

The metaphysics of privation

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The Metaphysics of Privation

David S. Oderberg

‘What, after all, is anything we call evil except the privation of good?’ (St Augustine)¹

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1. Introduction

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No theory of the good can be complete without a theory of its contrary, evil (or badness).² Suppose, in common with the classical natural law tradition, we think

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of good as a kind of fulfilment, the supplementation of some tendency of a thing.³ It

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is then natural, following the view famously defended by St Augustine and St

Thomas Aquinas,⁴ to regard evil as the *absence* of good – more precisely, as a

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privation of good. But how exactly are we to understand privation? And, given

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that a privation is a kind of absence, how should we go about solving the

metaphysical difficulties that – as we shall see – bedevil the attempt to treat evil

as an absence, as a type of negative reality? In what follows I do not propose

definitive answers; rather, I will explore the difficulties and outline the direction

their solution should take.

¹ *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, sec. 11

(http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/augustine_enchiridion_02_trans.htm) [last accessed 5.9.13].

² By ‘evil’ I mean to exclude any connotation of essential heinousness or egregiousness as attaches to the contemporary sense of the term.

³ Whether that thing must be living or whether, as was commonly held by the scholastics (and a view I support), goodness can also be found in the inorganic realm can be left aside for present purposes. For goodness as fulfillment, see for instance: Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I q.5, Aquinas (1920a): 52-64; Duns Scotus, *Treatise on God as First Principle* (Scotus c.1306); Cronin (1930): 134, 214 and passim; Mercier (1917): 212ff.

⁴ Aquinas (2003).

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2. Evil as privation

A privation, then, is a kind of absence, the non-existence of something. It is not
a mere absence like, say, the non-existence of a second moon for Earth or the

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absence of an elephant in the room. It is the absence of something on which

some aspect of the world has what **ONLY!** call a prior claim or title but where

the claim or title need not be construed evaluatively. So, for example, if you

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have cooked me dinner, and I ask for a third helping of ice cream but you

cannot give me any because you're out, then in the technical sense of

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privation used here, my inability to have more ice cream is a privation, not a

mere absence, because I had a prior desire for it. The privation becomes an

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evaluative matter when we ask, say, whether I really *need* a third helping; since

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I don't, I haven't been *deprived* of it, in the evaluative sense, though I am still

subject technically to a privation as opposed to a mere absence, which latter

would be the case if you serve me cheese for dessert and, without even a

thought on either of our parts about ice cream, in fact I do not eat ice cream but

cheese.

So there is a general difference between privations and mere absences.

And within privations there are those that are essentially evaluative and those

that are not. Deafness and disease are privations we correctly regard as bad or

evil. The essentially evaluative privations are, precisely, the evils. What they

have in common is that they are all privations of good. Since – I am assuming –

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good is a kind of fulfilment, evil is the privation of a kind of fulfilment. The

relevant kind of fulfilment belongs to the *nature* of a thing – how it is *supposed*

to function given the kind of thing it is. Another form of words is that evil is the

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privation of what is natural to some thing.⁵ You need not even accept for present

purposes that *all* evils essentially involve the privation of this kind of fulfilment

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or even any kind of fulfilment. Paradigmatic evils such as deafness, disease,

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amputation,⁶ dehydration in a plant, and of course death, obviously do exemplify

the privation of fulfilment. See **CIRCULATION!** and only have in mind the paradigmatic

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cases in what follows, for they need explanation as much as any others.

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3. Negative truth and truthmaking: the exclusion account

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Restricting ourselves from now on to the realm of the organic, there are a

number of questions that need to be answered before the analysis of evil as the

privation of good can be made convincing. One is whether privations, as

essentially negative entities (at least in part), can serve as truthmakers for truths

⁵ According to Aristotle (*Metaphysics*/Ross (1928) Δ: 22, 1022b27-30), a privation is something lacked by an entity that would naturally (pephukós) have it, at the time it would naturally have it (e.g. blindness in a man (his example), not an embryo (my example)). Aquinas follows this definition in *De Potentia* q.9 a.7 ad11, Aquinas (1932): 144 (<http://www.corpusthomicum.org/qdp8.html#60699> [last accessed 9.9.13]). In *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.6.1, Aquinas (1956: 44) he states that a privation is ‘of that which one is born to have, and should have’ (‘deficit ei aliquid quod natum est et debet habere’). In *De Malo* he says that ‘evil...is the very privation of a particular good’ (‘ipsa privatio alicuius particularis boni’: q.1 a.1, resp., (2003): 57). According to Suarez (1597: Disp. 11 *De Malo*, sec. 1.3 [last accessed 8.9.13]), evil is ‘the privation of a perfection due to a being’ (‘privationem perfectionis debitae in esse’ [my trans.]). Harper (1879): 533 holds that ‘Evil is the privation of perfection in Being’.

⁶ Losing a limb is always an evil, though amputating it for medically-indicated reasons might not be an evil *act*.

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about evils. By calling evil a negative entity I do not for the moment intend any

metaphysically loaded view of what a negative entity is, or what kind of

negative entity evil is. An evil is an absence, and absences are essentially

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negative: when we talk of absences we talk about what is not. We may also talk

about what is, but inasmuch as we **ONLY!** absence we refer to what is not – an

aspect of reality that is essentially negative.

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What we should say about privations as truthmakers for truths about

evils depends, then, on what we need to say about negative entities as

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truthmakers. For even if evil is a specific kind of negative entity, our account of

it has to be consistent with the truth about negative entities in general. There is

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some interesting discussion of negative entities and negative truth in the

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truthmaker literature,⁷ but also much vexation. There is nothing like a consensus

(for what this is worth in philosophy) about what, if any, kinds of truthmaker are

truthmakers for negative truths in general, let alone truths about evils.⁸

Assuming some of the more plausible and widely agreed-upon general

principles of truthmaking, we can nevertheless see what kind of progress might

be made when it comes to what we can call *privative truths* (or just privatives) –

truths about privations, of which truths about evils are our central concern.

⁷ See for example Armstrong (2004), (2010); Beall (2000); Dodd (2007); Molnar (2000).

⁸ That truths about evils are negative truths entails that the definition of negative truth is not syntactic, as Molnar (2000): 72-3 points out.

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Suppose we accept truthmaker necessitarianism: a truthmaker T for a
proposition p necessitates p;⁹ it makes p true in any world in which T exists.

Now take a privative truth: p = <this plant lacks water>¹⁰ What, in the world,

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necessitates that truth? It cannot be the mere absence of some threshold amount

of water in the plant's system, since **ONLY!** amount is also absent from, say, a

stone next to the plant. So wouldn't we be required to say that the absence of

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water from the stone necessitated the truth <this stone lacks water>? The

thought is that comparable truthmakers necessitate comparable truths. If the

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Fness of x necessitates <Fx> then surely the Fness of y necessitates <Fy>. Why

treat absences differently? If the absence of Fness in x necessitates <x lacks F>

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then its absence in y necessitates <y lacks F>. But stones don't *lack* water. They

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don't *have* it (with all the suitable qualifications in place), but that does not

mean they lack it. Plants, however, when they don't have water¹¹ do *lack* water.

So we cannot say that the mere absence of water in the plant is the truthmaker

for <this plant lacks water>.

So in searching for truthmakers for privative truths, we have a slightly
different task from that of having to find truthmakers for negative truths in
general; albeit since privatives are a species of negative truth, we should expect
the right account of truthmakers for the latter to be consistent with the former. I

⁹ Armstrong (2004): 5-7.

¹⁰ Following Armstrong's corner quotes convention.

¹¹ Some threshold amount, with all the requisite specification of circumstances.

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now intend to sidestep a detailed analysis of the question of truthmakers for

negatives, preferring to leave a placeholder for whatever the correct theory

happens to be. I will simply mention in passing two of the most well known –

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the exclusion account and the totality account.¹² According to the exclusion

account, for every negative truth there is some positive truth that excludes the

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contradictory of the negative truth. This is just another way of saying that for

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every negative truth there is a positive truth that entails it. Since the positive

truth has a truthmaker (assumed) that by what Armstrong calls the Entailment

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Principle, the truthmaker for the positive truth is also a truthmaker for the

negative truth. (EP: if T necessitates p , and p entails q , then T necessitates q .)¹³

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Example: it is true that flower F is not yellow. The exclusionist holds there to be

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a positive truth that excludes $\langle F$ is yellow \rangle . Assume it to be $\langle F$ is blue \rangle . In

other words, $\langle F$ is blue \rangle entails $\langle F$ is not yellow \rangle . By EP, the truthmaker for $\langle F$

is blue \rangle – the blueness of F , or the fact that F is blue – necessitates $\langle F$ is not

yellow \rangle .

Various objections have been raised against the exclusion account,¹⁴ but

I only want to mention Armstrong's final objection, the one he finds decisive,

namely that the exclusion account 'seems to depend far too much on the way

that the world happens to be.' Since negation is 'an all-pervasive and

¹² See Molnar (2000) for a brief but penetrating discussion of both. Demos (1917) defends the exclusion account; Armstrong (2004) defends the totality account; Molnar (2000) and Dodd (2007) reject both.

¹³ Armstrong (2004): 10-12.

¹⁴ See the earlier references.

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fundamental feature of our thought and discourse’,¹⁵ whether negative truths

have truthmakers should not be hostage to empirical fortune. Although vaguely
expressed, the idea seems to be that negative truths are ubiquitous, far too easy

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to find in every corner of reality, and it is too much to expect a priori that every

such corner will also yield the right truthmakers for the negative truths

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obtaining there. Suppose Armstrong is right; I make no judgment. When it

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comes to privatives, however, we are dealing with a very specific kind of

negative truth, one that does not obtain just anywhere and everywhere, whatever

CIRCULATION.

bit of reality we are talking about. First, the territory under consideration is only

that of the organic: privative truths about an organism are connected to its

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appetites and tendencies, what makes its life go well (the fulfilment of those

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appetites) or badly (their non-fulfilment). But no organism, unless perhaps *in*

articulo mortis, suffers privation in most or even many of its appetites. Being in

a deprived state at any time only applies to some organisms, and among them

only to some of their appetites. Being a non-ubiquitous phenomenon, we have

no reason to worry on that score that privatives might not have positive

truthmakers. Secondly, privation is a special kind of negation, as I have already

indicated. It only comes about when a tendency or appetite is unfulfilled, when

an organism lacks something it is supposed to have for its proper functioning.

As such, not only might there be, but we should *expect* there to be special

¹⁵ Armstrong (2004): 63 for both quotations.

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features of positive reality that underlie privative truths and exclude their
contradictories.

Return to our sample privative: <this plant lacks water>. Before

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beginning any analysis, we know that this truth must depend in some way on the

positive state of the organism: there is something about the plant that makes it

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the case that it is deprived of water – not merely that it hasn’t received any

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water recently, but that it is in a state of deprivation. We note its drooping

branches, yellowing and brittle leaves and so on. As it goes, this does not get us

CIRCULATION.

very far. The drooping and yellowing might be the result of some disease, not a

lack of water. More importantly, even if the drooping and yellowing are caused

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by a lack of water, for that very reason they cannot add up to a truthmaker for

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the privative: the *effects* of a lack of water cannot be a truthmaker for the truth

that the plant lacks water, even if they necessitate the plant’s lacking water. The

kind of necessitation truthmaker theorists have in mind is an ‘in virtue of’

necessitation: T necessitates p inasmuch as any world in which T exists is a

world in which p is true *in virtue of* T.¹⁶ Still, the drooping and yellowing point

us in the right direction, that of the actual state of the plant and its actual *needs*.

It’s not just that the plant does not have some threshold level of water in its

system; it *needs* to have that level of water, otherwise its life goes badly. So we

should be looking precisely at the organism, and at organisms of the same kind

¹⁶ Armstrong (2004): 5.

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(with ‘kind’ precisified appropriately), to see what it is about the plant that

makes it the case that it is deprived of water. One way of proceeding, appealing
to microstructural essentialists, is to drill down to whatever the first adverse

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changes are that occur to a plant when it is deprived of water, and these are

likely to be at the molecular and sub-molecular level. Perhaps, but I’m not sure

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this is very helpful for a general truthmaker account. To adapt a point of

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Armstrong’s which he raises against the exclusion account of certain high-level

negative truths,¹⁷ if the laws of nature are contingent, then there may not be any

CIRCULATION.

single phenomenon or set thereof, microstructural or not, that entails the

privative. So the exclusionist (incompatibilist) may end up holding that

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privatives have as truthmakers whatever it is, in any world, that necessitates

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them (in the ‘in virtue of’ sense). But even if the laws of nature are necessary,

we can imagine slight modifications to initial conditions, including accidental

properties of our plant, such that in some world what necessitates the

deprivation of water is quite different, physically, from what does so in our

world. The moral I draw from this is not that we should abandon the hunt, but

that the quarry is right under our noses: whatever the physical or biological

pathway may be in any world in which our plant exists and does badly through

lack of water, it will be the case that it *needs* water in all of those worlds. That’s

just how it is with plants, as a matter of essentialist truth.

¹⁷ Armstrong (2004): 63.

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4. Negative truth and truthmaking: the totality account

Before stating the kind of approach I think these considerations force us to

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adopt, I will now mention Armstrong's proposed solution to the problem of

negative truths.¹⁸ He does not offer a specific account of privative truths but does

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make a few remarks implying what the account would look like for him, which I

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leave to the next section. As to negative truths in general, his is what we might

call the 'totality solution': if we recognize 'totality states of affairs', we will see

CIRCULATION.

that they necessitate negative truths. A totality state of affairs is a complex state

of affairs whose parts are states of affairs and one of which is the state of affairs

SEE ABOVE FOR OFFICIAL

in which totality is predicated of all the others. In the case of a negative truth

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such as <this flower is not yellow>, a truthmaker is the state of affairs consisting

of all the states of affairs of this flower's possessing the properties it does, plus

what we can call the 'totalizer' state of affairs of those property possessions'

being *all* the property possessions involving this flower. When we inspect the

truthmaker, we see that this flower's being yellow is not contained in it. And we

see, to put it more naturally, that these are all the properties this flower has. So

that complex totality state of affairs necessitates that this flower is not yellow.

As Armstrong summarises it, 'the existence of the positive first-order facts plus

¹⁸ Armstrong (2004): 54-60.

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the existence of the general fact that collects them will entail the corresponding
negative first-order facts.¹⁹

There are many things that could be said about this proposal, but I want
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to keep close to the topic of privatives. For present purposes I am staying
neutral about the right account of negative truths in general, and so do not want
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to rule out the totality solution. Nevertheless, there are some worries about it. As
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Armstrong accepts, it does not do away with negative facts altogether, since
totality facts are at least partly negative, then, not these facts and no more. These
CIRCULATION.
'limit' facts, as he calls them, are the only kind of negative state of affairs we
SEE ABOVE FOR OFFICIAL
need, so we can appeal to ontological economy.²⁰ Dodd, on the other hand,
following Molnar,²¹ sees this as a decisive objection to the account, since it
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'does not provide a solution to the problem of the ontological nature of negative
states of affairs so much as presuppose one'; hence 'any appearance of genuine
explanation here is illusory.'²² Secondly, note that totality facts that consist
simply of every property possession – more naturally, every property –
possessed by something hardly constitute minimal truthmakers, and we should
want minimal truthmakers for all truths (nor do we have good reason to doubt
their existence).²³ A minimal truthmaker for p is one such that if you take away

¹⁹ Armstrong (2004): 59.

²⁰ Armstrong (2004): 58.

²¹ Molnar (2000): 81-2.

²² Dodd (2007): 389.

²³ Armstrong (2004): 19-21.

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part of it, what’s left is not a truthmaker for p .²⁴ If you take away one of the

property possession facts from the posited truthmaker for <this flower is not
yellow>, is a truthmaker left? You might think not, since you’ve no longer got

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all the relevant states of affairs, so you don’t have a totality fact. But what about
some facts’ being more relevant than others? If the flower is red, haven’t we got

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the only *relevant* fact as far as not being yellow is concerned? We can skirt

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around the totality solution’s collapsing into the incompatibility solution by

holding that the truthmaker for <this flower is not yellow> is the state of affairs

CIRCULATION.

of the flower’s being red and this being the only colour property of the flower.²⁵

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The *relevant* facts are those that – let’s leave it loose – concern the same

dimension or aspect of description as the negative truth for which we are

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looking for a truthmaker. So we need an account of the minimal truthmakers,

and that requires an account of sameness of dimension/aspect of description.

Even if we can give this, there is still the worry that the totality fact does
not necessitate the negative truth in the right *explanatory* way. I’m not saying
the ‘in virtue of’ part of the truthmaking relation is the same as explanation pure
and simple. We can say that <the sky is blue> is true in virtue of the sky’s being
blue without explaining why the sky is blue. When we are not engaging in mere
debracketing (which we can think of as the propositional equivalent of

²⁴ Armstrong (2004): 19-20: ‘If T is a minimal truthmaker for p , then you cannot
subtract anything from T and the remainder still be a truthmaker for p .’

²⁵ The proposal, then, would amount to more than holding that being red excludes being yellow, as
per the exclusionist solution.

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disquotation) but making an ontological point, we are saying something about
explanation. If we deny negative facts and say that this flower is not yellow in
virtue of some positive colour property that excludes it, aren't we explaining

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why this flower is not yellow? But if we say that it is not yellow in virtue of this

flower's having certain colour properties and only those colour properties (and

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in fact being yellow is not one of them), are we explaining why it is not yellow?

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We don't seem to be, even though we are eschewing all negative facts except

for specific totality facts, and content analysis is mere debracketing. It just

CIRCULATION.

doesn't seem that the totality solution gets the 'in virtue of' part of the

truthmaking relation right. **SEE ABOVE FOR OFFICIAL**

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4. A conjunctive analysis of privation

For these reasons I am inclined to prefer the incompatibility account of
truthmaking for negative truths, but what I want to say here is that neither
account as currently presented can handle privatives since they will not be able
to distinguish between privatives and purely negative truths. As already
indicated, privation is a special kind of absence – in the case of evil, which my
exclusive concern, the lack of fulfilment – and there is positive reality
embedded in it – a positive nature for the thing in question and a standard of
fulfilment for some part of its nature. Hence what I propose is a *conjunctive*
analysis of privation. Privation consists in the absence of something in an

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organism (which I say without any commitment to the irreducible reality of

absences) but in addition it involves the organism's *needing* what is absent for
its fulfilment. So I propose:

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(Priv) x has a privation of P=_{df} x lacks P and, according to standard S, x
needs P for its fulfilment. **ONLY!**

According to the conjunctive analysis, then, a privation is an absence
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plus a need. So (Priv) gives the definition of privation, hence even if a totality

account or an exclusion account gives the correct truthmaker for the left
CIRCULATION.

conjunct, we would still need a truthmaker for the right conjunct, and that would

have to be precisely the property of needing whatever it is of which the object is
SEE ABOVE FOR OFFICIAL
deprived. That state of need is a kind of positive being, but it is not *actual* being;
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it is *potential* being. Potential being is not negative being, even though it is not
fully actual being either. The state of need is a state of being in potentiality
towards something that if present will actualize the potentiality. It is in this very
general sense that, I would argue, salt needs water to dissolve in, a billiard ball
needs to have a force applied to it in order to move, and the moon needs the
earth's mass to stay in orbit around it. But it is also in this sense – the concern of
the present paper – that plants need water, cats need food, parasites need hosts,
apes need social groups, and so on.

Now needs are not absences, they are presences. When the presence is
combined with the absence of what is needed, you have a privation. And the

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privation is the minimal truthmaker for the corresponding privative truth. But

while it might be sufficient for semantic purposes to give a conjunctive analysis
of privation, at the ontological level there is more than mere conjunction: the
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combination of presence and absence has to be understood in a more substantial
way, as subsequent discussion will **ONLY!**

NOT FOR CITATION OR 5. Privations as causes

There is much debate over whether mere absences can be causes.²⁶ We certainly
CIRCULATION.
talk and think of privations, a special kind of absence, as causes. Lack of water
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causes organisms to get sick and die, as does lack of nutrition, oxygen, and so
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on. A lack of exercise causes muscle to atrophy. Lack of social companionship
can cause loneliness. A lack of purpose in life can cause wayward behaviour;
and so on. Privations can also, it seems, be effects: it is easy to think of
conditions under which any of the above privations might be caused. Why
should we have less trouble conceiving of privations as causal relata than mere
absences? On the conjunctive analysis privations consist of a both a need and a
lack, and a need at least is a positive being, a kind of potentiality. So we might
think this positive being makes the idea of causation involving privations to be
more plausible than for mere absences. But the other conjunct, if treated as a
mere absence itself, still poses a problem. After all, if privative causation

²⁶ Beebee (2004).

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involves a conjunctive state of affairs, all the conjuncts had better be positive if
they are to make genuine causal contributions to the way things are or turn out.

That is, mere non-being cannot produce anything, make anything happen, or

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change anything. Why not say that the negative part of the privation – the lack –

is not itself part of the cause but is **ONLY!** a background condition? We might

take a view of negative states of affairs according to which they cannot cause

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anything but they can make it possible for other, positive, things to act as

causes. So we might say that what caused the paper to burn was the application

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of a flame, but that one of the conditions making this possible was the paper's

being dry, where being dry is or includes the absence of moisture. Yet do we

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want to say that lacking water is what makes it possible for the plant to get sick

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and die? No, we want to say, lacking water is one of the things that *makes* the

plant get sick and die, along with its *needing* water to stay healthy and survive.

So unless we want to treat absences as full-blown real beings capable of

causation in their own right (or as causal contributors), perhaps we need to find

an underlying positive being that, alongside the need, contributes to causing the

effects of the privation.

Armstrong is rather confusing at this point.²⁷ Recall his general position
that the truthmakers of negative truths are totality facts. But he goes on to accept
that absences can be causes (citing omissions and lacks alongside absences,

²⁷ Armstrong (2004): 63-6.

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without distinguishing adequately between these different types of negative

states of affairs). Then we should expect him to hold that when there appears to
be causation involving absences, what is really involved is totality facts –

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which, admittedly, have a negative element to them, but are not merely

negative. That is, we should expect **ONLY!** to hold that a certain kind of entity

T is the truthmaker for truths of existence for that entity – e.g., the truthmaker

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for 'redness exists' is the colour red, universal redness, etc. – then you will hold

that T is also part of the truthmaker for causal truths involving that entity – e.g.,

CIRCULATION.

the colour red is also part of the truthmaker for the causal truth <bulls go crazy

at the sight of red>. So we should expect that, since Armstrong holds totality

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states of affairs to be truthmakers for negative truths, they should be part of the

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truthmakers for truths of causation involving the apparent negative entities in

negative truths.

Yet he does not say this. If a person dies in the outback from lack of
water, he does not hold part of the truthmaker for the relevant causal truth to be
the totality state of affairs that necessitates, say, <Fred lacks water>. And this
seems right, since how could such a totality fact be the right kind of cause of
Fred's death? Think about what accepting such a totality fact as cause would
oblige us to believe – that Fred's death was caused, actually caused (albeit in
part), by his having properties $P_1 \dots P_n$ and only those properties, and none of
them was the property of having adequate water in his system. This is bizarre:

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Fred's death was not caused (even in part) by *that*. Positing a likely minimal

truthmaker does not help, since Fred's death was also not even partly caused by

his having hydration properties $W_1 \dots W_n$ ²⁸ and adequate hydration was not one

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of them. It was caused precisely by not having adequate hydration! This is not

to say that we have to accept negative facts such as lacks as real, irreducible

ONLY!

beings. We ought to look for something positive to play the causal role, as long

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as it also entails the relevant negative truths. The point about generality facts is

they don't play the right causal role. Armstrong thinks they play some causal

CIRCULATION.

roles,²⁹ but implicitly he does not think they play the role of cause that believers

in irreducible negative facts attribute to the latter.

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According to Armstrong, then, the truthmaker of a privative causal truth

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such as:

P_c <lack of water caused Fred's death>

consists of: (i) a positive causal process, i.e. a causal process involving only

positive beings as causal relata; (ii) an ontological causal law; and (iii) the

²⁸ Assuming we can isolate the right kind and range of hydration properties.

²⁹ Armstrong says they are 'causally relevant' but not 'causally operative' (2004: 76-7). He remarks that the past and future of the world would have been caused to have been different had a given actual totality state of affairs not obtained. In other words, totality states of affairs are 'causally relevant via counterfactuals [of causation]': they make a difference to what causal activity would have obtained had the given totality state/s of affairs themselves not obtained. Yet it is hard to see why the advocate of wholly irreducible, wholly negative states of affairs could not say exactly the same thing: if there had been no elephant in the room, the causal activity of the world, both past and future, would have been different. So absences, qua purely negative entities, are also 'causally relevant'. Hence Armstrong's reduction to totality states of affairs purchases no advantage in this respect.

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actual situation or boundary conditions obtaining in the particular case.³⁰ No

negative being is cause or effect, but what distinguishes privative causation

from any other positive causation is that supplementing the positive causal

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process are the truthmakers for counterfactuals of causation³¹ which state what

would have been brought about had **ONLY!** not been the relevant lack. In the case

of P_c, although Fred's death was caused by some positive physiological state of

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affairs, what makes it a case of death by lack is the obtaining of truths such as

C: <if Fred's body had received water that **CIRCULATION.** would have enabled the body

to continue in the living state>.³² And the truth of a counterfactual of causation

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such as this is necessitated by an ontological causal law plus boundary

conditions.

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For all the lack of specifics, the proposal seems promising. But it has
two worrying aspects, closely connected. The first concerns the law or laws at
work. In fact Armstrong doesn't even tell us what they might be in this sort of
case; all he says is that they are truthmakers for the relevant counterfactuals of
causation such as C. We have to work backwards from C to derive the law
behind it, and in so doing we end up with something like:

³⁰ Armstrong (2004): 64-5.

³¹ These kinds of counterfactual, to which Armstrong appeals, are discussed at length in Dowe (2000):
ch. 6.

³² Armstrong (2004): 64, slightly modified.

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L₁: Humans who receive water in circumstances C_F [these being
circumstances identical or relevantly similar to Fred's] are caused to live
(in C_F).

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But since Fred died, we need more than L₁ since its obtaining is compatible with
Fred's living even though he did not receive water. We also need:

L₂: Necessarily, humans who live in C_F receive water.³³

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It is not, however, receiving water pure and simple that is nomologically
relevant to survival in this case. Receiving a certain amount of water. How

much? It can't be 'enough for it to cause humans to live and be such that

necessarily, if they live then they have that amount', since this would turn L₁

and L₂ into analytic truths. So should we perhaps assign a specific number or

amount to the water that would have caused Fred to live in those circumstances?

Surely there is such a number, though in fact it is a *range* of quantities that are
relevant; so why not lay down that range as what figures in the relevant laws?

We can simply say that if Fred had been given, for example, between 1.2 and
3.1 litres of water up to an hour before his death, he would have been enabled to
survive. And suppose that, in fact, he was only given .8 litres. We can state the
relevant laws more precisely by plugging in these quantities.³⁴

³³ I leave aside for present purposes Armstrong's own 'contingent necessitation' theory of laws.

³⁴ Needless to say, we can make this more precise by inserting more variables and conditions.

Moreover, what we have are not so much laws in their own right as instances of laws. Better, a law concerning
circumstances like Fred's is a specific instance of a generic law connecting hydration with human survival.

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We still do not, however, have the right kind of laws that we can appeal
to as necessitating, in combination with the positive causal process, the truth of
privative causation. Recall that the truthmakers are supposed to be that in virtue
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of which the relevant truths obtain. So we are now in the position of saying

something like:

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TMPC:

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The truth that <lack of water caused Fred's death> obtains in virtue of:

(i) Fred's being given .8 litres of water.
CIRCULATION.

(ii) L_{1W} : Humans who receive between 1.2 and 3.1 litres of water in

circumstances C_F [these being circumstances identical or relevantly
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similar to Fred's] are caused to live (in C_F):

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(iii) L_{2W} : Necessarily, humans who live in C_F receive between 1.2 and

3.1 litres of water.

It looks like we have all we need to necessitate the privative causal truth of
Fred's death by lack of water; but do we really? It is not at all clear that (i)-(iii)
of TMPC necessitate P_c : why might not (i)-(iii) obtain and yet it not be true that
Fred was *caused* to die by a lack of water? We can plausibly claim that all (i)-
(iii) necessitate is the truth that there is a non-coincidental, *non-causal*, lawlike
co-variation between Fred's lacking water and dying. The idea is that Fred's
lacking water supervenes, as Armstrong holds, on the relevant positive being,
and that positive being – receiving .8 litres of water, for example – plus the

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relevant laws necessitate that the positive being causes death. In other words,

the positive being³⁵ at one and the same time necessitates the lack, is a necessary
part of what necessitates Fred's death, and is itself the cause of Fred's death.

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But we need not postulate any kind of causation between the *lack of water* and
the death. **ONLY!**

The worry here ties into the other concern I have with Armstrong's
overly brief and somewhat gnomic account, namely that it gets the causation

wrong. For Armstrong, cases of causation by absence (lacks, preventions,
omissions) occur but they are 'second-class cases of causality', since they

supervene upon causation between positive states of affairs.³⁶ But a 'second-

class' case of causation, whatever that means exactly, either is a case of
causation or it is not. Here I think there is a dilemma for Armstrong. If it really

is a case of causation, albeit 'second-class' because supervenient, then Fred's
death is overdetermined: it is caused by receiving .8 litres of water *and* by

lacking 1.2-3.1 litres. But this is not a *joint* cause: the lack is not, to use one of
Armstrong's favourite expressions, an 'addition of being' on top of the positive

state of affairs, as though having a below-threshold amount of water and not

having an above-threshold amount were two necessary ontological elements in
the total cause of Fred's death. If the lack were a real (albeit 'second-rate')

³⁵ Keep it singular for simplicity, and allow also for limit properties if we keep to Armstrong's official position that totality states of affairs determine privations along with all other absences.

³⁶ Armstrong (2010): loc. 1145 of 1907 in Kindle edition, beginning of ch. 11; 'second-rate cases of causation' (2004: 66).

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cause, it would have to be a *competing* cause, a *rival* candidate, along with the
positive state of receiving .8 litres, for the title of *the* cause of Fred’s death. Nor
can overdetermination be allowed here: if Fred had not lacked 1.2-3.1 litres, he

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would not still have died – he would have lived, because he would not still have
had .8 litres or any other below-threshold amount. Conversely, if he had not

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received .8 litres or any other below-threshold amount (remember there is
nothing special about .8 litres; I could more precisely have said something like

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0-1.19 litres), he would not still have died – he would have lived, because he

CIRCULATION!

would have had an above-threshold amount. So the presence and the lack are

SEE ABOVE FOR OFFICIAL

not overdetermining causes, they are genuine rivals; but this is intolerable. What
caused Fred’s death – what he had or what he lacked?

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The answer, for Armstrong, has to be – what Fred had, not what he
lacked. A ‘second-class’ case of causation is not really a cause of causation at
all, and so his analysis of truthmakers for truths of privative causation should be
understood as an analysis of truthmakers for true *façons de parler*, underlying
which are literal truths about non-coincidental, non-causal, lawlike co-variations
between privations (themselves not ‘additions of being’) and various other states
of affairs, some of which are themselves privations (e.g. death). The real cause –
the only cause – is the positive presence of a certain amount of water in Fred’s
body. But we cannot hold this. Fred simply is not killed by the mere presence of
a certain amount of water, .8 litres we have supposed. Even if we make it a

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range, and say the positive state is Fred's receiving 0-1.19 litres into his body,

that will not do. Receiving .8 litres of water, or 0-1.19 litres, or any particular

amount X, does not *of itself* kill anyone, human or any other organism. In Fred's

WARNING – AUTHOR'S DRAFT

case, as for other humans, it is not enough to have X to die – Fred has to have X

and *need more* (in circumstances C) **ONLY!** Why not add the need for more to the

circumstances, thus maintaining having X as the cause? Because needing more

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is not a *circumstance* of Fred's situation, like the ambient temperature, moisture

content of the atmosphere, **CIRCULATION.** and the like; it is a *fact about Fred* that he needs

more than X in order to survive.

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So what I am proposing is that the true cause of Fred's death is a

combination of an actuality and a potentiality – the actuality of his receiving

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some positive amount of water, and the potentiality of his needing more in order

to survive. Now, this positive amount excludes his having any other amount of

water, including a threshold amount necessary for survival. So we can regard

the pure absence of a threshold quantity as an inferred, supervenient kind of

being. Less gesturally, we can say that the pure absence of a threshold quantity

is not a real being and has no causal power. Since I have defined a privation as

the combination of a lack and a need, and the lack – the pure absence – is not a

real being, then even though the need is a real being, the whole privation cannot

be a real being since part of it is not real. Hence it does not have any causal

power.

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In saying that neither the absence nor the privation of which it is a part is
a real being, the contrast is not between ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ or ‘illusory’, and
the like, but ‘real’ and ‘conceptual’, as in the scholastic distinction between real
beings and beings of reason.³⁷ It is true to say that Fred does not have a threshold

amount of water in his body; this is ONLY – but not anything real, nothing
with any active or passive powers. On this we can agree with Armstrong. We

can also hold it true to say that Fred is deprived of water, that he is subject to a
privation, but again the privation is nothing with any active or
passive powers. (Armstrong would not regard this as a distinct truth since he

does not give the same analysis of privations in terms of absences and needs.)
But we cannot say that the ‘second-class’ causality of Fred’s privation obtains in

virtue of the ‘first-class’ causality of a positive presence of water. There is no
causation by privation; strictly, ‘Fred was caused to die by a lack of water’ is
just false. But we usually do not speak like this anyway: we say things like

‘Fred died from a lack of water’, where what we seem to be doing is offering an
explanation minus any commitment to what did the causing in virtue of which
the explanation is true. When a doctor writes ‘cause of death: dehydration’ on a
death certificate, he is not demonstrating metaphysical belief in privations as
causal agents. Indeed, if asked he would talk about the positive state of the body

³⁷ For useful accounts of the idea of a ‘conceptual being’ in scholastic philosophy, see Klima (1993);
Galluzzo (2010).

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in virtue of which death occurred as an effect. Metaphysically, even this would
not be the right way to explain what was going on. We cannot say, with

Armstrong, that privative causation supervenes on positive causation, even if we
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make clear that the supervenience base is the singular case before us and the law

it instantiates. For the law it is supposed to instantiate will not be part of that in
ONLY!
virtue of which the privative causation occurred. To see this, return to **TMPC**

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above, in particular:

- (iii) L_{2W} : Necessarily, humans who live in C_E receive between 1.2 and
CIRCULATION.
3.1 litres of water.

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I claim that a privation is defined as a lack plus a need, and further that lacks
supervene on positive states of being. The concept of need is an essential part of
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privation, distinguishing it specifically from absences in general. Now I

presume Armstrong would say that the concept of need is captured on his
account by the content of the relevant laws, in particular (iii) of **TMPC**. Truths
embodied by formulations such as (iii) are just what needs *are*.

I reply that not every necessary connection involving an organism and
its parts constitutes a need. I do not need to have a congenital mole on my right
arm even though there is (random mutations aside) a necessary connection
between the activity inside my body, in particular genetic expression, and the
presence of the mole. The rejoinder is that only necessary connections involving
such states and activities as life, death, and proper bodily functioning count as

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constituting needs: (iii) says precisely that survival necessitates the presence of

a threshold amount of water, so that amount is what the organism needs (to

survive). My reply to this rejoinder is that my survival necessitates many things,

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including the universe's existence prior to my existence, but I do not *need* the

universe to have existed prior to my existence, at least not in the sense

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applicable here. So the Armstrongian might want to restrict the relevant

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necessary connections to those involving only the organism as a whole. But not

even these can be identified with the organism's needs: being an animal

CIRCULATION.

necessitates being an organism, but no animal *needs* to be an organism, not in

the sense required here. **SEE ABOVE FOR OFFICIAL**

We need, then, to think differently about how privations enter into

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causal relations. All causes are positive states of being, as Armstrong insists, but

those on which privations supervene are of a particular sort, consisting of both

actuality – e.g., having a certain quantity of water in the body – and a certain

kind of potentiality, that in terms of which we can characterize need.³⁸ Being in

this complex privative state is, precisely, a state of the organism. The more

accurately and completely the need is spelled out, the closer we get to the

relevant law (or laws). But that law (those laws) is just another way of talking

about the organism; it is not something added, ontologically, to the organism's

properties as an additional element of the complex truthmaker for statements of

³⁸ See Wild (1952) for an illuminating account of potency and need.

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6. The reality of evil

Now we look to be boxed into a difficult and delicate situation. For we seem to be committed to a set of incompatible claims:

1. Evil is real.
2. Evil is a privation.
3. Privations are not real.

As if this isn’t bad enough, we want to add:

4. Evil can be a cause and an effect.
5. No privation can be a cause or effect.

To say that evil is a privation, and that privations, being negative, are not real and have no causal powers, looks rather distasteful to say the least. Is there no real evil in the world? Do murderers, rapists, and other evil people not cause evil? And are they not really evil as people? If my position ends up being that evil is all in the mind, or even worse a mere nothing, then I take that, as any sane person should, to be a straight *reductio ad absurdum*.

I do not, however, think any concession should be made to a single one of these supposed implications, albeit a proper understanding of what the reality of evil amounts to reveals that we cannot be simplistic about it either. We

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cannot place evil, ontologically, alongside good as part of reality in the same

way – as positive being. I do not take the denial of evil as positive to be part of

the package of claims counted as distasteful and pointing to a reductio of the

WARNING – AUTHOR'S DRAFT

present position. Many people do in fact believe evil to be a positive reality, a

positive force; the history of thought, **ONLY!** embodied especially in such

movements as Manicheism, witnesses to this constant strain of thought. One

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can, however, safely deny this without committing oneself to the denial of evil

as a reality altogether.

CIRCULATION.

But haven't I already denied that evil is real anyway? Yes, but only in

such a way as to indicate that (1) is ambiguous. In particular, 'real' vs.

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'conceptual' and 'real' vs 'unreal' are distinct distinctions. Nothing in the

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present position entails that evil is unreal: indeed how can it be unreal if it

supervenes on positive being? So evil cannot be nothing, and anyone who thinks

the present position involves claim (3) misunderstands it, if he interprets 'real'

in (3) as contrasting with 'unreal'. Still, goes the reply, I am committed to the

view that, although something, evil is only something in the mind; for isn't that

just what a conceptual being is, and isn't it a reductio of the present position if it

involves the claim that evil exists only in the mind? I reply that holding evil to

be a conceptual being, or being of reason, is *not* the same as holding it to be

merely something in the mind, so we need to see exactly what the claim

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amounts to. Perhaps the most useful way of understanding the claim is by
comparison and contrast with universals.

Universals are, at least on the classical Aristotelian and scholastic view,
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real beings in nature, i.e. in the extra-mental world, but conceptual beings *as
purely universal*. What this means **ONLY!** Universals have a dual existence. As
purely universal – as, say, humanity, or redness, or triangularity – they exist
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only in the mind; one never encounters humanity pure and simple in the world,
only individual humans who share a real human nature. **CIRCULATION!** The universal humanity
does exist in the world, but *only as multiplied*, not as a pure universal. It is,
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following the current jargon, wholly present wherever and whenever
instantiated, but it is always instantiated if it exists in the world at all. In itself,
PUBLISHED VERSION.
abstracted from all instances, humanity is in the mind – with a foundation in
reality, as the more traditional jargon has it.

Privations, too, have a foundation in reality, namely the positive states
and needs on which they supervene. That certain positive states give rise to evil
is something that the mind apprehends, but it does not follow that evil is a kind
of real being – only that the mind judges truly that there is evil on the basis of
certain kinds of real, positive being. Evil is a conceptual being in precisely this
way. So whilst both universals qua universal, and evil qua being, are both
conceptual, i.e. mental objects that are the result of apprehending real being in
the world, the difference is that universals do not supervene on anything

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whereas evil does. Universals have a dual reality – multiplied in the world and

pure unities in the mind. They do not supervene on their instances; they just
have instances. Evil, on the other hand, supervenes on positive states of being
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and so has a remoter foundation in reality than universals qua purely universal.

This difference in remoteness **ONLY!** foundation manifests itself in respect of
causation. Universals exist in the world but only as multiplied. Since they are
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positive beings, they can be genuine causal relata; but not as *purely* universal. If

tigers scare me, then absent some highly non-standard situation it is the
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universal kind that scares me, but not qua purely universal: it's not the abstract

species that scares me, for otherwise I'd have to break into a cold sweat just
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knowing that *you* were thinking about them, or just by reading about them in a
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textbook. What scares me is indeed the universal kind, but as multiplied in the
individual instances (actual or possible) I might encounter, or consider
encountering, and so on. Here then, the universal *itself* is causally powerful,
even though it has conceptual as well as real being; it is as real rather than
conceptual that the causing is done.

In the case of evil, we do not have – as we do in the case of universals –
a single being that is both real and conceptual, where as real it is part of the
causal nexus and as conceptual it is not. Rather, we have evil as conceptual
being, and as real being we have the positive states and needs on which evil
supervenes. The causing – the only causing – is by positive beings, and the only

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effects are positive beings. Now this might seem to contradict the apparent

commonplace expressed in (4) above, that evil *can* be a cause and effect. But I

deny that (4) is a commonplace, when we consider the actual push and pull

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going on in the world. Suppose Nancy is suffering from a terrible disease, and I

am moved to tears. Thinking in terms of actual worldly causation, just what is

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causing me to cry? It is by no means obvious that what makes me cry is any

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evil. Evil is not, we must remember, a substance any more than goodness is a

substance. Like the good, it is a quality of substances (and other beings).

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Nancy's disease has the property of being a (natural) evil. So am I caused to cry

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by the evil quality of her disease? We might say that I am caused to cry *by her*

disease, but this does not seem quite right. It is more accurate to say that I am

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caused to cry *by her having a disease*. But having a disease is a positive being,

and if the disease itself plays a causal role here, it too contributes only positive

being to the causing of my reaction. I have already argued that positive beings

cannot be evils in themselves, even if they have the property of being evil. So

why would Nancy's having the disease make me cry if it is not an evil in itself,

being positive? Why should I cry because of Nancy's having a disease any more

than because of her having blue eyes? Because even though the disease, as a

positive being, is not itself an evil, it *has the property* of being evil, and its

having the property of being evil is wholly fixed by the disease's being a

positive process that puts Nancy in a state of need. We are simply not compelled

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to hold that reacting to evil requires being caused to do or feel something by a

negative being. On the contrary, to the extent that common usage is of any
evidential value here, when we speak of being moved to react in some way to

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evil, we speak of positive beings – a disease, or *having* a disease, being in a

certain positive state – that we judge **ONLY!** to be evil: ‘What makes me cry is *that*
she has this terrible illness’.

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What we should say, then, about the propositions above is:

1. Evil is real: true [when opposed to ‘evil is illusory/unreal’]; false
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[when opposed to ‘evil is conceptual’].

2. Evil is a privation: true
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3. Privations are not real: false [when ‘not real’ is read as
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‘illusory/unreal’]; true [when ‘not real’ is read as ‘conceptual’]

4. Evil can be a cause and an effect: false [when evil is considered in
itself as a privation]; true [when the positive states on which evil
supervenes are considered]

5. No privation can be a cause or effect: true [when the privation is
considered in itself as a negative being]; false [when the positive states
on which the privation supervenes are considered].

7. Conclusion

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What I have offered is no more than the sketch of how a metaphysical

explanation of evil should proceed. To be adequate, the explanation should

account for all of the plausible intuitions we hold about evil without introducing

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implausible metaphysical commitments. Embedding our account in a broader

theory of negative truth and negative being requires exploration of a number of

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issues whose surface I have only scratched – in particular, the scholastic

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distinction between real and conceptual being. If and only if a satisfying account

can be produced, can we then begin to consider the place in the world of our

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ultimate target, that specific kind of evil which we call *moral*. If the

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phenomenon of moral evil can be set within a more general theory of evil along

the lines sketched here, we will have achieved a kind of progress by unification

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that is sorely lacking in all contemporary moral theories.³⁹

³⁹ I am grateful to staff and students at SUNY Buffalo and the University of Reading for comments on a draft of this paper, as well as to participants in the conference ‘New Scholastic Meets Analytic Philosophy’ held at the Lindenthal-Institut, Cologne.

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