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5-2-2018

# Reclaiming Privation Theory for the Contemporary World

William Joshua Shrader-Perry  
*Loyola Marymount University*

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*Reclaiming Privation Theory for the Contemporary World*

by

William Joshua Shrader-Perry

A Thesis presented to the  
Faculty of The Department of Theological Studies  
Loyola Marymount University

In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
Masters of Arts in Theological Studies

May 2, 2018

*In memory of Hal Leigh Shrader.*

## Introduction

During my first year as a graduate student, my wife's uncle died after a long battle with brain cancer, and a few months later my father-in-law died in a motorcycle accident. These two events, while of a different sort than the kind of evil I will be writing about here, sparked my interest in the relationship between theology, philosophy, and evil. While philosophy of religion and theology have recently focused on theodicies and defenses dealing with the problem of evil, which is the dilemma posed by the existence of a good God and the existence of evil in the world, my hope is to look at evil in a different light.<sup>1</sup> While providing theodicies and defenses against the problem of evil is important, it is also important to think about evil metaphysically. To think about evil metaphysically is to attempt to articulate not how evil and God can coexist, but what evil *is*. To that end, I will attempt a retrieval of the metaphysical account of evil as privation of the good and show that it can function as a normative account of evil in the contemporary era.

To do this, I will first examine the traditional accounts of evil as privation that we owe to Augustine and Aquinas. Second, I will attempt to show that metaphysical reflection on creation can allow contemporary people to rediscover the good, or value, inherent in creation, leaning especially on the work of William Desmond. Third, I will turn explicitly to consider influential contemporary philosophical work on the nature of evil. Finally, I will show that privation theory can provide an account of evil that has normative and practical consequences for how Christians conceptualize evil. Here I show how a metaphysically robust understanding of evil can help Christians be more effective as we attempt to counteract evil in the contemporary world. In this

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<sup>1</sup> There are at least two ways in which the problem of evil is categorized (although there can be more). The first is the logical problem of evil. The logical problem of evil is presented as: can both a good, omnipotent, and omniscient God and evil exist? The second is the evidential problem of evil. The evidential problem runs like this: can a good, omnipotent, and omniscient God exist when horrendous evils exist as well?

last section, I will examine the privation account of evil in conjunction with certain events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the major criticisms of privation theory is that it fails to account for some of the major atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I hope to show that privation theory can not only account for everyday moral evils, but that it can also account for horrendous evils as well.

Before beginning my argument, I will note a few important aspects of this paper. I will begin with a short section explaining my methodology. Then, I will briefly distinguish between two different kinds of evils. Lastly, I will detail some important objections to privation theory.

### Method

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophical inquiry that asks and seeks to answer questions about the nature of reality. The metaphysician is concerned with understanding the physical and (if such there be) non-physical realities of the world.<sup>2</sup> Since the Pre-Socratic philosophers, the general aims of metaphysics have often been understood to be the central aims of philosophical investigation.<sup>3</sup>

Aristotle describes metaphysics as “‘first philosophy.’”<sup>4</sup> Yet, in the contemporary world, metaphysics has largely been pushed to the margins of philosophy.<sup>5</sup> It was accused of being “‘cognitively meaningless’” by the logical positivists because metaphysical conclusions are not “‘empirically verifiable.’”<sup>6</sup> However, metaphysics is in some sense an inescapable reality. Even the claim that all is “spatiotemporal (a part of ‘nature’) and is knowable only through the

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<sup>2</sup> Panayot Butchvarov, “Metphysics,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd Ed, ed. Robert Audi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 563.

<sup>3</sup> D.W. Hamlyn, “metaphysics, history of.,” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 556.

<sup>4</sup> Butchvaraov, “Metphysics,” 564.

<sup>5</sup> While metaphysics has made a resurgence in contemporary philosophical investigation, I do not think it holds the same position that it did before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, I think that it is a fair to say that metaphysics, while it certainly has regained some prominence in contemporary philosophy, is still marginal in the field as a whole.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 563.

methods of the sciences, is itself a metaphysical claim, namely *metaphysical realism*.”<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, this paper will engage in a metaphysical reflection on evil. By this I mean, I will attempt to answer the question: what is evil? To do this, I will begin with a retrieval of the Augustinian and Thomistic accounts of privation theory.

By retrieval, I mean both a historical examination of privation theory, and an attempt to revitalize it for the contemporary mind. This means that although I may not hold all of the same commitments about the nature of God or even the nature of the good as Augustine or Aquinas, I do hold to the same basic understanding of evil as privation of the good. I also share with Augustine and Aquinas a conviction that metaphysical thinking about evil has both normative and practical effects on the way in which Christians attempt to mitigate evil in the world. Here I should note that my application of privation theory will be different than both Augustine and Aquinas. However, I believe that even though my application of privation theory differs from the Augustinian and the Thomist account, I still hold true to the basic tenants of privation theory—i.e., that evil is a lack of particular goods associated with particular beings, that being is fundamentally good, and that the goodness of being is structured hierarchically (that is to say, some beings are more good than others).<sup>8</sup>

One of the difficulties with thinking metaphysically is that metaphysics tends to defy systematic articulation and conceptualization. For some, this would prevent them from attempting any articulation of metaphysical thought, but for others, like Desmond, the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> The hierarchical nature of being should not be understood as contrary to the inherent goodness of being. To say that some beings are more, or less, good than others is not to suggest that some beings are therefore more, or less, evil. The hierarchical nature of being is an attempt to describe the differing moral worth of differing beings. Although contemporary persons do not necessarily admit to holding a hierarchical account of the value of being, many (however not all) contemporary persons do hold that different beings have varying degrees of moral worth. Many, I think that it might be fair to say most, people would hold to the belief that human beings are more valuable than animals. This is an example of a hierarchical understanding of the goodness of being.

recognition that all metaphysical thinking ultimately ends up in failure is simply the beginning of metaphysics.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the failure of systematic thought to articulate metaphysics should not discourage the metaphysician. Instead, this failure should be embraced as part of the process of metaphysical thinking.

Like Desmond, I wish to begin by articulating that metaphysical examinations of evil are ultimately doomed to failure. However, this should not keep us from attempting to think metaphysically about evil. It should remind us that a philosophical venture as great as metaphysics should be accompanied by great humility. It seems as though Augustine also had difficulty systematizing his thoughts on evil. Charlene Burns describes Augustine's work on evil in this way: "A chronological examination of his writings on evil reveals tensions at times between Augustine the Neoplatonic philosopher, Augustine the hearer of Manichaeism, Augustine the newly baptized Christian, and Augustine the powerful bishop."<sup>10</sup> However, the tensions within his thought might stem from the nature of metaphysics as non-systematic. To mitigate the non-systematic nature of metaphysics, Desmond attempts metaphysical thinking in a profound way. He articulates his systematic thoughts in a way that is both whole, but also open to the other: an open whole.<sup>11</sup> Typically, systematic writings are thought of as closed off and whole on their own. I hope that my own metaphysical reflection on evil in this paper will be an open whole.

Here I should also note the limitations of this paper. While much has been written on the topic of evil in the wider traditions of philosophy and theology, I will be writing from and within

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<sup>9</sup> William Desmond, *Being in the Between* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), xv.; Christopher Ben Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern* (Eugene: Wpif & Stock, 2009), 23-24.

<sup>10</sup> Charlene Burns, *Christian Understandings of Evil: The Historical Trajectory*, Christian Understandings, ed. Denis Janz, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 60

<sup>11</sup> Desmond, *Being in the Between*, xiv, 211.

the tradition of distinctively Western philosophy and theology. I do not intend to disparage Eastern philosophy or theology, but I find myself firmly rooted in the traditions of the West. Although a large portion of this paper will engage with the Catholic philosophical and theological tradition, I myself am a Protestant philosopher and theologian. As a white, male, philosopher and theologian, I attempt to recognize the limits of my own perspective, and I attempt to engage with some women philosophers in the largely male dominated tradition of philosophy and theology.<sup>12</sup>

I note my own limitations in an attempt to emphasize that my thinking on the subject of evil comes from a particular perspective. Although I believe my thinking can be applied normatively to most, and potentially to all, instances of evil, I realize I cannot possibly synthesize all of the relevant thinking about evil in this paper. Therefore, this paper should be understood as an open whole. It is a whole in the sense that it can stand on its own and can function as a normative framework through which we can understand and evaluate evil, but it is open in the sense that it is bound by a particular perspective and therefore must be open to critique and criticism from other perspectives. I embrace my own perspective, but I realize that there are other philosophical and theological ways of understanding evil that can invigorate my argument and there are understandings that would challenge it.

### Distinguishing Evils

Philosophy distinguishes between natural and moral evils. Natural evils are events that happen in the world that occur naturally, such as: earthquakes, tsunamis, wild fires, etc. This category might also include disease and other events that are not the result of the actions of a

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<sup>12</sup> Some women who have been formative in my theological and philosophical thinking are Elizabeth Johnson and Marilyn Adams McCord. However, neither of their works pertain exactly to the topic of this paper.



conscious moral agent.<sup>13</sup> Augustine understood natural evils as the consequences of the Fall.<sup>14</sup> He distinguishes the two kinds of evils by differentiating between evil “that someone has done” and evil “that someone has suffered.”<sup>15</sup> He continues on to say that the second form of evil, which will be called natural evil here, is the result of God’s just punishment against the wicked. Here is one point at which I diverge from Augustine, I do not believe that natural evils are the result of God’s punishment for wickedness. Ultimately, natural evils are beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will focus on the way in which evil as privation applies to moral evil.

### Objections to Privation Theory

In the contemporary world, proponents of privation theory seem to be fighting an uphill battle. Stanely Kane notes: “Aside from orthodox Thomists, few philosophers, either theists or their critics accept” privation theory any more.<sup>16</sup> John Milbank explains that many disregard privation theory because its description of evil seems to lack the explanatory power necessary to account for “the unprecedented evil of the twentieth century: the mass organization of totalitarian control and terror, systematic genocide, and the enslavement of people who are deliberately worked to the point of enfeeblement and then slaughtered.”<sup>17</sup> Critics, of the sort described by Milbank, claim that privation theory cannot account for the evils of the twentieth century because it describes evil as a product of “the deliberate pursuit of a lesser good.”<sup>18</sup> This seems

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<sup>13</sup> Here we might distinguish between the actions of a conscious agent (potentially some kind of animal) and a conscious moral agent (such as a human being).

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 1. While people suffer from evil “that someone has done,” no one causes natural evil (although we might note that climate change is caused by human agents, but the effects of climate change on natural evils might be best understood as *indirectly* caused by human agents). The distinction for Augustine between evil “that someone has done” (moral evil) and evil “that someone has suffered” (natural evil) should be understood in this way: evil “that someone has done” can certainly be suffered, but natural evil is only suffered and is not caused by any particular moral agent.

<sup>16</sup> Stanely Kane, “Evil and Privation,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, No. 1 (1980): 43.

<sup>17</sup> John Milbank, “Darkness and Silence: Evil and the Western Legacy,” *Evil in Contemporary Political Theory*, eds. Bruce Haddock, Peri Roberts, & Peter Sutch (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

unsatisfying to many contemporary philosophers. They question: how can an event like the Holocaust find its genesis in the pursuit of a lesser good? In the end, many contemporary philosophers conclude that privation theory fails to function as a normative account of evil because it does not seem able to account for the atrocities of the twentieth century. However, I intend to show that privation theory can function as a normative account of evil in the contemporary world.

## Chapter 1

### **Augustine and Aquinas**

I begin by examining the Augustinian account of privation theory because it provides the background for the more systematic account of Aquinas. Augustine's account has merit on its own, but I find the Thomistic account to be better suited to provide a normative account of evil because of its systematic nature. Taking both accounts of privation theory together also provides contemporary persons with a more holistic account of evil as privation. On their own, both accounts are able to normatively account for evil. But taken together, these accounts of privation theory provide a more holistic vision for understanding evil as privation.<sup>19</sup>

Saint Augustine (354 - 430 CE) was one of the most influential Christian philosophers in the Western tradition. He was born into a time when Christianity had become a major power, yet was still in the formative stages of its systematic development.<sup>20</sup> John Hick says of the great theologian and philosopher: "Augustine's influence was exerted at an earlier and more plastic stage in the growth of the Christian mind and neither scholasticism nor Protestantism has

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<sup>19</sup> I think this is especially true because Aquinas attempts to rearticulate much of Augustine's thoughts on the privative nature of evil. While Aquinas certainly has different philosophical commitments than Augustine, he comes to similar conclusions in a more systematic way. I think Aquinas would see his account of privation theory as a direct expansion of the Augustinian account.

<sup>20</sup> John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 37.

significantly altered the grand design of his picture of God and the universe, or his conception of the drama of man's creation, fall, and redemption."<sup>21</sup> Although Augustine adapted his understanding of evil as privation from Plotinus, he was the first, and certainly one of the most formative, Christian theologians to think metaphysically about evil.

During the early stages of his life, Augustine strongly resisted the Christian faith. Instead, he was drawn toward Manichaeism because he believed that it best explained the existence of evil in the world.<sup>22</sup> The Manichaeans believed that the best explanation for evil and suffering in the world was the existence of both a good god and an evil god who fought over the fate of humanity. They believed in a dualistic world in which the spiritual was synonymous with the good, while the material was understood to be evil. Burns explains: "Manichaean dualism taught that there are two independent and opposite forces, the good light and evil darkness. These opposite forces permeate creation...the ascetic lifestyle of the Manichaean elect served to release the light trapped in the evil material body."<sup>23</sup> Eventually, Augustine would turn away from Manichaeism and convert to Christianity.

After his conversion, he realized that the Manichaean notions of God were more problematic than he had originally thought. He realized that the god that the Manicheans claimed to worship could not be the true God that deserved the worship of human beings. Their god was "less than absolute," according to Hick, and "but one of two co-ordinate powers warring against each other." Another way of understanding Manicheism's concept of god is to envision god as a "totality.... divided against itself and as including within it the principle and energy of evil."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Burns, *Christian Understandings of Evil*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 39.

To Augustine the Christian, the thought that evil could reside within the Divine<sup>25</sup> and somehow divide the Absolute was horrific.<sup>26</sup>

### Evil as *Privatio Boni*

In order to understand Augustine's account of privation theory, it is necessary to understand the Christian commitments that compelled him towards his understanding of evil as privation. Augustine understands creation to be fundamentally good.<sup>27</sup> Because God is Good, and created all that exists, all existence shares in the goodness of the Divine. The question then becomes, for Augustine, from where does evil originate? God cannot be the source of evil, but evil must come from somewhere. One cannot deny the reality of evil and suffering. It was as obvious to Augustine as it is to anyone in the contemporary world.

Yet, if God creates everything, and there is evil in the world then, *prima facie*, God creates evil. But this cannot be the case for Augustine, because God is Good. Evil must then come from another source. Therefore, because of his commitments to the Christian belief in the goodness of created being, Augustine adapted a Neoplatonic concept of the privative nature of evil. Augustine's primary influence in this regard was Plotinus, a Roman philosopher who lived a century prior to Augustine.

Plotinus theorized that all created being came from one ultimate source, a Supreme One.<sup>28</sup> Because, for Plotinus, this One is good, evil cannot be a part of it, nor can it be a part of that which emanates from it—i.e., created being. The One creates being in “descending degrees

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<sup>25</sup> In order to avoid gendered language to describing God, I will use the terms: God, the Divine, and the Absolute. These terms should all be understood as synonymous with God.

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *Against the Fundamental Epistle of Manichaeus*, trans. Richard Stothert (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1872), XX 26 in Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Scott, “Rethinking Evil From Ontology to Theology” in *Pathways in Theodicy: An Introduction to the Problem of Evil* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2015), 30; John Milbank, “Darkness and Silence,” 15.

<sup>28</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 40.

of being and goodness.”<sup>29</sup> This does not mean that those creatures with less goodness and less being (terms that correlate for Plotinus and Augustine) are more evil. Instead, their degree of being and goodness corresponds with their role, responsibility, and value within the hierarchy of being.<sup>30</sup> Using a distance metaphor of sorts, as the creative outpouring of the One begins to move further from its origin, the creative outpouring begins to lessen (this results in the degrees of being and goodness); eventually, according to Hick, the creative process “is exhausted and the vast realm of Being borders upon the empty darkness of non-being,” which Plotinus associates with evil.<sup>31</sup>

Plotinus believed that as the emanation of the One continued away from it, or down from it, there would eventually be an end to the creative process. Plotinus calls this end, “matter.”<sup>32</sup> Hick explains that Plotinus’ concept of matter is not the same as the scientific notion of matter as particles that make up the material world. Instead, Plotinus is thinking of matter in the Platonic sense of “formless and measureless” energy that must be formed into the material world. For Plato, this matter is given form by the “Ideas,” according to Hick; whereas, Plotinus understands the emanation of the One to give form to matter.<sup>33</sup>

Evil, for Plotinus, is not something that is inherent to human beings. Evil has existed since the beginning, but as non-being. Hick notes that here there seems to be some confusion in Plotinus’ thought on evil. On the one hand he affirms the non-existence of evil, that it is a privation of the good; on the other hand, however, he sometimes thinks about evil as something that seems to have an existence of its own.<sup>34</sup> This difficulty in articulating the metaphysical

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>30</sup> Thinking of the world in a hierarchical way was commonplace in the late antiquated and medieval time periods.

<sup>31</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 41.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 42.

concept of evil as privation is one that Augustine will also struggle with, but in some sense, this struggle to articulate is part of metaphysical thinking.

Augustine found in Plotinus a philosophical understanding of evil that seemed to fit well with certain Christian metaphysical commitments that Augustine had. One such commitment, is belief in the goodness of God. For Augustine “God is the ultimate of being and goodness.”<sup>35</sup> Because God is the creator of all being, all creation in some way shares in the goodness of the Divine. Burns explains: “There is nothing contrary to God, because ‘the contrary of existence is non-existence. There is therefore no nature contrary to God.’”<sup>36</sup> Burns notes that there is something of a contradiction in Augustine’s line of thought here; for if all existence is synonymous with God, then how can natures other than God’s exist? For Augustine, created beings exist because they share in the power of existence and goodness of God, but in a finite way.<sup>37</sup>

Augustine’s second Christian commitment is to the goodness of all created being. Created being is good because it shares in the goodness of God by virtue of its Divine origin. Not only is it good, but there is a certain hierarchy of goodness in created being. Augustine would understand human beings to be at the top of this hierarchy because of their inherent intellect, with varying degrees of goodness inherent in the rest of created being: human beings have more value than animals, animals have more value than plants, plants have more value than non-organic things, and so on. In my own understanding, this second commitment (the inherent goodness of being) is the foundational assumption for privation theory. If created being is not inherently good, then the privation account of evil seems to fall flat.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 43; Scott, “Rethinking Evil,” 30.

<sup>36</sup> Burns, *Christian Understandings of Evil*, 61.

<sup>37</sup> Scott, “Rethinking Evil,” 30.

With these two metaphysical commitments in mind, Augustine comes to the conclusion that evil cannot be an entity *per se*. Instead, Augustine conceives of evil as a privation, following Plotinus. Because God is good, God cannot create evil. Therefore, evil cannot have a positive existence like the rest of creation; it is instead best understood as a privation. Privation, for Augustine, means the lack of some good that ought to be present in a particular being.<sup>38</sup> For instance, it is not an evil for a human being to be unable to breath underwater, as this is not an attribute of being human. However, if a fish was born unable to breath underwater, this would be considered by Augustine, and later Aquinas, to be an evil, because the good the fish ought to have, by virtue of being a fish, is absent.<sup>39</sup>

Privation theory seems to give us a plausible account of certain evils easily enough. In the above example, privation theory seems able to account for the fish born without the ability to survive underwater, or even a bird born without wings. It also seems as though sickness and disease can be understood as privative forms of evil. In spite of the fact that contemporary science shows that most diseases are not caused by an absence of health, but by active agents within the body (bacteria, viruses, etc.), privation theory is still able to account for sickness and disease. As Kane notes, the objection (that sickness and disease are caused by active agents) is a weak one. Just because an evil is caused by an active agent, does not mean that some good is not deprived from the body—i.e., health.<sup>40</sup>

Kane, however, notes a stronger objection to privation theory: “the occurrence of pain in the body is a departure from the state of good health, and any departure from the normal healthy

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<sup>38</sup> Kane, “Evil and Privation,” 43.

<sup>39</sup> A fish being born without the ability to survive under water would be considered a natural evil by Augustine. Therefore, it is a possibility because of the Fall.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

state of the body is evil. But pain is something more than merely a departure from the state of normal good health.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, pain is not the absence of health, but is itself a positive experience. Therefore, pain as a positive experience must be accounted for as both an evil, but also a good because of its positive existence, at least according to Kane.<sup>42</sup> However, an obvious weakness of this objection to privation theory is the association of pain with evil. Pain, according to Bill Anglin and Stewart Goetz, should not necessarily be associated with evil.<sup>43</sup> On my view, the inherent association between pain and evil is a leap at best. Pain is that which results from evil; for example, the phantom pain from a limb that has been lost. The pain itself is not necessarily the evil, the evil is the loss of a limb.<sup>44</sup>

However, Augustinian privation theory seems, *prima facie*, to have some difficulty accounting for moral evils. Accounting for moral evils in Augustine’s account of privation theory seems difficult because most moral evils involve some positive action on the part of the agent. Anglin and Goetz use the example of one person murdering another by stirring poison into the other person’s drink. How can privation theory account for the seemingly positive evil action of stirring poison into another’s drink, thereby killing them? They respond: “Just stirring poison into the coffee is not itself evil. Indeed, an act of murder is something good not insofar as it is an act of *murder* but insofar as it is an act of a certain type which may or may not involve a privation such as the failure to respect life, but which will be done on account of something that agent believes is good.”<sup>45</sup> It is not the act which makes the killing evil, it is the privation in the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Bill Anglin and Stewart Goetz, “Evil Is Privation” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13. no. 1 (1982): 6.

<sup>44</sup> One might note that pain can be understood as a case of suffering, and suffering most certainly can be a form of evil. However, suffering can be understood as a lack. Suffering might be understood as a lack of happiness, contentment, peace, etc. Therefore, I think it is important to make a distinction between evil and suffering. Not all forms of evil are suffering, but it seems that all forms of suffering might be considered evil.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 7.



motive of the person committing the action. If killing was itself privative, an evil action, then we would have to punish every instance of killing—i.e., police violence, killing in war, defending one's family, etc.—and many philosophers would argue that there are indeed instances of justified killing.

Consider a second, more difficult example: torture. There is a qualitative difference between justified killing and torture. It seems to me that torture is always wrong, and there is never a good justification for torturing anyone.<sup>46</sup> Todd Calder writes: “the malicious torturer is not just not as good as she might be. She is not simply withholding gestures of kindness which a morally decent person would bestow; her actions are positively bad and these actions are constituted by attributes she possess, i.e., desires for other people's pain for pleasure, and not by attributes she lacks.”<sup>47</sup> While Calder makes a strong objection by stating that the desire for torture does not come from attributes lacked, but from attributes that the torturer has, this does not necessitate that there is no privation of some good in the torturer. Just because she has a positive desire which seems to drive her to torture, does not mean that she does not lack some proper recognition of the good. In fact, her desire to inflict pain for her own pleasure can be seen as the pursuit of a seemingly good end. Augustine might respond that one's desires do not determine the action of the will; the privation in the torturer is a will that has turned “away from the unchangeable good and toward changeable goods.”<sup>48</sup> Ultimately Augustine explains that human beings are not slaves to their desires, “for the will cannot be forced into such iniquity by

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<sup>46</sup> It is true that many have tried to come up with justifications for torture, but I think many ethicists would agree that no potential justifications actually succeed.

<sup>47</sup> Todd C. Calder, “Is the Privation Theory of Evil Dead?,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 44 no. 4 (2007): 373.

<sup>48</sup> Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 68.

anything superior or equal to it, since that would be unjust; or by anything inferior to it, since that is impossible.”<sup>49</sup>

Therefore, it seems that the Augustinian account of privation theory is able to account for moral evils. However, in accounting for moral evils, privation theory does not question the morality of the action itself but focuses on the will of the agent. Augustine explains that moral evil comes from a “perverse will.”<sup>50</sup> Milbank notes that, for Augustine, because of Adam’s sin, humanity lost its “vision of God” and is faced with physical death and “incapacity of the body.” Milbank continues: “As a result of this twin impairment, will as desire lacks both vision and capacity and degenerates into concupiscence.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, our will is turned away from God and toward changeable goods, which result in evil.

Understanding evil as privation allowed Augustine to both circumvent Manichaeian understandings of the relationship between good and evil, and to hold that God is not responsible for evil in the world. Next, I examine Aquinas’ understanding of evil as privation. For the most part, Aquinas will closely follow the Augustinian notion of evil as privation. Yet, he will also begin to systematize the notion of evil as privation, and he will give more credence to the notion that evil exists as privation.

### **Aquinas On Evil as Privation**

Thomas Aquinas lived nearly a millennium after Augustine, but nonetheless is potentially the second most influential theologian and philosopher in Christian history, behind Augustine. In

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 71. Here there could be a discussion of things like addiction or severe mental illness. In cases of drug and alcohol addiction the brain chemistry of the addict is changed so that a dependency upon the drug is formed. It is therefore more difficult to suggest that Augustine’s understanding of the will controlling our actions independently of other input. However, Augustine did not have the same understanding (or any understanding) of brain chemistry that contemporary persons have, and there is something to be said for addicts still being able to gain control over their addiction via their will, although not without support and occasional medical intervention.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>51</sup> Milbank, “Darkness and Silence,” 18.

his work, *De Malo*, Aquinas attempts to examine the nature of evil. Brian Davies explains that Aquinas is not writing about “amazingly wicked deeds;” instead, he is concerned with “‘badness across the board,’ or ‘the undesirable in general.’”<sup>52</sup> While, for Augustine, God could not be the source of evil because of the goodness of the Divine, Aquinas believed that God could not be the source of evil because God is the source of all being. According to Aquinas, as the source of being God is “‘Being Itself’ or ‘Subsisting Being.’”<sup>53</sup> Since evil is a privation, or lack of goodness which is associated with being, God cannot be the source of evil as this would imply a lack of being within God.<sup>54</sup>

Although Aquinas agrees with Augustine that evil is a privation, a lack of some good a particular being ought to have, he further explains evil in more systematic terms. Hick states: “Following Augustine, he defines evil in general negative terms. But he renders the traditional definition more precise by giving priority, among the several terms used by Augustine, to ‘deprivation’ and ‘defect.’”<sup>55</sup> Burns notes that Aquinas and Augustine had different philosophical commitments which informed their notions of evil as privation. Augustine’s philosophical commitment was to the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus, as I mentioned above. Aquinas, on the other hand, is committed to Aristotelianism.<sup>56</sup>

Aristotle synthesizes the dualistic worldview of the Greeks into one unified reality. While Plato held that the highest reality was that of the intelligible world, Aristotle conceived of a reality in which there was no separation between the world of sensory experience and the world

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<sup>52</sup> Brian Davies, “Introduction,” *De Malo*, ed. Brian Davis, trans. Richard Regan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14.

<sup>53</sup> Davies, “Introduction,” 16.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>55</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 94.

<sup>56</sup> Burns, *Christian Understandings of Evil*, 84,

of the forms.<sup>57</sup> Aristotle believed that thoughts corresponded to reality, and he understood this correspondence in terms of universals. Burns explicates: “A universal is an idea that represents that which is common to all members of a particular genus or group of things.”<sup>58</sup> Aquinas strays from a strict materialist realist view—which states that there is exact correspondence between the idea of a thing and the thing itself—and instead developed a more moderate understanding of the realist position in light of his theological beliefs.<sup>59</sup> As Burns notes, “The Thomist position on universals is that everything in the abstract concept applies to every instance of a thing and the universality of the concept is a product of the mind.”<sup>60</sup> For Aquinas, universals ultimately derive from the mind of God. Everything that exists within the world has a corresponding concept that applies to it. For instance, the concept of man applies to every instance of a true man. More generally, the concept of person applies to every human being that Aquinas would consider a person. It is, in fact, the things correspondence to the concept that makes it what it is—i.e., a person is a person inasmuch as it corresponds with the concept of person.

Because of Aquinas’ Aristotelean commitments, he has a different metaphysical conception of reality than Augustine. While Augustine believed in the goodness of created being, a deviation from his Neoplatonic commitments, he was nevertheless influenced by the dualism of Platonic thought.<sup>61</sup> Platonic dualism suggests that there is a separation between the world of sensory experience and the world of the forms. This separation between the world of the senses and the world of the intellect allowed Augustine to say that evil is nonbeing, because there is, for the Neoplatonist, a continuum of being. The world of the forms, or the intellect, has the most

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 84.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

being or is the most real. The sensory world has less being, and therefore is less real. This continuum ends at nonbeing; the point at which Augustine places evil.<sup>62</sup>

Aquinas' realist commitments cause him to have a different understanding of the privative nature of evil than Augustine. While Augustine strongly maintained that evil does not strictly exist, Aquinas will deviate from this and say that evil as a privation can have no existence *on its own*.<sup>63</sup> However, as a privation of the good, evil does exist. Evil exists insofar as it is parasitic on the good. Davies explains: "Aquinas holds, evil has no independent existence. It 'is there' only in the sense that something 'is missing.'"<sup>64</sup> For Aquinas then, evil is in some way a nonbeing like Augustine imagined, but in its nothingness, it exists parasitically.

Aquinas equates goodness with desirability: "we need to note that good is, properly speaking, something real insofar as it is desirable, for the Philosopher in the *Ethics* says those who said that good is what all things desire defined it best."<sup>65</sup> Aquinas understands the good to be what all things desire. He continues on: "But we call what is contrary to good evil. And so evil is necessarily what is contrary to the desirable as such. And what is contrary to the desirable as such cannot be an entity."<sup>66</sup> However, just because evil is not an entity *per se*, does not mean that Aquinas denies that evil has some kind of existence—i.e., an existence parasitic on the good.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>63</sup> Scott, "Rethinking Evil," 34.

<sup>64</sup> Davies, "Introduction," 21.

<sup>65</sup> The Philosopher that Aquinas refers to is Aristotle. Aquinas, *On Evil*, ed., Brian Davies, trans. Richard Regan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 58.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>67</sup> While Augustine might have denied that evil existed as a category of being, he certainly did not deny the effects that evil has on the world. In fact, understanding evil was one of the primary reasons that he began his exploration of Manichaeism.

Aquinas continues on to note that all creation can ultimately be traced back to God, the “first and universal cause,” and because God created particular beings, God must have also created particular goods. Hence, Aquinas insists that evil cannot have being because it is contrary to good. He writes: “if evil were a real thing, it would neither desire anything nor be desired by anything, and so have no activity or movement, since nothing acts or moves except because of the desire of an end.”<sup>68</sup> This understanding of movement or action comes from Aristotle as well. Aristotle believed that in order to truly understand something, you need to understand what causes it. For Aristotle, there are four causes: the first is the material cause—i.e., what is the thing made of and what are its parts? The second cause is the formal cause—what causes this particular thing to be different from other particular things? The third cause is the efficient cause. The efficient cause is most important for Aquinas here, as this category is concerned with how things move from a state of potentiality to a state of actuality. Lastly, Aristotle understood all things to have a final cause. The final cause is the end a particular thing tries to achieve.<sup>69</sup>

Evil, for Aquinas, cannot exist like created being because it does not have an efficient or final cause. Scott explains: “creation naturally strives for its particular form of goodness. Rational agents direct their actions toward beneficial or salutary ends, real, or perceived. Evil represents the misdirection of their striving, whereas evil itself has no end or desire in itself, it is simply negation.”<sup>70</sup> However, while Aquinas understands evil to be primarily privative in nature, he also understands it to have some kind of existence: an existence parasitic on the good.

Aquinas ties the reality of evil very closely to the existence of the good. He understands all creation to be good because its source is God. However, he writes about evil as if it inheres

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>69</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc, 2016), 7; Matthew Petrussek, “Theological Ethics” (lecture, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, Spring 2016).

<sup>70</sup> Mark Scott, “Rethinking Evil,” 33.

within the foundations of the goodness of created being itself: “evil is only the privation of a due perfection, and privation is only a potential being, since we say that things that nature designs to possess a perfection that they do not have are deprived. Therefore, it follows that there is evil in good, since we call potential beings good.”<sup>71</sup>

However, this does not mean that Aquinas ascribes the same kind of being to evil that he does to good; it is clear that Aquinas understands evil to be privative in nature. Yet, he connects it closely with the good because this enables him to say that evil exists as an accidental cause of the good. By accidental, Aquinas does not mean unintended; instead, accidental denotes a quality that is nonessential to the nature of a particular being.<sup>72</sup> He says, “the cause of evil is good in the way in which evil can have a cause. For...evil cannot have an intrinsic cause.”<sup>73</sup> In this way, Aquinas begins to articulate the parasitic existence of evil. Aquinas is more willing than his predecessor to ascribe an accidental existence to evil. He writes: “we conclude that every evil has a cause, but only by accident, since evil cannot have an intrinsic cause.”<sup>74</sup> And ultimately, for Aquinas, that cause is the good: “in one way, good as deficient causes evil; in the second way, good as an accidental cause causes evil.”<sup>75</sup>

While in some ways Aquinas’ insistence on the parasitic existence of evil seems to run contrary to privation theory, it can be better understood as a further development of the Augustinian notion of privation. Aquinas strengthens a seeming area of weakness in Augustine’s original account of evil. As discussed above, while Augustine’s privation account of evil has certain strengths when describing malformations, physical lack, health problems, and the like, it

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 65-66.

<sup>72</sup> For instance, for Aquinas, rationality is an essential quality for a human being to possess by nature of being human. However, height is an accidental quality. It can vary among human beings and there is no one height that makes one human. The same could be said for hair color and various aspects of human beings.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 71.

has a seemingly weaker stance when describing moral evil. Above I showed how Augustinian privation theory was able to account for moral evil, but it seems to me that the Thomistic account of evil as privation is better suited to account for moral evil.

Gregory Reichberg captures the critique of Augustine's account of evil perfectly, "Can the idea of a falling away from the good, however refined, come anywhere close to capturing the calculation, the commitment, the energy, and the drive that underlie the most virulent projects in malfeasance."<sup>76</sup> Aquinas empowers the privation account of evil in its ability to account for moral evil by explaining how evil can be thought to exist parasitically on the good. For Aquinas, according to Reichberg, "A wrongful deed has the character of privation insofar as it lacks a due ordination to the agent's rightful end; it is something more than privation insofar as it is an act posited in opposition to the moral rule."<sup>77</sup> Reichberg explains that if Aquinas continued with Augustine's understanding of evil as nonbeing, then he would be committed to an understanding of sin which ruled out intentional wrongdoing. Instead, "when sin is classified within the category of mixed privation... the experience of varying degrees of gravity is readily made intelligible 'by reference precisely to that element which is said in a positive manner.'"<sup>78</sup>

Reichberg explains that intentional moral evils affect both the action and the agent. The action is "deprived of its due excellence," while the agent "is...deprive of valuable internal goods, natural and supernatural."<sup>79</sup> Human beings commit evil actions because of "some defect of the will," according to Reichberg.<sup>80</sup> Evil, because it is a privation, cannot be the final cause of anything. The only way that evil can be committed by human beings is when they choose an evil

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<sup>76</sup> Gregory Reichberg, "Moral Evil in Aquinas's 'De Malo'" *The Review of Metaphysics*, 55 no. 4 (2002): 751.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 757.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 758.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 759.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 761.



that they perceive to be a good.<sup>81</sup> He explains: “nothing exercises causality except insofar as it is in act; evil, as such, represents the privation of act. Hence, evil qua evil cannot function as a cause; it is only when annexed to a good that evil is possessed of a corrupting power.”<sup>82</sup> As I stated above, good is the accidental cause of evil; therefore, for evil to have any existence or causal power it must be concomitant to some good. Ultimately, Aquinas concedes that it is a defect on the part of the agents will that cause her to choose evil.<sup>83</sup>

Aquinas, following Augustine, maintains that evil is privative in nature; it does not exist in the world *per se*. However, Aquinas differs from his predecessor in that he understands evil to exist parasitically on the good. This in turn, allows Aquinas to develop a more nuanced understanding of intentional moral evil. Moral evil, according to Aquinas, exists insofar as it is the accidental consequence of the pursuit of some perceived good. Aquinas explains that it is a misdirected will that turns the moral agent to evil deeds. However, this does not mean that human beings commit evil out of ignorance. There is some level at which we will evil actions knowing that they are evil.

Both Augustine and Aquinas understand evil to be privative in nature. Augustine maintains that evil is nonbeing, while Aquinas explains that evil can exist parasitically on the good. This distinction is important when considering moral evils. The Thomistic account provides contemporary proponents of privation theory a defense against one of the major critiques brought against them. For many, privation theory seems unsatisfying in its description of horrendous moral evils. However, on the Thomistic account, evil can be understood as an absence, yet it can be understood to have some kind of existence precisely because of its

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 763.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 767.

absence. The Thomistic account allows the privation theorist to say that evil does exist, but not on its own. As Reichberg explained above, in the Thomistic account our actions can be understood as privations and as more than privations. Therefore, we can declare horrendous evils as evil both in the privative sense, and in the sense in which they are more than privations by their opposition to the moral law.

One of the important presuppositions of privation theory is the inherent goodness of created being. For Augustine, creation is good because, by virtue of its being created by a perfectly good God, it shares in the goodness of the Divine. Aquinas understands creation to be good because God is the ground of being that sustains all existence. Nevertheless, privation theory cannot account for evil if the presupposition of the goodness of being is not accepted. Therefore, I turn now to an account of how metaphysical reflection on created being can enable contemporary persons to rediscover the goodness, or value, of being.

## Chapter 2

### **Metaphysical Reflection and the Value of Being**

Desmond articulates an account of the end of metaphysics in terms of the modern response to what he calls the “equivocity of the ethos.”<sup>84</sup> The ethos for Desmond is the “ontological context or overdetermined matrix of value” in which human beings find themselves.<sup>85</sup> In some ways, human beings fear that which they cannot systematize and control, and the equivocity of the ethos escapes strict systemization. Therefore, instead of having an open hospitality to the equivocity of being, human beings look at the plurality of being with hostility.<sup>86</sup> No longer is the goodness of being recognized; instead, the inherent value of being

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<sup>84</sup> William Desmond, *Ethics and the Between* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 23.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 17

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

becomes equated with the utility of being in its ability to advance humanity's purposes.

Following Hobbes and Spinoza, Desmond says of the current attitude towards the contemporary ethos: "we do not love the good; what we love, we call the good."<sup>87</sup> Ultimately, this attitude results in a distrust of other-being.<sup>88</sup>

Desmond recounts that premodern philosophers not only had an account of the teleological value of being, but they also had a strong sense of the "*archeology of the good*."<sup>89</sup> Premodern philosophers understood that the origin of being was itself good; therefore, being was good as well. Desmond explains: "this point is more Platonic than Aristotelian: The Good itself as origin, as original, not just as end."<sup>90</sup> Desmond understands the mistrust of modernity to be directed towards this originative good. He accounts for this by suggesting that the removal of teleological goods from our "rational scheme of intelligibility has a boomerang effect on the archeology of the good."<sup>91</sup> Removing the goods towards which being strives has the unintended effect of obscuring the Good as origin.

Human beings fear that which they cannot control, and the result is a loss of the good and a homogenizing of being. The homogenizing of being is our attempt to make the world intelligible, to make it fit into a univocal category that we can systematically understand and control. However, this results in an understanding of other-being as inherently worthless. Desmond says, "the truth of the other as object becomes a homogenous valueless being-there; it becomes a *worthless thereness*."<sup>92</sup> The value of being is then only recognized when other-being

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Other-being is all that is not the self.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 26. Emphasis Desmond's.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 28.

becomes useful for self-being. According to Desmond, this affects the world in two ways. Of the first, he states: “the objectification drains the world of values, considered as final causes; the world is purposeless, but we are purposeful, and cannot but be purposeful; the very neutralization of the world is itself no neutral project but the *product of a will to purpose*.”<sup>93</sup> Of the second: “*We* [human beings] become the source of purpose, *we* become the purpose in an otherwise purposeless world.”<sup>94</sup>

In devaluing the good, we devalue being. In devaluing being, we make ourselves the measure of value. We objectify being and make value subjective. In an attempt to make the world as univocal and intelligible as possible, we actually create a world devoid of meaning. For Desmond, this devaluing of being takes the form of a quest for autonomy. What Kant envisioned as a freedom for human beings, actually becomes a freedom from other-beings. Desmond says of this quest for autonomy: “suppose we say that the law of self, or *noms of to auto*, is first *freedom from*: it cannot be fit into the network of objectivities; it is over against them.”<sup>95</sup> This freedom is a selfish freedom, one that seeks autonomy for itself, and not for the other. Freedom of this sort cannot truly be free from other-being because, as Desmond explains, it is constantly reacting to the reality of other-being. Other-being becomes valuable only inasmuch as it is useful to self-being. Instead of understanding other-being as distinctly other, it becomes “other relative to the self.”<sup>96</sup>

This eventually leads Desmond to an understanding of radical autonomy as a form of will to power.<sup>97</sup> Will to power, as Desmond understands it, is self-defeating. Will to power creates a

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>97</sup> Desmond does not deny autonomy completely. He is attempting to point out that the idea that one could be entirely free from the influence of other-being is in fact not possible. Self-being and other-being are in constant relationship with one another, it is an inescapable reality of the world we find ourselves in.

valueless creation, in which only human beings can supply the necessary value to other-being. However, Desmond aptly notes, that human beings are just as much a part of the valueless world that they have made. He says, “for we have made the *whole* of creation worthless; we are also creatures in creation; as part of the valueless whole, the human is also valueless, ultimately.”<sup>98</sup>

This valueless place that modernity has brought us to is not the promised land. However, Desmond sees in the valueless landscape of modernity a potential for a rebirth, a reclaiming of metaphysics. Now that we have been brought to the point of utter valuelessness, we can clearly see that the end result of will to power and radical autonomy is an illusion. Now we are in a place for a metaphysical rebirth. One in which we can reclaim the value of being as distinctly other.

For Desmond, we have come to a point of metaphysical renewal in the contemporary world. Along with this renewed emphasis on metaphysics, comes a renewed understanding of the goodness and value of being. As I stated above, the goodness of being is one of the presuppositions of privation theory, and without an understanding of the goodness of being privation theory will be unable to provide a normative account of evil in the contemporary world. Desmond’s account ties metaphysics and the value of being together. After Kant and the turn to the self, philosophers began to abandon conceptions of being that presupposed its goodness. Instead, they began to understand the human being as the measure and creator of the goodness of being. However, Desmond provides a way for us to think metaphysically about being and to rediscover the goodness of creation.

The next chapter surveys two contemporary philosophers whose ideas will help to develop privation theory into a normative account of evil in the contemporary world. First, I will

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 35.

examine Desmond's metaxological metaphysics. Desmond provides a metaphysical account of the world that revitalizes the inherent goodness of being. Second, I examine Hannah Arendt's account of the banality of evil. I use Arendt to show that it is possible that even the most horrendous evils can be conceived via a series of mundane everyday evils.

### Chapter 3

#### **Contemporary Thinkers on Evil**

##### William Desmond's Metaxological Metaphysics

Desmond's metaxological<sup>99</sup> metaphysics is the foundation of all of his philosophical thought. He attempts to retrieve the wisdom of the ancients, looking to the past to guide contemporary philosophers in the present. After the enlightenment, there was an attitudinal shift from desire seeking good "because it is the good" towards "the good is the good because desire seeks it."<sup>100</sup>

In his metaxological metaphysics, Desmond attempts to reclaim what was lost during the enlightenment: a fundamental wonder about being. He calls this "agapeic astonishment."<sup>101</sup> He writes:

The advent of metaphysical thinking is in a primal astonishment. Astonishment itself is primal. It is elemental and irreducible. Plato speaks of *thaumazein* as the *pathos* of the philosopher. This is sometimes translated as *wonder* and this is not inappropriate. Astonishment, however, captures the sense of being rocked back on one's heels, as it were, by the otherness of being in its givenness.<sup>102</sup>

It is ultimately this initial astonishment with the givenness of being that leads us into metaphysical perplexity. This agapeic astonishment comes before metaphysical perplexity, for

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<sup>99</sup> Metaxological literally means: an account of the between. Simpson says: "it is a 'discourse concerning the middle, of the middle, and in the middle.'" See Simpons, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 32.

<sup>100</sup> Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 518.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Desmond. It is the initial event that propels us towards metaphysical thinking. Christopher Ben Simpson says this about metaphysics: “metaphysics...asks the ultimate ‘why’ of being: why being and not nothing?”<sup>103</sup> This question, the why of being, leads Desmond to an understanding of the givenness of being.<sup>104</sup>

For Desmond, metaphysical thinking happens in a particular context: the between. Simpson explains: “Desmond understands the ‘meta’ of metaphysics as double, as referring to how it is to meditate on both the beyond...and the ‘in the midst’ of being as intimately related...”<sup>105</sup> We think metaphysically from the between; between origin and end, between beginning of life and death, between self-being and other-being. We think metaphysically from a particular ethos of being as well. Simpson explains that unlike the previous ethos, one that was open to the good and the overdeterminate sense of being, the current ethos is one in which mindfulness has been cut off “from some of the deeper, overdeterminate resources of the primal ethos.”<sup>106</sup> The current ethos has shifted the primal ethos in two particular ways: by the objectification of being and the subjectification of value. Both the objectification of being and the subjectification of value happen together, they are interrelated, yet they can be distinguished.<sup>107</sup>

The objectification of being happens as humans begin to understand the good as synonymous with their own desires. Instead of recognizing the inherent value in created being, value becomes equated with that which can provide the most utility to humanity. The good is that which serves humanity in the most efficient way. As this objectification of being rises, the

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<sup>103</sup> Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics and the Postmodern*, 23.

<sup>104</sup> The givenness of being refers to the idea that all that exists has no reason for existing other than the fact that it exists. Beings do not self-exist. They exist because of some other.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

subjectification of value closely follows. Instead of value being realized in other-being, human beings become the measure of value. For, the good is only good as long as it is good for me. Not even good *to* me, but *for* me. The subjectification of the good follows from the turn to the subject. Human beings become the determinative aspect of the good in other-being. In the end, Desmond understands this to result in a human will to power that will culminate in a nihilistic end.<sup>108</sup> Desmond's entire project can be categorized as an attempt to turn us away from nihilism and towards the primal ethos.

The primal ethos is characterized by an understanding of the overdeterminate nature of being. Simpson explains: "The ethos/between is a prior happening...and givenness that is always already given and that, as such, contains the promise/potentiality/possibility of the fulfillment/realization/actualization of beings."<sup>109</sup> This primal ethos is the ethos of the ancients. Those who were moved by wonder, astonishment, and perplexity at the fact that anything is at all.

Why does being exist? Because it was given to be. There is no other reason. The very ability to ask anything at all about being comes to us from the givenness of being itself. Desmond explains: "this surfacing of the question is not first generated by some self-sufficient act of autonomous thought. It comes to us from a depth of otherness, the otherness of being itself, that we cannot claim to control, or completely encapsulate in our subsequent concepts."<sup>110</sup> Our connection with being is not a dualistic object/subject relationship; instead, our relationship to being is "immediate" and intimate.<sup>111</sup> D.C. Schindler writes: "one finds oneself always already

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>110</sup> William Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 4.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 4.



‘in’ being, and one finds being always already ‘in’ one’s thinking.”<sup>112</sup> In coming into an awareness of one’s own contingent existence, one begins to realize that one’s own existing and thinking originates outside one’s self; being comes from some other.<sup>113</sup>

The question of being itself leads one to an initial astonishment with being.<sup>114</sup> Simpson explicates: “this initial astonishment at givenness is overdeterminate—an awareness of an original unarticulated plentitude prior to and exceeding all determinate facts and definitions.”<sup>115</sup> Ultimately, the overdeterminate reason for there being anything at all leads us to an understanding of being as primarily given to be. According to Desmond, the fact that human beings find themselves to be at all, and to be in the midst of other-being, leads to the astonishing conclusion of the givenness of being.<sup>116</sup>

Ultimately, Desmond understands all being to be given to be; not only given to be but given to be for itself. Created being is made as other to the originative source of being.<sup>117</sup> There is a self-determining to being. Beings exist for themselves, and this is expressed in the self-determination of beings to continue their existence. However, while beings are for themselves, they are not closed off to other-being.<sup>118</sup> This Desmond describes as an open wholeness.

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<sup>112</sup> D.C. Schindler, “The Positivity of Philosophy: William Desmond’s Contribution to Theology,” in *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology*, eds. Christopher Ben Simpson and Brendan Thomas Sammon (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 121.

<sup>113</sup> In the earlier parts of Desmond’s work, he does not talk about the contingency of being. He writes about the contingency of being in relation to Aquinas’ argument from contingency in *God and the Between*. However, I think contingency is an appropriate way to talk about coming to the realization that the self does not generate its own being.

<sup>114</sup> Christopher Ben Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 35.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>116</sup> Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 5-6.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

Desmond understands being to be ontologically good. He states: in agapeic mindfulness “the gift of being intimates that it is an agape, and to be rejoiced in for its own sake, for the intrinsic worthiness of its sheer being there.”<sup>119</sup> He understands all being to have value (to be good) first, because all being is given to be. Agapeic mindfulness is the recognition of the inherent goodness of being. This mindfulness has genesis in agapeic astonishment at the givenness of being. The givenness of being in and of itself is a good because there is no reason for being other than its givenness.<sup>120</sup> Second, being is good because it is given to be for itself. The fact that being is at all, and that it is free, is good.<sup>121</sup> Third, being is good because particular beings are integrities of being. Desmond says: “to be is to be an integrity of being, which is to be a one.”<sup>122</sup> However, this does not mean that Desmond understands concrete beings as closed off to other beings. He conceptualizes these integrities as open wholes.<sup>123</sup>

Desmond articulates four different ways of being: the univocal, the equivocal, the dialectic, and the metaxological. Each way of being illuminates a different understanding of being; none of the ways of being should be abandoned, but in some sense each way of being progresses towards the next culminating in the metaxological.

The first way, or sense, of being is the univocal.<sup>124</sup> In this understanding of being, the emphasis is placed on the determinacy of being. Simpson explicates: “all being is seen to be determinately intelligible.”<sup>125</sup> Simpson explains that while the univocal sense of being is

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 506.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 508.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 506.

<sup>124</sup> This section on the ways of being will primarily come from Christopher Ben Simpson’s book, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern: William Desmond and John D. Caputo*. I have chosen to draw from this book for this section because Simpson attempts a *systematic* articulation of the whole of Desmond’s thought.

<sup>125</sup> Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 29.

accurate in some ways, in many other ways it is lacking. In two primary ways univocity fails to account for being: the first, univocity cannot account for the “ambiguity of being, and it ignores what does not fit into its determinate framework.” The second, univocity cannot “account for the will to univocity—the desire to account for all of being in terms of determinant intelligibility—*itself.*”<sup>126</sup>

The second sense of being is the equivocal. The equivocal sense of being, in contrast to the univocal, stresses “manyness over unity, difference over sameness, ambiguity over clarity.” However, like the univocal sense of being, equivocality cannot account for being in its fullness either. Ultimately an insistence on the equivocal causes a fall into sheer chaos. Simpson explains: “remaining with sheer equivocality means not only the dispersal of being but the dissolution of mindfulness itself. There is no reason the absolute claim of equivocality should stand when all other absolute claims cannot.”<sup>127</sup>

The third sense of being is the dialectic sense. This sense of being stresses both determination and difference. Dialectic is a means of making even the indeterminate more and more determinate through a process of self-mediation. Simpson explains: “the dialectical sense of being, for Desmond, is truthful in that it points to the necessity of thinking through that ambiguity and instability of the partial truths and of coming to have some intelligible understanding of being in its becoming and otherness.”<sup>128</sup> In the dialectic way, the focus is not on static univocity or on indeterminate equivocality, but on a process of self-mediation by which even the equivocal becomes more and more intelligibly determinate. Simpson notes that in the end, the dialectic way fails to fully articulate the fullness of being. In dialectical thinking,

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 31.

difference is ultimately subsumed into a determinate self-mediation. Dialectical thinking therefore ignores “otherness—transcendence and infinities within, without, and above—that resist the dialectical sense’s total reduction to immanent unity and remains sources of persistent perplexity.”<sup>129</sup>

Lastly, we come to the final sense of being: the metaxological. For Desmond, metaxological thinking is situated between the objective univocal way and the indeterminate equivocal way. According to Simpson, it “is a discourse *of* and *in* the middle.”<sup>130</sup> It seeks a determinate unity of being that does not reduce otherness to something subsumed into self-mediated thinking like dialectic. Instead, it seeks a unity that recognizes and celebrates difference, a community. Simpson writes: “unlike the dialectic, the metaxological sees the difference between the self and the other as being mediated from the side of the other as well as from the side of the self.”<sup>131</sup> Here Desmond thinks about mediation in a double sense: “this *double mediation* entailed in the metaxological sense of being consists of both *self-mediation* (thought thinking itself in thinking its other) and *inter-mediation* (thought thinking its other).”<sup>132</sup>

Because Desmond understands freedom to be an integral part of the goodness of being, there is an open space for evil in his metaxological metaphysics. The doubleness of being “is so inherently ambiguous as to be always a danger and a hazard.”<sup>133</sup> Freedom provides the ground for evil. The potential of created being is both the potential for goodness and the potential for evil. Therefore, Desmond states: “the human being is the most dangerous being.”<sup>134</sup> In human

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 515.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 517.

beings, the potential for goodness, the state for which they were made, is as likely as the potential for evil.

Desmond ties evil to equivocity. This is not to say that equivocity is itself evil, but evil is found in the equivocal way of being. Evil is tied to the same power that brings creation to life. Desmond explains: “I want to say that this pre-determinate, pre-reflective equivocity of faith/distrust comes closer to the ambiguous matrix of our presentiment of the good or evil of being.”<sup>135</sup> Desmond is somewhat Thomistic in this sense. While he does not explicitly state that evil is a privation of the good, he certainly connects the existence of evil with the good. Like Aquinas, Desmond seems to understand evil to be parasitic on the good, at least implicitly. For ultimately, it is the potential for goodness that allows for the possibility of evil.

Desmond’s metaphysics provides us with a way to begin to rebuild our metaphysical thinking. His understanding of the goodness of being that allows for the possibility of evil will be important as I continue to develop some of the normative functions that privation theory can provide. In the next section I turn to Arendt’s understanding of the banality of evil.

#### Hannah Arendt: On the Banality of Evil

After the Second World War, Arendt went to the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. She describes her own work in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as a report of the proceedings of the trial, but this is not an entirely accurate understanding of her goals. Susan Neiman explains: “Arendt’s claim that her best-known book was just a long piece of reporting was disingenuous, for her critics were right to sense that she was not merely describing but also defending *something*.”<sup>136</sup> According to Neiman, Arendt was writing not strictly about Eichmann and the atrocities that he

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<sup>135</sup> William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 79.

<sup>136</sup> Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 299.

committed in the name of the Nazi regime. Instead, the entire world was under indictment. Eichmann's case was, for Arendt, paradigmatic of a wider problem. All people recognize evil in the world, but very few recognize evil for what it is. Arendt therefore attempts to articulate a phenomenological account of evil as banal. Neiman explains that, for Arendt, Eichmann was not the monster that the prosecution attempted to portray him as. Instead, Arendt argues that the context that Eichmann found himself in contributed to the atrocities that he committed.<sup>137</sup>

Arendt herself goes to great lengths to explain the normalcy of Eichmann:

Half a dozen psychiatrists had certified him as “normal”—“more normal, at any rate, than I am after having examined him,”...another had found that his whole psychological outlook, his attitude toward his wife and children, mother and father, brothers, sisters, and friends, was “not only normal but most desirable.”<sup>138</sup>

Arendt not only saw him as an entirely normal man, but also did not find him to be particularly conniving or devious: “[Arendt] concluded that Eichmann's inability to speak coherently in court was connected with his incapacity to think, or to think from another person's point of view.”<sup>139</sup> Throughout the trial Arendt did not see a monster sitting in the glass booth that separated the accused from the other people in the room; she saw a normal man.

During the trial she realized something about the nature of evil: evil is not necessarily radical in nature, often times it reveals itself in the subtlest of ways and grows throughout one's life. Richard Bernstein explains that Arendt never intended her account of the banality of evil to be understood as a kind of universal theory to account for all kinds of theoretical evils. Instead, she understood her account of evil primarily in phenomenological terms. She says, “when I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem, a Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 26.

<sup>139</sup> Amos Elon, “Introduction,” in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, xiii.

which stared me in the face at the trial.”<sup>140</sup> However, the possibility of horrendous evil being born out of banal evils will become important in showing how privation theory can provide a normative account of evil in the contemporary world.

Arendt understands evil to be mundane. Not that the total effects of evil are banal or mundane, but the actions that lead people to atrocious evils are often subtle and unsuspecting. In the trial, Arendt notes that Eichmann could only be as guilty as his situation would allow. Eichmann, to his own knowledge and conscience, was a law abiding German citizen. In fact, if Eichmann had not followed his orders and acted differently than he did throughout World War II, he would have been a criminal in the German state. Arendt writes about the prosecution’s argument: “their case rested on the assumption that the defendant, like all ‘normal persons,’ must have been aware of the criminal nature of his acts.”<sup>141</sup> However, this was not necessarily the case with Eichmann, or many of the other German commanders during the Second World War. She even says of Eichmann’s motives: “except for an ordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all.”<sup>142</sup> According to Eichmann himself, he did not even hate the Jewish people. The defense’s testimony states: “He ‘personally’ never had anything whatever against Jews; on the contrary, he had plenty of ‘private reasons’ for not being a Jew hater.”<sup>143</sup>

In the end, it seemed to Arendt, that Eichmann was not a monster who set out with radically evil intentions to destroy anyone. He was a law-abiding citizen, who, because of his drive for advancement followed his orders. This of course for Arendt does not excuse his crimes, but it does make them more understandable. Her work humanized Eichmann, but it also reveals

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<sup>140</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 287.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

something about the reality of evil itself. Her interpretation of the phenomena that led Eichmann to his place of imprisonment, brought Arendt to a realization about the nature of evil. During the trial, she came to the conclusion that evil can be radically subtle in nature, banal.

In Eichmann's case, like many cases in society, there was no moment that turned him from a course of good toward unimaginable evil. Instead, his horrendous actions during the war were the result of a multitude of minute evil choices, some of which he had no control over—i.e., the context in which he lived. However, the result was the same. The man standing before the court, who was obviously not a monster, had committed monstrous acts in the name of the Nazi regime. In the end, the downfall of Eichmann was his detachment from the wider reality around him and his “thoughtlessness,” which wreaked “more havoc than all the veil instincts taken together which, perhaps are inherent in man.”<sup>144</sup>

Of the trial as a whole, Arendt said:

If we are to apply this whole reasoning to the Eichmann case in a meaningful way, we are forced to conclude that Eichmann acted fully within the framework of the kind of judgement required of him: he acted in accordance with the rule, examined the order issued to him for its “manifest” legality, namely regularity; he did not have to fall back upon his “conscience,” since he was not one of those who were unfamiliar with the laws of his country.<sup>145</sup>

Her final conclusion was that Eichmann was a normal man, who through a series of circumstances, made choices that brought him to the point of being a part of one of the largest genocides the world had ever seen.

Because of Arendt's conclusion that evil can be the result of the mundane everyday choices of human beings, she received much criticism from her contemporaries and even still today. One of the interesting critiques of her understanding of the banality of evil was that it

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 293.



seemed too similar to the Augustinian notion of evil as privation.<sup>146</sup> Many of her contemporaries made the claim that privation theory fails to capture the kind of monstrous evil that must exist for an event like the Holocaust to take place. While there is some seeming validity to this claim (although I will ultimately argue that this claim is false), I think a more apt understanding of the veracity with which Arendt's contemporaries attacked her is that if her understanding of evil is accepted, every human being is capable of what Eichmann and the other Nazis did to the Jewish people.

When faced with horrendous evil, such as the evil of the Holocaust, human beings do not want to see the humanity of those who commit such horrendous evils. What they would like to see is a group of people so corrupt and evil that they are no longer recognizable as human beings. However, if Arendt's reflections on evil are accepted no one can look at another human being, even if they have committed horrendous evils, without recognizing the potential for evil in themselves. Therefore, Arendt's reflections not only force us to recognize that we all have the potential for great evil, but that even those who commit great evil are not necessarily monsters but human beings.

Ultimately, Arendt's reflections on the banality of evil force people to realize that we all have the potential for great evil. But her understanding of evil also empowers us to fight against growing evil in human beings. Neiman explains: "the claim that evil is banal is a claim not about magnitude but about proportion: if crimes that great can result from causes that small, there may be hope for overcoming them."<sup>147</sup> If evil results from mundane causes then we can find ways to mitigate it. If evil results from monstrous causes, then evil becomes more difficult to overcome.

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<sup>146</sup> Milbank, "Darkness and Silence," 11.

<sup>147</sup> Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 301-302.

Arendt's reflections on evil are important because they show that horrendous evils need not be caused by equally horrendous circumstances. Her phenomenological account of Eichmann's actions shows that it is possible that some of the greatest evils of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, can result from mundane moral evils. As I hope to show in the next section, if banal evils can lead to monstrous ones, then privation theory is better able to account for events like the Holocaust. If privation theory can account for moral evils, like the banal kind that Arendt proposes, and if these banal evils can produce monstrous evils, then privation theory seems to be able to account for the horrendous evils.

#### **Chapter 4**

##### **A Normative Framework**

The fundamental principle of privation theory is that evil is the absence of some good that a particular being ought to have. Privation theory describes moral evil primarily as the result of the pursuit of lesser goods. As moral agents, we turn our will from unchangeable goods (for Augustine and Aquinas this means God) towards changeable goods.<sup>148</sup> Even the turning of the will can be understood as a privation. A perfect will is oriented towards those unchangeable goods, whereas a privative will is oriented towards the changeable goods of the world. Above I used the example of the person who tortures others. The torturer's will is turned towards the fulfillment of their own desire (in this case the infliction of pain on others for personal pleasure). Additionally, there is a privation of the respect of life in the torturer. On the Thomistic account, the torturer's actions can themselves be understood as privative in that they do not abide by the moral law.

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<sup>148</sup> Maybe unchangeable goods are different for contemporary persons. As a Christian, I'm inclined to accept that God is the unchangeable good.

Can privation theory account for banal evils, like telling a small lie? A lie can be understood as a privation. First, the liar's will can be seen as privative in that it is turned towards the fulfillment of certain desires to avoid punishment (if that is the reason for the lie). The lie itself can be understood as a privation because it is outside the moral law. There is also a privation within the liar. Namely, the loss of the moral good that accompanies truth telling.

It seems that privation theory can function as a normative framework to account for evil in the contemporary world. It can provide contemporary people with an understanding of what evil is, not just that evil exists. It also exercises compelling explanatory power when describing evils. As a normative account of evil, it certainly seems to succeed. One might object by saying that at times it seems unsatisfying, but this objection does not deny its ability to define and explain moral evil.

One of the benefits of this normative account of evil is that by providing contemporary persons with an understanding of the nature of evil, they can come closer to developing ways to mitigate evil in the world. In the contemporary world, evil is often left undefined and nebulous.<sup>149</sup> Cadler notes that there is a sense in which evil refers to "anything bad or wrong," but it can also be understood to refer to "the most despicable sorts of acts, characters, and events."<sup>150</sup> Privation theory not only captures both of these meanings, but it gives more content to them. Evil is not just badness or horrendous actions, it is the absence of some good that a particular being out to have.

Privation theory presupposes both that being is inherently good, and that there is a hierarchy to being. According to this hierarchy, certain beings have more goodness than others. God is the highest being on the hierarchy as Being itself or Pure Act. Human beings are below

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<sup>149</sup> Cadler, "Is the Privation Theory of Evil Dead?," 371.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

God, sharing in God's goodness and being in a finite way. Below humans are animals followed by organic (non-animal) beings.<sup>151</sup> As this hierarchy continues down from God, beings have less and less goodness. Therefore, according to this hierarchy beings have different degrees of goodness and value—i.e., human beings have a greater degree of goodness than animals, and animals have a greater degree of goodness than organic (non-animal) beings, etc. The presupposition that grounds the hierarchy of being is the inherent goodness of all being. Because all being is created by God, all being shares in God's goodness. However, according to this hierarchy, not all being has the same value.

How can we recognize the value of being in a world that has seemingly devalued being?<sup>152</sup> Desmond's metaxological metaphysics provides contemporary persons with a new way to think metaphysically about the contemporary world. His metaphysics attempts to articulate a system that does not force difference to assimilate with sameness but respects the other as other. By respecting other-being as distinctly other, one is better able to recognize the value of other-being for the sake of other-being. Desmond's metaphysical vision of the world returns us to a state of agapeic astonishment. It is here that we are able to recognize the inherent goodness and value of being.

Privation theory assumes that all being is inherently good. In fact, this is one of the reasons that Augustine was so adamant about the idea of evil as privation. God, according to Augustine, is good and creation shares in God's goodness, and therefore is good as well.

Augustine, in an attempt to protect God's nature and the nature of creation from accusations of

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<sup>151</sup> Animals are distinguished from human beings because of the difference in their rational faculties. This obviously causes problems for ideas of personhood for those with cognitive disabilities. I recognize that this causes a problem, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. For a modern version of the hierarchy of being, see Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 377-378.

<sup>152</sup> We see examples of this devaluing of being in the current ecological crisis. The contemporary emphasis on autonomy at the expense of the freedom of others is also indicative of the devaluing of being. American individualism is an example of this emphasis on autonomy.

inherent evil, provides a Christianized version of privation theory. If we accept privation theory as a normative account of evil in the contemporary world, then we must also accept its presuppositions.

If contemporary persons accept privation theory as a normative account of evil, we would need to reevaluate the way in which we attempt to mitigate evil in the contemporary world. Because privation theory forces us to recognize that no person is inherently evil, we must recognize the good in all people even when they commit horrendous evils. This, on my view, has practical implications for our justice system. As it is now, our justice system is an attempt to remove those who have committed evil actions from society. As opposed to rehabilitation, the justice system focuses on making those who have committed moral evil pay for their actions. However, if we viewed evil through the lens of privation theory, we would need to be committed to a form of justice that is focused on rehabilitation. If evil is lack of particular goods in moral agents—i.e., defects of the will, lack of concern for human life, etc.—then our attempts at justice should focus on rehabilitating these defects, not just removing people from society.<sup>153</sup>

I have already discussed how privation theory can account for some instances of evil. Above I gave an account of how privation theory can account for sickness, murder, pain, and torture. Sickness is a particularly interesting case because often sickness is caused by some active agent (agent here is not a human moral agent, but a being like bacteria or tumors). However, just because another being, which we would consider to be good by virtue of its existence, causes sickness, does not mean that there is not some privation of the host. In the case of sickness, the host who is affected loses health.

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<sup>153</sup> Here is one point at which I diverge in my application of privation theory from Augustine and Aquinas, both of whom argued for capital punishment.

Does the value of bacteria or a tumor mean that they are deserving of protection over/against the moral agent? According to privation theory, no. There is a hierarchy of being that places human agents above organic (non-animal) beings, and therefore justifies human value over/against the value of organic beings. Therefore, because organic entities like bacteria or tumors cause privations on the part of human moral agents, humans are justified in eliminating them.

Another example might be: in the contemporary world, politicians have spent more time demonizing the *other side*, as opposed to uniting to maximize the total good of humanity. However, even this demonizing of the other side can be evaluated differently when we understand it through the lens of privation theory.<sup>154</sup> In our current political situation, it is important to remember that human beings at their core are good, not evil. Even though our will is often turned from actual goods towards perceived goods that often result in evil. If contemporary people adopt privation theory as the normative lens by which they evaluate evil, then we would be forced to recognize the goodness of those who hold politically differing views.

One important critique of privation theory is that it does not seem to be able to account for instances of horrific evil, such as the Holocaust. Some have suggested that privation theory provides an unsatisfying account of gratuitous evils like genocide. Some others have suggested that privation theory diminishes the evil of the Holocaust, because evil according to privation theory does not exist *per se*. According to these critics, evils that result from the pursuit of lesser goods seem unable to explain the atrocities committed by the Nazis and downplay the suffering

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<sup>154</sup> Our politicians are seeking some seeming good—i.e., that more people turn away from the other side towards the *right* side, so that our nation can be better. However, this *good* that they seek is in fact an evil that is perceived as a good.

of those who experienced them. However, I do not think that this is necessarily true; privation theory can account for such atrocities.

I think it is important to note that privation theory does not deny the reality of the evils of the Holocaust. Instead, privation theory insists only that evil does not exist *per se*, but evil certainly can exist parasitically upon the good. We might then ask: what good could have caused the Holocaust? Again, it is important to remember that while, for Aquinas, good is the accidental cause of evil, it is not the formal or efficient cause. This means that evil is the result of a perceived good that is sought after, which in reality is not a good worthy of pursuit.<sup>155</sup> Here we might use Eichmann as an example again. Eichmann did not set out to destroy the Jewish people. He intended to rise through the ranks of the Nazis regime for his own benefit. Again, this does not excuse his behavior, but it does put his motivations and actions into a different light. If we accept Arendt's phenomenological analysis of evil, it is possible to say that atrocious evils can be the result of a series of smaller privations. I believe that I have shown that privation theory can account for banal evils.

One might object: Hitler's hatred of the Jewish people does not seem to be a privation. His hatred was a positive feeling—i.e., something he experienced—that motivated him to create the Nazi empire. The privation theorist might respond: hatred should not itself be seen as an evil. It seems as though there are certain things that people should hate: injustice, poverty, starvation, suffering, instances of evil, etc. As such, if hatred is directed at these concepts, it can be a positive motivating force to mitigate injustices and evil. However, it seems that one could say

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<sup>155</sup> Obviously, we are unable to ascertain the true motivations of Hitler, but I think it is fair to assume that he did not understand his own goals and motivations as evil. Even if we look again at the person who enjoys the torture of others, we see that in some sense that do not necessarily seek an evil, which would be torture. Instead, they seek a good, in this case the pleasure that receive from torture. Often times it is difficult to face the idea that even the most seemingly evil among us are at their core human beings seeking some good, because this means that all of us are capable of great evil. The fact that all of us are capable of great evil also means that it becomes more difficult for us to alienate those who commit radically evil acts.

that hatred directed towards people can be understood as privative. Hatred in this sense has lost its proper object. Therefore, Hitler's hatred of the Jewish people can indeed be understood as privative. If one man's hatred can be the cause of such a horrendous evil, then it seems as though privation theory can account for the evils of the Holocaust. Therefore, it seems that privation theory can account for the existence of banal evils and horrendous evils.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have attempted to revitalize the metaphysical account of privation theory for the contemporary era. I suggest that privation theory can function as a normative account of evil in the contemporary world. In the first chapter, I began by examining Augustine and Aquinas, two of the most important philosophers/theologians who developed privation theory in Christian theology. Both understand evil to have no existence on its own, but Aquinas differs from Augustine in his understanding of the parasitic existence of evil.

In the second chapter, I gave an account of the connection between metaphysical thinking and recognizing the good of being. Metaphysical consideration is important when discussing evil as privation because privation theory has certain metaphysical assumptions, such as: the goodness of being, hierarchies of being, —i.e., there are certain goods that are appropriate for some beings to have but not others—and the origin of being and its nature.

The third chapter is an examination of some contemporary philosophers on evil. I began by examining Desmond's metaphysics as a way to begin to rebuild our metaphysical thinking in the contemporary era. His four ways of understanding being provide a foundation for metaphysical thinking in the contemporary era. Then I gave a brief explanation of Arendt's thoughts in *Eichmann on Jerusalem*, especially focusing on her reflections on Eichmann's



humanity and his subtle movement towards the horrendous evils he committed during the Second World War.

In the fourth chapter, I attempted to show how privation theory can account for evil as a normative framework for the contemporary world. First, privation theory actually points us towards the good, because evil can only exist parasitically on the good. Second, I attempted to articulate a few examples of the normative function of privation theory; showing that it can account for both mundane evils and horrendous evils.

As a normative lens by which contemporary persons can evaluate evil, privation theory allows us to give an account of what evil is. Ultimately, evil is a lack of the good. It is important to have a metaphysical account of evil because knowing what evil is can help people to mitigate it. To use an example from above: if evil has substance, existence, and people can *be* evil, then the current justice system by which we remove evil people from society is an appropriate way to reduce evil in the world. However, if evil is no-thing (except potentially parasitic on the good), then we have to reformulate our justice system to focus not on retribution and removing evil people from society, but on rehabilitation. A justice system based on privation theory would be forced to recognize the good that is inherent in all people, and it would function to rehabilitate and maximize the good, thereby reducing evil.<sup>156</sup>

It seems as though privation theory can function as a normative lens through which contemporary persons can understand evil. I hope to have shown throughout this paper that privation theory can account for evil in the contemporary world. I also hope that I have been able to articulate some reasons why contemporary persons should adopt privation theory as a

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<sup>156</sup> I think there is also a sense in which evil will never be completely eliminated until the fullness of the Kingdom of God is revealed, but that does not mean that there is not a real possibility of reducing instances of evil, or maybe better said the effects of evil, in the world.

normative framework by which we can evaluate and describe evil. I think that if we adopt privation theory as a normative lens to evaluate evil, we are better prepared to mitigate evil in the contemporary world.

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