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Corruptio Boni – an Alternative to the Privation Theory of Evil

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Abstract

The classic 'privation theory' of evil defines evil as an absence (or 'privation') of a good that ought to obtain. Despite its historical importance, privation theory is faced with a number of serious difficulties. I outline two of these difficulties and argue that they continue to pose a threat. I then present 'corruption theory', an alternative theory of evil reconstructing from some of Augustine's writings on the subject. I argue that this theory shares the strengths of privation theory, while evading its problems. I then defend it against an anticipated objection, before drawing out some of its potential implications for ethics.

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1. Introduction

We are acutely aware of evil in the world. This awareness plays a major role in shaping our moral convictions, as well as our overall outlook on life. Indeed, whether in the form of personal tragedies, profound disappointments or terrible injustices, the experience of evil poses a threat to the worth of our lives, leading some to argue that coming into being is always a harm, given the prevalence and inevitability of these evils (cf. Benatar 2006). But even for those of us who would not go that far, evil looms large in our minds.

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The existence of a sizeable philosophical literature presenting competing analyses of the concept of evil is thus unsurprising. Philosophical interest in evil is of course not new. And yet, there is an important difference in scope between contemporary scholarly work on the subject and the relevant writings of classical thinkers like St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas. Eve Garrard (2019, p.189) distinguishes between 'broad' and 'narrow' senses of evil, where the former is really identical to what others have called "badness" (e.g. Kretzmann 2000) and thus refers to anything undesirable (even minor pains and wrongs), and the latter is attributed only to especially reprehensible behaviour attitudes, desires etc (e.g. genocide, sadism). Contemporary philosophers working on evil, no doubt inspired by Hannah Arendt's celebrated inquiry into the motivations of Nazi atrocities, have almost exclusively focused on evil in the narrow sense (as noted by Calder 2008 p.378).

This sharply contrasts with more traditional approaches, which seek to understand evil in the broad sense. Thus understood, 'evil' encompasses both so-called 'moral' and 'natural' evils, i.e. evils brought about by moral agents (e.g. murder, slander) and evils brought about by natural processes uncontrolled by moral agents (e.g. diseases, natural disasters). The view that has prevailed in the Western tradition, apparently anticipated by Plato[1] but most commonly associated with Augustine, takes evil to be a kind of absence or *privation of good*. To borrow a couple of Augustine's examples, sickness is a privation of the good of health, and character defects are privations of the good of virtue (*Enchiridion III*, in Ramsey 2005).

Privation theory, as we might call it, faces a number of serious objections from those who contend that evil must be more than a mere absence (e.g. Calder 2008, Robson 2013). Even so, the theory still enjoys significant (though minority)[2] contemporary support, and responses to alleged counter-examples have been put forward (e.g. Swenson 2008, Davies 2013). In particular, David Oderberg (2019) has recently advanced a richly detailed defence of privation theory, including both a positive case for the theory and replies many objections.

The resilience of privation theory is perhaps explained by the fact that its critics rarely propose alternatives. What could evil be, if not a privation of the good? What follows is my attempt at answering this question. The theory of evil that I will present and defend has been gestured at by various authors. As I will show, it also finds a surprising precedent in Augustine, whose understanding of evil will turn out to be more complex than privation theory suggests. In short, I will argue that evil consists in *corruption of the good.*

I begin by setting out privation theory in more detail, as well as its key motivation and weaknesses. I then contrast it with corruption theory, and explain how it shares

[1] According to Alina Scudieri (2019 p.20), "Plato never conceptualized evil as a self-standing ontological principle of reality: he always conceived it as derivative from the good".

[2] One critic comments that aside "from orthodox Thomists, few philosophers (…) accept this theory anymore" (Kane 1980, p. 43).

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privation theory's strengths while more successfully overcoming the challenges levelled against it.

2. Privation theory

2.1. Outline of the theory

Privation theory identifies evil with "a lack in some subject of [a good] that ought to be there" (Grant 2019, p.42). This implies that while every evil will consist in an absence of good, not all absences of good will constitute evils. For example, the fact that I lack the ability to echolocate like bats is not an evil, but my inability to hear would be. Examples like these illustrate privation theory's reliance on a metaphysical theory of *natures*, which serve as kind-specific standards of what goods something ought to have, given the kind (or 'species') to which it belongs. Since I do not belong to the kind of thing that ought to be able to echolocate, but *do* belong to the kind of thing that ought to be able to hear, it follows that only one of the corresponding inabilities will constitute an evil.

2.2. Why privation theory?

Discussions of privation theory typically have little to say about the positive case for the theory, focusing instead on putative counter-examples (whether the aim is to refute or defend the theory). Even when positive reasons are attended to, these tend to be strictly theological (e.g. Calder 2008, p. 371, Swenson 2009): privation theory, we are told, is advanced as part of a response to the problem of evil. It allows the theist to say that God is not responsible for the existence of evil, while also affirming God's role as the sustaining cause of every existing substance (other than God), since evil is not a substance at all on privation theory (any more than holes or shadows are substances). This emphasis on the role of privation theory in the defence of traditional theism may create the impression that the theory can be simply dismissed by non-theists, who are in no need of a theodicy. In effect, at least one author appears to believe that the only reason anyone has ever subscribed to the theory is on order to salvage theism (Kane 1980, p.56). In fact, privation theory is motivated by broader metaphysical considerations, which critics of the theory ought to take seriously.

The most basic consideration in favour of privation theory is ontological parsimony. Suppose that good and evil are ontologically on par with each other, with neither being analysable in terms of the other. This is less parsimonious than if, say, only good is a *sui generis* reality, and evil is a kind of absence of good. For then, our ontology would have fewer basic kinds of thing - since a privation is plausibly not a 'thing' at all - than if we postulate two *sui generis* substances, 'good' and 'evil'. Even if we hold that an absence (e.g. a hole) is a basic kind of thing, privation theory would still be more parsimonious than taking evil to be *sui generis*. For then the choice would be between an ontology containing 'good' and 'absence' as basic kinds (on privation theory), and one containing 'evil' *in addition* to the former two.

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Closely connected to ontological parsimony is the virtue of explanatory unification. When constructing metaphysical theories, we should aim to maximise explanatory power and minimise unexplained, ultimate facts, such as to 'unify' many *explananda* under a small number of *explanantia* (cf. Cameron 2008). Privation theory wins out here again, since the existence of evils is *not* an ultimate fact on this view, being metaphysically explained by the existence of goods and absences thereof.

The role of explanatory unification in supporting privation theory is further underscored by David Oderberg (2019, p.271), whose case for privation theory begins with the observation that *some* evils quite obviously are privations of good, e.g. a lack of health and a lack of food. Suppose that other evils, like malice, were *not* merely privative – call those *positive* evils. Evil would thus be "metaphysically heterogeneous", as Oderberg puts it (*ibid.*). This would then raise the following question: in virtue of what are privative evils and positive evils both *evils simpliciter*? To answer this question, one would need to identify something that privative evils and positive evils have in common and which nothing else has, other than the fact that they are both called 'evil'. If no such shared feature exists, our explanations of what makes given objects or states of affairs evil will differ fundamentally – in some cases, it will be 'because it lacks some good G', while in others it will be 'because it *possesses* this *sui generis* property P'. In other words, evil would be *disjunctive*: to be evil would be to either lack some good, or to possess P. This is less unifying than if all instances of evil ultimately had the same metaphysical explanation, which would be the case if privation theory was true (for then, it would be true that for every instance of evil, it is explained by a lack of good).

Since we should prefer more ontologically parsimonious and unifying theories (all else being equal), these are strong reasons in favour of privation theory.[1] To these, I wish to add some further explanatory benefits of the theory. Any theory of evil will need to be at least consistent with the truism that good and evil are opposites, or "contraries" as Aquinas puts it repeatedly in *de Malo* (Question I., 2003).[2] One way for two properties *F* and *G* to be opposites of each other is for *F* to consist in the absence of *G*, e.g. heat and cold are opposites because cold is the absence of heat. This is not the only way for two things to be opposites (for instance, white is the opposite of black, even though white is not the mere absence of black, or vice versa), but it is one way. Thus, privation theory offers a suitable explanation as to why good and evil are opposites, namely that one consists in the absence of the other. In contrast, if good and evil are ontologically on par (say, if they are both *sui generis* properties), it is unclear why they should be opposites. In particular, it is unclear why a substance that is evil in one respect could not also be fully good, in the same way a cube that is heavy might also be fully red. Or, to put it another way, we lack an explanation as to why I

[1] Moreover, the ontological status of disjunctive properties or kinds is disputed, with some arguing that they are not real. If this is correct, an implication of the claim that evil is either to lack some good or to possess P would be that there is no such thing as evil – an implausible implication.

[2] Despite repeatedly speaking of good and evil as being "contrary" to each other, Aquinas nevertheless argues that "properly speaking", they are not such, since contraries must share a genus (e.g. black and white are both colours). Even so, he appears to think that good and evil may still be said to be contraries in a loose sense.

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cannot both aspire to be a perfectly good person, and also to be an evil genius, in the same way that one might aspire to be both wealthy and famous.

Might one argue that good and evil are opposites in the same way that black and white are opposites, i.e. without one being the absence of the other? All that is needed, one might think, is for good and evil to be radically different to each other. But this is insufficient : strength and intelligence are completely different things, but are obviously not contraries. Black and white *are* contraries, because they both belong to the same kind or category (in virtue of both being colours), *and* differ sharply as colours (cf. footnote 3). I am not aware of any 'category' to which *sui generis* properties of good and evil could both be said to belong, and which would make it legitimate to call them opposites. The opponent of privation theory thus owes us an explanation as to how an alternative to the theory could account for the fact that good and evil are opposites. To my knowledge, this has yet to be provided.[1]

For these reasons, it seems to me that the historic popularity of privation theory is largely deserved, even apart from its theological uses. Despite this, it is beset by many objections. Since I cannot address them all, I will focus on the two that strike me as being the most serious.

2.3. The First Problem: Irreducibly positive evils

Some evils do not appear to be mere privations of good. Obvious examples include pain, sadistic pleasure and murder, to name only a few. The evil of pain (or suffering) seems to consist in more than the mere absence of pleasure. And the evils of sadistic pleasure and murder seem to consist in more than mere disregard for human well-being and life. Thus, critics charge that privation theory mischaracterises such evils, which are irreducibly positive.

Pain is the most frequently discussed alleged counter-example, perhaps because it is widely considered to represent the most difficult challenge to privation theory. Since so much has already been said about the significance of pain to privation theory, by both the theory's proponents and detractors (cf. Haratine 2023 for a detailed overview), I wish to focus instead on the evil of malevolence. This evil includes any evil that involves willing evil on someone – sadism, malice, envy, hatred, murderous rage etc.

Let us first consider how privation theorists have approached malevolent attitudes and behaviours. While privation theorists generally recognise (as one surely must) that these involve more than mere absences, they insist that what makes them *evil* is itself privative. For instance, while a malevolent act like murder is obviously not a mere

[1] A related line of support for privation theory holds that it is directly implied by some theories of good, conjoined with the assumption that evil is the opposite of good. For example, after defending the identification of 'good' with "fulfilling the standards appropriate for a specific type of thing", Patrick Lee argues that evil must consist in the opposite of this, which is "lacking what is due the kind of thing one is" (2007, pp. 487-488).

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absence of (right) behaviour (insofar as *any* act of any kind cannot be an absence), the evil of the act is itself an absence of good. Bill Anglin and Stewart Goetz (1982, p.7) offer the example of "stirring poison into a cup of coffee", which, as a positive act, is not evil, but is made evil by a failure on the part of the person doing the stirring to properly value human life, which *is* a privation. Patrick Lee surveys the traditional 'capital sins', including envy, and argues that each consists in the desire for a good (which is clearly not an evil) in a way that fails to show "full respect for all other goods" (2000, p.263). Envious people desire their own good, but not the good of others, which they (wrongly) see as a threat to their own good. David Oderberg examines malevolent attitudes like malice, hatred and contempt (2019, pp.313-325), and concludes that each of these is a case of possessing an attitude or emotion which is not evil in itself, but which "lacks a proper object" (p.316), and is thereby evil. For instance, malice is pleasure derived from harm suffered by another person. But pleasure ought to be derived from genuine goods, and harms suffered by other (innocent) persons are not genuine goods. Conversely, hatred ought to be directed at genuine evils (e.g. extreme injustice), but becomes itself evil when instead directed at things which are not themselves evil (e.g. one's fellow human beings).

Each of these analyses take the evils of malevolent attitudes and behaviours to consist in a failure to value or will some good(s). Since a failure is a type of privation, and willing the good is itself a good, it follows that the evil of malevolence is privative in nature.

That malevolent attitudes and acts necessarily involve a failure to will the good seems plausible enough. But is this failure what *makes* them evil? At most, we might be able to say that it is *part* of what makes them evil. To say that this is *all* that makes them evil, on the other hand, implies that actively desiring for someone else to suffer evil *in the same way* that being indifferent to someone else's suffering is evil. This is not to say that, on the above analysis of the evil of malevolence, malevolence and indifference would turn out to be identical - they would not. But they would both be evil for the same reason, namely that they both involve a failure to will the good of another person's well-being. This is deeply unintuitive: surely, we feel, they are not evil in the same way. In particular, one intuitively seems markedly *more* evil than the other. Given privation theory, this could only be the case if one involved a greater failure to will the good (and thus a greater absence of good) than the other. But it does not seem right to say that if you are completely indifferent to Bob's suffering, you nevertheless value Bob's well-being more than I do, since I actively desire his suffering (compare: if I hate football and you are indifferent to it, it would be mistaken to infer that you value football more than I do).

In a later paper, Patrick Lee (2007, p.480) argues that what makes a murder evil is that it "deviates from the moral standard for acts of the will", or "the standard of moral goodness" (*ibid.* p. 483). Deviation is a lack of conformity to a moral standard, and thus the purportedly positive evil of murder turns out to be privative.[1] This seems to me to be problematic for the same reason as above: both murder and refraining from

[1] This is similar to the view defended by M.B. Ahern (1966, pp.40-42), who argued that moral evil consists in the absence of a relevant moral right, e.g. the right to take a life.

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saving a life out of selfish indifference fail to conform to the standard of moral goodness. The specific standard here is presumably 'valuing and respecting life' (or something along those lines), which neither murder nor selfish reluctance to save a life meet. As before, if I intend to murder Bob and you are completely indifferent as to whether Bob survives and decline to do anything to save him (e.g. by letting him know of my murderous intentions), you cannot be said to value his life any more than I do. Murder and indifference are thus equally deficient with respect to the relevant moral standard, meaning that here again, an explanation as to why murder is a greater evil than indifference is lacking.

Irreducibly positive evils such as malevolence, then, continue to pose a serious challenge to privation theory, despite the efforts of privation theorists to construe such evils as wholly privative.

2.4. The Second Problem: evil and unrequired goods

Privation theory has two components: the first is that evils consist in *absences* of good. The second is that these must be absences of goods that *ought* to obtain. Most criticisms of privation theory, including the one discussed in the previous section, focus on the first component. In contrast, the criticism I am about to discuss pertains to the second component.

To say that evils are privations of goods which ought to obtain is to imply that there are some goods (whether actual or merely possible) for which it is *not* the case that they ought to obtain. This is not to say that they ought *not* to obtain – their obtaining is a good, for which one may properly express gratitude. But they are not 'required', so to speak; it is incorrect to say that they *should* exist. If privation theory is true, it would follow that if such 'unrequired' goods were to be destroyed or prevented from coming into being, this could not constitute an (intrinsic) evil, since the goods were never needed in the first place.

At this point, I should say more about what it means for some good to 'ought' to obtain, according to privation theorists. As we have seen, that which specifies the goods that a thing ought to have is usually said to be the thing's *nature* or essence.). 'Nature' here is understood not in the contemporary sense of a set of properties, but in the Aristotelian-Scholastic sense of a thing's essential dispositions or tendencies to behave in a certain way. For example, a beaver's nature will dispose it to gnaw trees and build dams, while a tree's nature will dispose it to grow roots and photosynthesise (Feser 2021, p.3). These things are not merely good, they are "*due* goods" (Reichberg 2002, p.1), without which the kinds of being to which they are due cannot fully flourish or properly function. On standard privation theory, then, an evil obtains if and only if there is "some nature that is unfulfilled", as Oderberg puts it (2019, p.284).

Let us say that a good is 'unrequired' if it is not required for the fulfilment of the nature of that which possesses it. On the face of it, it appears that many such goods exist: musical talent, mathematical brilliance, moral heroism, etc. Such goods cannot

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plausibly be said to be required by human nature, such that to lack them is to fail to properly function as a human being (in the same way that lacking the ability to speak or think would constitute a deviation from human nature). It seems equally clear that the *loss* of these goods would be evils. For example, if Mozart had suddenly lost the ability to compose music in the middle of his career, we would consider that to be an evil, and a great one at that. All of this suggests the following argument:

(i) The loss of any good is an evil
(ii) It is possible to lose an unrequired good
(iii) The loss of an unrequired good is not the absence of a required good
(iv) Therefore, it is possible for there to be an evil which is not the absence of a required good

The argument's conclusion (iv) is clearly inconsistent with privation theory, given how 'required good' has been defined. (i) and (ii) are motivated by the above examples, and (iii) is true by definition. But there is a way out for the privation theorist: while admitting that the goods under consideration are not required by *human* nature, she can insist that they are nevertheless required by other natures. Thus, the good of musical talent is required by the nature of a musician, mathematical excellence is required by the nature of a mathematician, and so on. Thus, the possible loss of these goods do not truly motivate (ii), since it would not exemplify the loss of an unrequired good. Privation theorists have indeed sometimes been known to multiply natures in this way – for example, Oderberg speaks of the nature of zoos, which is unfulfilled in the absence of zebras, which thus constitutes an evil (2019, p.285). Note, however, that in order to reject (ii), the privation theorist must claim that for any apparent case of loss of an unrequired good, there is in fact some nature which requires said good. On the plausible assumption that any good can in principle be lost, this amounts to the claim that there are no unrequired goods after all. But if there are no unrequired goods, it trivially follows that *all* goods are required, in which case any absence of good whatsoever will be an evil. This is precisely what privation theorists want to (and indeed *must*) avoid: the whole point of the "that ought to obtain" clause in standard formulations of privation theory was to avoid the implausible implication that any absence of good, e.g. my inability to fly or echolocate, would be an evil.

We may formulate the problem as a dilemma: either there are unrequired goods, or there aren't. If there are, since their loss would constitute an evil, it follows that there are some possible evils which are *not* absences of goods that ought to obtain, and privation theory is false. If there aren't, the privation theorist must accept that any absence of good is an evil, which seems absurd.
I conclude that unrequired goods pose a significant, though largely unnoticed, threat to privation theory.

3. Introducing corruption theory

Having shown that privation theory continues to face serious problems, it should be clear that there are strong reasons to seek an alternative account of evil. This section presents and motivates such an account.

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3.1. *Corruptio boni*

Once again, privation theory is most commonly associated with Augustine's writings on evil. As Philip Cary notes, '*privatio boni'* is indeed one of the ways in which Augustine speaks of evil.[1] Interestingly, however, Cary goes on to say that he "much more often used the other term, *corruptio*, and its cognates" (2019, p.32). At first glance, the 'corruption' of a good, even a *due* good, does not seem identical to its mere absence. This initial impression is confirmed by Augustine's explanations as to what he has in mind, which may be found in his polemical writings against the Manicheans:

> "I ask you again, What is evil? If you say it is that which is hurtful, here, too, you will not answer amiss. (…) Whatever is hurtful takes away some good from that to which it is hurtful; for without the loss of good there can be no hurt.(…)
>
> I ask a third time, What is evil? Perhaps you will reply, Corruption. Undeniably this is a general definition of evil; for corruption implies opposition to nature, and also hurt (…) what is corrupted is perverted; and what is perverted suffers the loss of order, and order is good. (…) if corruption takes nothing away, it does not corrupt*."* (*De Moribus Manichaeorum* 4-5, in Schaff 2007).

For Augustine, corruption necessarily involves "hurt", which itself necessarily involves a "loss of good". As such, corruption is in necessary "opposition to *nature*", which, for Augustine, refers to all created substance, as is made clear elsewhere in the text.[2] Corruption is against nature, or "hostile to substance" as he puts it in chapter 8, insofar as it tends to make good things worse than they would otherwise be.

To say that corruption occurs, then, is to say far more than that a good is absent. While corruption tends to result in the absence of a good, not all absences of good, e.g. my lack of mathematical genius, are caused by corruption. More to the point, corruption and absence are distinct, even when causally connected (indeed, the fact that they can be causally connected presupposes that they are distinct, insofar as self-causation is impossible).

The characterisation of evil as corruption of good is a theme that runs throughout Augustine's writings. For instance, *De Libero Arbitrio* plainly states that "vice" (i.e. moral *evil* in a person's character), "precisely because it is a vice, is against nature". As if that weren't clear enough, he goes on to say that if "it does not harm nature, it is not a vice", indicating the essentially destructive character of vice (3.13.38, in R. J. Deferrari 1968). This point is taken up again in *City of God*, where it is specified that if

[1] In addition, comments to the effect that "evil does not exist at all" (*Confessions 7.13.19*) and "evil is not a substance" (*ibid.* 7.12.18, quotes taken from in Asiedu 2002 p.337*)* certainly give the impression that he conceives of evil in purely privative terms.

[2] Chapter 3 speaks of evil being "against nature, that is, against substance".

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vice “did no injury, it was no vice” and thus “could not be called evil”. Importantly, the following sentence identifies injury with “taking away or diminishing good” (XII.6, 2015).

Augustine’s position is aptly summarised by one of his best-known commentators:

> “Augustine says in the City of God that sin is evil because it harms natural good. And this would be the case only if sin were to take something away from natural good. Therefore, sin diminishes natural good.” (Aquinas, *De Malo* 11, 2001)[1]

This summary should be surprising to those used to thinking of Augustine as holding to a simple privation theory of evil. Privation theory, as outlined in 2.1., states that what makes something, be it sin or whatever else ‘evil’ is that it lacks some good – perhaps charity or justice, in the case of sin. This seems quite different to the explanation that Augustine provides, which holds that what makes something evil is that it corrupts, ‘diminishes’ or ‘takes away’ a good.

This immediately raises the question of why some of Augustine’s writings appear to defend privation theory, explicitly referring to evil as a *privatio,* while others appear to defend a contrary view. One possibility is that Augustine did not have a consistent position on evil. A more interesting explanation may be that ‘privation’ in his work was never meant to refer to a mere absence, even of what I have called a ‘required good’ (cf. section 2.4.). Perhaps he was instead referring to the process by which something is deprived of a good, resulting in the absence of a good, rather than to the absence itself. In that case, his use of *privatio* might perhaps be harmonised with the way that evil is characterised in the above passages.

Since my concerns are not exegetical, I shall leave these interpretative issues to historians of philosophy. I will now more clearly set out an account of evil which draws from relevant remarks from Augustine, and which evades the problems faced by privation theory.

3.2. Outline of corruption theory

My proposed theory is as follows:

Corruption Theory: something is evil to the extent that it is corruptive of a good*,* where *S* is corruptive of *G* to the extent that it destroys or damages *G*.

The thought that some things might be evil in virtue of being directed against a good in one way or another (rather than in virtue of lacking some good) is not absent from the contemporary literature. Robert Adams (1999, pp. 102-104), John F. Crosby (2001) and Parker Haratine (2023, pp.19-21) have all suggested that evils which admit

[1] See also *Summa Theologiae II.II.34.4.* “A thing is said to be evil, because it hurts, as Augustine observes (Enchiridion xii)”

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of no plausible privative analysis should instead be understood as being *opposed* to good. For example, what makes an act of murder evil is the fact that it opposes the good of a life, not (say) the fact that it involves a failure to value life.
While 'opposition' is a somewhat vague notion, it seems clear enough that to be corruptive of a good (as I have defined it) is to be opposed to it. However, all three of the above authors are explicit in indicating that the 'oppositional' account is only meant to apply to a certain type of evil, namely irreducibly positive ones. On the other hand, privative evils like blindness or ill-health are evils for the reason that privation theory says that they are, i.e. that they are absences of good.[1]

Having two separate accounts of evil, with each account applying to a different set of evils, invites an obvious question: 'what makes it the case that the absence of (required) good and opposition to good are *both* evil'? Without a feature shared by privative and irreducibly positive evils explaining why they are evil *simpliciter*, we would either have to admit that we do not know what it means for something to be evil *simpliciter* (knowing only what it means to be a privative or positive evil), or that evil is disjunctive, such that to be evil is *either* to lack some required good, *or* to be opposed to some good. As we saw in 2.2., this is an unattractive feature, which we should try to avoid if possible.

In contrast, the account of evil laid out at the beginning of this section is intended as a *general* account of evil, whether positive or privative. Take a clear case of a privative evil, paralysis. Since to be paralysed is to be deprived of motility, and a significant ability to move is (quite plausibly) required by any animal nature, privation theory is able to account for the evil of paralysis. But consider that there is in fact more to paralysis that an inability to move oneself – otherwise, we would say that stones are paralysed. Rather, paralysis will always involve a damage of some kind, be it damage to the spinal cord, to the brain or to the nervous system. This damage will in turn take way an ability to move which would otherwise be there. This is so whether one loses this ability, or never acquired it in the first place, as in the case of being born paralysed. Thus, corruption theory is also able to account for this evil, which it can explain as a destruction of the good of motility, which is either remove or prevented from coming to be in the first place. In either case, paralysis is evil because it is corruptive of this good. Can this kind of move be generalised to all privative evils? I submit that at the very least, it can be generalised to any state of affairs that the privation theorist would consider to be an evil. Recall once more that an absence of good counts as evil on privation theory *only if* it involves an unfulfilled nature. Now, if a substance *S* lacks a

[1] Surprisingly perhaps, Aquinas has also occasionally been read as holding to a view of this sort (e.g. Reichberg 2002). This is suggested by remarks like the following: "The good and evil in moral matters are opposed as contraries and not as privation and possession of a form, since evil imposes something inasmuch as it attains an order or measure or form (…) But natural evil results absolutely from privation" (*De Malo I. 5.*).

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good *G* which is required by its nature, this must be because something has frustrated the potential of *S* to possess *P*, perhaps by interfering with its disposition to acquire *P*. Otherwise it is unclear in what sense *G* is required by the nature of *S.*[1] Less formally, if you *should* have something but *don't*, there is surely something that explains why you don't. But if something prevents *S* from having the good *G*, that thing is corruptive of *G*, and thus constitutes an evil on corruption theory.

The privation theorist might protest that, on the above account, it is never the absence of good itself that is evil, but that which leads to it. But surely there at least some cases where it is the absence itself that is evil, e.g. a lack of sufficient food. In fact, this is compatible with corruption theory, since an absence can itself be corruptive of a good. For example, the absence of sufficient food is corruptive of the good of health (people who lack sufficient food are less healthy as a result).

Still, the privation theorist might say, perhaps it is somehow possible for *S* to lack *G* even though *G* is required by its nature, and nothing explains why *S* lacks G – it 'just does'. If this possible, we can still say that *S*'s *failure* to fulfil its nature is evil, insofar as it prevents *S* from acquiring the good *G*, and is thereby corruptive of *G*.

3.3. Corruption theory and the strengths of privation theory

Let us recall the motivating reasons for privation theory. As we saw in 2.2., privation theory offers a relatively parsimonious and unifying account of evil, which is able to account for the fact that good and evil are opposites. These features made privation theory preferable to theories that take at least some evils to be *sui generis*, all else being equal.

As it happens, corruption theory fares equally well on these fronts. This is primarily because, despite differing from privation theory in important respects, it preserves what is arguably the latter's most attractive feature: the fact that it takes evil to be *parasitic* on the good. In effect, both theories explain evil in terms of the good, whether as an absence of good or being corruptive of it. Thus, both theories eschew the need to postulate a *sui generis* property of 'evil', in addition to good. This makes the theories equally parsimonious, and equally unifying (since each theory aims to explain all instances of evil in the same way, whether in terms of absence or of corruption of good).

[1] As we saw in 2.4., privation theorists generally take a thing's 'nature' to be that thing's essential tendency to behave in a certain way, e.g. a tree's tendency to grow roots. If this is true, then a failure of a thing to fulfil its nature will plausibly always involve some kind of interruption of this tendency.

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Moreover, corruption theory does equal justice to the fact that good and evil are opposites. Once again, *F* and *G* may be opposites as in virtue of one being the absence of the other (which is the way in which heat and cold are opposites). But they may also be opposites in virtue of one being destructive of the other, e.g. if *F* = life and *G* = death (if death were the mere absence of life, inorganic matter would be dead, which it surely is not).

Hence, the reasons that motivate privation theory also motivate corruption theory.[1] We must now consider whether the theories are also on par with respect to the problems they face.

3.4. Corruption theory and the problems with privation theory

The first objection (perhaps more accurately described as a 'family' of objections), discussed in 2.3., was that some evils appear to be irreducibly positive, meaning that they cannot plausibly be analysed as privative evils. Malevolent attitudes (like hatred) and acts (like murder) in particular pose a problem, because they are more than mere privations of benevolence. As we saw, privation theorists typically concede this last point, but nevertheless argue that what makes malevolent attitudes and acts evil is that they involve the lack of some good, e.g. a lack of concern for the well-being of others. But this treatment of the evil of malevolence fails to explain why it is worse to be malevolent than to be merely indifferent to someone else's good (since both malevolence and indifference involve a failure to value another person's well-being).

Does corruption theory suffer from the same flaw? Note first that malevolent attitudes and acts do appear to be attitudes and acts that are 'corruptive of a good', whatever else they might be. Murder, for instance, is essentially destructive of the good of life. As for malevolent attitudes like the hateful desire for another person's suffering, aside from the harms that malicious people tend to inflict on the targets of their malice,

[1] While this has not been a focus of this paper, I should add that the theological grounds for supporting privation theory (briefly sketched in 2.2.) also support corruption theory, since both theories deny that evil as such is a substance, whose existence could thus be blamed on divine creative activity. Indeed, the destructive or damaging effect that a substance has on a good is not itself a substance. The corruption theorist can affirm, with the classical theistic tradition, that every created substance *as* a substance is good, and is only 'evil' insofar as it is destructive of a good. Further, note that destructive activity something is not evil as such – whether it is evil depends on the object of destruction or damage, which could itself be evil (e.g. a tumour) or simply worthless. Destructive activity is thus evil only if directed at real goods.

The critic can of course ask why a divine being would tolerate the existence of substances which oppose real goods. But this is similar to asking why a divine being would tolerate absences of required goods, granted that this is what evils consist in. I conclude that privation theory and corruption theory are on par with respect to theological utility.

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malicious feelings are destructive to the goods of friendship and societal goodwill, to name only two. The same could be said of other malevolent attitudes like envy and spite.[1]

What about the difference in degree of evil between malevolence and indifference? The corruption theorist can account for this by saying that while both malevolence and indifference are corruptive of good, malevolence is the *more* corruptive of the two. This is especially obvious in the case of murder, which directly destroys the good of human life, while a mere failure to value life is not directly or essentially destructive in this way. The case of hatred is less obvious, but only slightly so. Plausibly, both selfish indifference and hatred oppose the good of benevolence (insofar as both stop one from willing and valuing another person's good). But the 'distance', as it were, between hatred and benevolence is greater than the distance between indifference and benevolence. Suppose that Kelly, who had previously been completely indifferent to the well-being of Katie, suddenly begins to hate her. This doesn't make Kelly value Katie's well-being any less than before (since she was already utterly deprived of concern for Katie's well-being). But her newly-acquired hatred makes it more difficult to will Katie's good than if she had remained merely indifferent (since it is always harder to will the good of those we hate than of those we simply don't care about, everything else being equal). Thus, hatred is more destructive of the good of benevolence, presenting a greater obstacle to this good than selfish indifference.

The second objection, discussed in 2.4., charged that a loss of a good *G* would constitute an evil, regardless of whether *G* is required by something's nature, e.g. if Mozart had suddenly lost his musical genius. We saw that privation theory struggles to account for evils of this kind, because they do not constitute a privation of a good that *ought* to obtain, given the relevant nature. Corruption theory, in contrast, holds that something is evil to the extent that it is corruptive of a good, *without* specifying that this good must be required by a thing's nature, or anything else. Thus, corruption theory can account for the evil of a condition resulting in a sudden loss of musical genius, simply by stating that musical genius is a good, and thus that anything that destroys or impairs such a good is thereby evil.

I conclude that corruption theory successfully circumvents the most serious objections threaten privation theory.

[1] In the same way, corruption theory is impervious to the standard objection levelled at privation theory, mentioned in 2.3., to the effect that the evils of pain and/or suffering are not privative in nature. For the corruption theorist can say that pain and/or suffering are evil in virtue of their opposition to well-being, as Haratine suggests (2023, p.20), since they make a person's life worse than it would otherwise be.

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3.5. Conclusion: the case for corruption theory

The case for corruption theory is captured by the following simple argument:

(v) Evil is parasitic on good
(vi) If evil is parasitic on good, either privation theory or corruption theory is true
(vii) Privation theory is false
(viii) Therefore, corruption theory is true

(v) is motivated by the considerations raised in 2.2. (and reiterated in 3.3.), regarding the goods of ontological parsimony and explanatory unification, as well as the need to account for the fact that good and evil are opposites. (vi) is plausible, insofar as, other than privation theory and corruption theory, there are no live options for a theory of evil that takes evil to be parasitic on the good. Finally, (vii) is motivated by the problems that continue to plague privation theory, i.e. irreducibly positive evils and the possibility of evil without the absence of a required good.

4. An objection: intrinsic and instrumental evils

Once again, corruption theory is as follows:

Corruption Theory: something is evil to the extent that it is corruptive of a good, where *S* is corruptive of *G* to the extent that it destroys or damages *G*.

A critic might charge that, since damage to or the destruction of a good is an effect of something, corruption theory entails that something is evil only ever in virtue of its effects. Since to be evil in virtue of one's effects is to be an instrumental evil, it follows that all evils are instrumental evils. But this is absurd – surely there *are* intrinsic evils as well, i.e. evils that are evil 'in and of themselves'. Thus, corruption theory ought to be discarded, since it has an absurd implication.

In truth, the objection oversimplifies the instrumental-intrinsic distinction. It is fairly obvious that if some thing *S* is evil only in virtue of some effect *E* that it produces, *and* would not be an evil if it weren't for *E*, *S* could only count as an instrumental evil. But what should we say in the case of *S'* , which is evil in virtue or producing some effect *E'*, *and* which is such that producing *E'* is part of its essence? In that case, it does not seem right to call *S'* a mere instrumental evil, like *S*. For *S',* unlike *S,* is *necessarily* evil, since *E'*, the effect that makes it evil, is produced by *S'* in all possible worlds where *S'* exists. We might say that *E'* is a necessary expression of the nature of *S'*, that it is in the nature of *S'* to be evil. Again, this seems far more congruent with the claim that the evil of *S'* is more than instrumental.

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Let us say, then, that something that is only *contingently* destructive of a good is instrumentally evil, while something that is *necessarily* or *essentially* destructive of a good is intrinsically evil. For an example of the latter, recall what was previously said about the evil of malevolence (cf. 3.4.). Malevolent attitudes like hatred are corruptive of various goods, including the good of friendship. We may now add that hatred is *necessarily* corruptive of the good of friendship. In effect, in all possible worlds where I am hateful of Bill, I am prevented from being Bill's friend. Hence, hatred is an intrinsic evil on the foregoing schema. The same could be said of, say, disease, which is essentially corruptive of the good of health (otherwise, it would not be disease), and suffering, which is essentially corruptive of the good of happiness or well-being (cf. footnote 13).

Therefore, *contra* the objection, corruption theory does not imply that there are no intrinsic evils.

5. Conclusion

The traditional privation theory of evil arose from a desire to explain evil in terms of good. We saw that there are strong theoretical grounds to aim for this. Unfortunately, privation theory, at least in its most common formulations, is beleaguered by objections that have turned out to be rather persistent, the best efforts of privation theorists notwithstanding. I have advanced and defended an account of evil which retains the central contention that evil is somehow 'parasitic' on good, while circumventing these problems.

I have proceeded under the assumption that what I have called 'corruption theory' is an alternative to privation theory. However, I am open to the suggestion that it should really be seen as a type of privation theory, or a variation on it. Given the evidence of something like a corruption theory in the writings of St Augustine, the philosopher most frequently associated with privation theory, the former is perhaps best thought of as what the latter was originally meant to be.

One would expect a true theory of evil to shed some light on at least some areas of ethics. Hence I would like to end with some of the ethical implications that a corruption theory of evil might have, if true. First, we saw that, on corruption theory, something is intrinsically evil if it is *essentially* corruptive of a good. This entails that some actions are intrinsically evil, since some actions are essentially destructive of a good, such as in the case of murder, whose nature it is to be destructive of the good of a human life. Thus, corruption theory has a bearing on the question of whether only mental states

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like pain can be intrinsically evil, as held by ethical theories like classical utilitarianism, to which corruption theory is thereby opposed.

One should tread carefully here – to say that an act is intrinsically (morally) evil does not amount to saying that it is intrinsically morally *wrong*, as 'evil' and 'wrong' are distinct concepts. Even so, that an action is intrinsically evil is surely a reason to believe that it is intrinsically wrong, even if not a decisive one. This is especially plausible on the widely shared assumption that good and evil are prior to right and wrong, such that an action's wrongness is at least in part explained by the fact that it is evil.

In particular, what corruption theory says about intrinsic evil appears to parallel what philosophers in the so-called 'New Natural Law' tradition have said about intrinsic wrong. Such philosophers characteristically posit a number of 'basic goods' to be pursued by human beings, and argue that "to choose an act which in itself (…) damages a basic good", as John Finnis puts it, "can never be [morally] justified" (1979 pp.120-121) and thus is always morally *wrong*. Similarly, corruption theory argues that an act which 'in itself' (i.e. by nature) damages a good is always morally *evil*. Again, these two claims are not identical. But it seems that the second claim offers a significant line of support for the first, and may well form the basis of an argument to the effect that acts that essentially oppose a good are intrinsically wrong, as held by New Natural Law theory. The articulation and defence of such an argument would be a task for another day.

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