New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2012.01516.x

# Evil, Privation, Depression and Dread

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**Abstract**

In this essay I examine the idea that evil is to be understood as a kind of absence or a privation. I put forward two arguments against this idea. The first claims that if evil is an absence it becomes causally powerless, which seems strongly contradicted by experience and revelation. The other argument says that the idea that evil is an absence cannot do justice to the evil of depression. Depression is a set of feelings which are all too real, and so cannot be understood as literally identical with a set of absences.

**Keywords**

Evil, privation, privatio boni, Brian Davies, depression

In this essay I want to address and criticize a fairly central contention about the nature of evil in Christian thought. The idea I have in mind is the notion that evil is to be identified with a lack or absence. Evil, it is said, has no positive reality, but is a privation. To be more precise, it is said to be the gap between what should be present and the diminished, less than full reality. It would, of course, be an endless, encyclopaedic task to examine this whole tradition, so in order to make things manageable I will focus my analysis and critique on Brian Davies' defence of this contention in *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*.[1] Davies is an excellent spokesman for this tradition, and his writing exhibits the kind of clarity every theologian or philosopher hopes to attain. I will take his thoughts about evil's privative nature to be fairly representative of the whole tradition. What I say, therefore, in criticism of Davies' argument and his understanding of evil is intended as a critique of this whole way of thinking about evil. However, given the limit of time and space, my analysis will not engage or address every aspect of this part of

[1] Brian Davies, The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil (London: Continuum, 2006).

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Christian thought, but I certainly want to raise some central questions about its adequacy.

The plan of this essay is as follows: I will give an account of what Davies says about the privative nature of evil. I will then direct two arguments against the presented analysis. I must admit to having little constructive to say about the nature of evil, but perhaps the partially cleared ground will be empty enough for someone else to build. In any case, I will attempt to show that evil cannot be identified with any kind of absence.

Let us begin our exploration of Davies' view about the nature of evil.[2] Davies employs Geach's distinction between an ordinary descriptive term (like 'red'), and what Geach dubs a logically attributive adjective. When, for example, I use the adjective 'red' in 'there is a red bus' and 'there is a red post box' I mean something fairly similar in both cases. However, some adjectives function in a different fashion. Logically attributive adjectives like 'good' imply different attributions depending on what is being described. To be a good doctor, for example, is different from being a good cage fighter. The former's goodness lies in her ability to heal, the other's goodness increases in relation to the amount of injury she is capable of inflicting. However, says Davies, despite the wide variation in what we might specifically imply by calling something good, there is a "common meaning". By calling anything good we are "surely saying that it succeeds in some way." So to be a good doctor is to be "one who succeeds in performing as we require doctors to perform. It is to commend the doctor because there are some aspects of his work we find desirable."[3]

Having shown that 'good' functions as a logically attributive adjective, Davies can now say something about evil. When we say X is evil

[2] Davies says that the assertion that evil is "an absence or privation of a due good" is "making a claim about the *meaning* of what we say when we call something bad." (p. 144. My italics). Here it seems that Davies is offering an analysis of the meaning of our terms concerning evil and good rather than an explication of the non-linguistic nature to which the words refer. To clarify the distinction, think about the claim that the mind is the same as the brain. To my knowledge, no philosopher of mind understands this as a claim about identity in *meaning*. They are making a claim about what the terms refer to – they refer to exactly the same non-linguistic item. With this distinction in mind we may ask whether Davies is offering an account of the actual ontological nature of the non-linguistic items to which the terms refer, or whether he is offering a kind of what we might loosely call an ordinary language account where we try to handle problems by concentrating our attention on how we employ language and meaning. It seems to me, taking Davies' book as a whole, that he is not just offering a kind of linguistic analysis about the employment of concepts, but is trying to examine what evil actually is. Of course, it may be the case that Davies thinks that the meaning of the terms (suitably clarified and exposed) accurately speaks of evil's ontological status as a kind of lack. In the course of this essay, I will understand Davies' undertaking to be an analysis of the nature of evil, rather than an exercise in linguistic analysis.

[3] Davies, The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil, p. 146.

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we mean "(roughly) that X does not have what we are looking for"[4] in that type of thing. Again to find something bad is to "understand that it is failing to be what we are looking for."[5] Davies says that to call something bad is to say that it "does not measure up to desires or expectations and, in this case, always displays an absence."[6] Davies puts this point in another way. When we say something is bad we are "lamenting an absence of being, the fact that what could and should be there is not there." Indeed, we are "always" doing this.[7] From the privative nature of evil we can conclude that evil does not "in any serious sense exist . . . It has no identifiable *substance* or *positive quality*."[8]

Davies discusses a familiar charge put against this kind of analysis of evil. Christian Scientists assert, in accord with Mary Baker Eddy, that "Sin, disease, whatever seems real to material sense is unreal . . . All inharmony of mortal mind or body is illusion, possessing neither reality nor identity though seeming to be real and identical."[9] Some might see Davies' identification of evil with a privation and Baker's dismissal of evil as an illusion as more or less equivalent, and conclude that evil should not be taken very seriously. This is wrong says Davies. He explains that Augustine and Aquinas (who both accept the privative account) "accept that people can, in virtue of their badness, have real or positive effects."[10] Evil's privative character does not imply that it is causally ineffective. Its lack of being does not mean that it can be dismissed as mere illusion. To illustrate this idea Davies quotes a celebrated passage from Herbert McCabe:

> Things really are bad sometimes and this is because the absence of what is expected is just as real as a presence. If I have a hole in my sock, the hole is not anything at all, it is just the absence of wool or cotton or whatever, but it is a perfectly real hole in my sock. It would be absurd to say holes in socks are unreal and illusory just because the hole isn't made of anything and is purely an absence. Nothing in the wrong place can be just as real and just as important as something in the wrong place. If you inadvertently drive your car over a cliff you will have nothing to worry about; it is precisely the nothing that you will have to worry about.[11]

[4] *Ibid*., 146.
[5] *Ibid*., 147.
[6] *Ibid*.
[7] *Ibid*., 177.
[8] *Ibid*.
[9] Quoted by Davies, p. 177.
[10] *Ibid*., p. 147.
[11] Quoted by Davies pp. 147–148. McCabe's essay can be found in God Matters (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), pp. 25–38.

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Evil, then, despite its privative nature, can produce real effects: in this case the driver's alarm, the falling of the car through space and, after a few moments, the driver's death. Indeed, Davies tells us that statements mentioning absences and their effects can be *causal* statements. To illustrate this contention Davies gives two examples: "He suffered because he chose to ignore good advice" and "He got sick because he did not take precautions."[12] Evil, then, is no illusion despite its having no positive being or substantial reality.

Let us summarise what we have so far. Evil is the absence of a due good, and because it is an absence it has no real being. Despite it being an absence it is certainly something we should take seriously since it can, like holes and gaps, have very real effects. In other words, its privative nature should not lead us to suppose that evil cannot do anything. Having captured the essence of Davies' thought about evil (and the essence of this particular tradition's understanding about its nature) we can turn to a discussion of the problems which I think emerge from this kind of account. First let us look at the idea that evil can do things – that since it is causally efficacious it should be taken seriously and not thought of as an illusion.

We have just seen two examples given by Davies of causal statements mentioning absences. It would be easy to give many more – such statements are ubiquitous. Given this ubiquity it may be thought obvious that absences can cause things – that privations can literally causally affect the way things are. However, ubiquity of a certain kind of linguistic practice is not always a good guide as to what really is the case. I do not, for a moment, doubt that people intend such statements as "He died due to a lack of oxygen" to be understood causally, but I seriously do doubt that, under any close scrutiny, they can be taken as literally true in any causal sense. It seems to me that this point is clear once deeper scrutiny is undertaken. Gaps, absences and not taking precautions or not having enough oxygen cannot actually *do* anything. Why? Because only real things – things with positive being – can have any causal muscle. Davies, as we saw, quotes McCabe to bolster his case for the causal effectiveness of absences – the car plummets over the cliff *because* of the absence of the ground. But if we consider the case further, and try to think more carefully about the example, we might find that the ordinary way of describing the event is seriously misleading. Are not the real causes of the car plummeting down towards its doom the car's being driven over the cliff and the existence of gravity? The driver's main worry should be the *presence* of the ground at the bottom of the cliff; the *absence* of the ground in front of him as the car plummets is powerless to harm him. Gravity and the hardness of the ground

[12] *Ibid*., 174.

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beneath are the real causes of the car's destruction. They have the capacity to be causes since they are real things, and not mere absences or privations.[13]

Doubtless it is the case that were I to be throttled by the rather sinister looking stranger sitting opposite me in this library, I would stop writing, but my not being throttled is not causing my writing. The absence of throttling fingers around my throat is surely not causative at all. At best, it is a kind of background causally inert condition of my continuing to write. To make the point again, herds of wildebeest careering through the shelves would probably make me look up and stop writing. So, if we are to take absences as causal, I should take the absence of wildebeests as at least part of the cause of my carrying on writing. The sudden appearance of a wall between me and the page would stop me writing, so absences of walls are also causally powerful. But this is nonsense. Imagine the countless billions upon billions of absences that are 'causing' me to carry on writing now. Think of each absence as a little push. If this is the case – if absences were the least bit casually potent – my hands should be moving across the page with superhuman speed such would be immense causal impetus.[14]

Consider button-holes.[15] Button holes *allow* buttons to pass through them. This is their job, but no button hole has ever in the history of reality *caused* it to be the case that a button went through it. A manipulating hand has to do that, or a gust of wind, or a weird button firing machine gun. If all of reality were a button-hole surrounded by some cloth, and a single solitary button, and that button went through the hole, could we say that the button-hole caused that to happen? No, we would say the movement of either the cloth or the button caused the remarkable event.[16] Likewise, a 'lack of oxygen' has never done anything – the lack of oxygen in space is not a kind of entity waiting to pounce on unlucky astronauts. The problem is not the causal effectiveness of the 'lack of oxygen' but the fact that the cells of the human body need a certain amount of oxygen to

[13] For defence of the claim that absences and omissions are not causally effective see Helen Beebee's essay 'Causing and Nothingness' in J. Collins, N. Hall, & L Paul eds, Causation and Counterfactuals (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 291–308. For articulation of the opposing view that absences are causally powerful see David Lewis 'Void and Object', pp. 277–290. He gives further clarification of his views in 'Causation as Influence', pp. 99–104. Both essays can be found in Causation and Counterfactuals.

[14] See Beebee, 'Causation and Nothingness' pp. 294–297 for discussion of the way in which taking absences as causal explodes into a staggering multiplicity of causal determinants for each event.

[15] On the ontological status of holes see Casati Robert and Achille Varsi, Holes and Other Superficialities (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

[16] If a determined Thomist were to say that it was the movement of the *button-hole* which was the causal factor, I would ask him how he would determine the speed of the button-hole without measuring the speed of the cloth which forms the button-hole's shape.

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survive. To insist that the 'lack of causal influence' *caused* the event is really, I would submit, a kind of nonsense and a reification of nothing into a strange type of something. What makes people gasp, die, or do anything has to be substantial – if it is not it has no causal muscle to exercise.[17]

Phil Dowe, in his excellent book *Physical Causation,* makes the same point. He acknowledges (as I do) the plain fact that we make the kinds of assertions like the ones Davies and McCabe use. He imagines the following conversation between two people:

> You say that the father's inattention was the cause of the child's accident. Surely you don't mean that he literally made the child run into the path of the car, or that he made the car hit the child. Rather, you mean that his failure to guard the child was the cause in the sense that had he guarded the child, the accident would not have happened. You don't mean that he literally caused the accident; you mean that it was possible for him to have prevented it.
>
> Yes, that what I mean. And you, when you talk of a scenario in which the father prevented the accident, you don't mean that he bore any literal causal connection with the real thing called an accident. You mean that had he not acted in the way he did, some circumstances would have brought about the accident.
>
> Yes, that's exactly what I mean.[18]

He concludes: "I claim that we recognise, on reflection, that certain cases of prevention or omission, such as this one, are not really cases of genuine causation."[19] He says there is an intuition of difference between cases of omission and prevention and genuine cases of causal efficacy. I agree. I, too, possess this intuition of difference, and I expect my reader to recognise this as well.

If absences are causally powerless, it has serious consequences for Davies' thesis. Evil cannot be causally effective at all since, according to his analysis, it is an absence, a kind of nothing. Only things – 'substantial' parts of reality – can do things. Davies has then a choice: he can opt for 1) and say that evil has no causal power,

[17] One possible counter-example to these ideas is the justly famous account in Sartre's Being and Nothingness (London: Methuen, 1958) where he sees his friend Peter's absence in the café as he waits for him. Peter's absence 'haunts' the café. If he literally sees the absence of the friend, it seems eminently plausible to say that the absence is causing something. This is a difficult area, but it seems to me that Bergson has a better account of this kind of phenomenon – basically he argues that the 'seeing' of absences is an inference. We deduce that something is not black by seeing it is white. We do not directly see that it is not black. See H Bergson, Creative Evolution (New York, Dover, 1998), chapter 4. This seems plausible, but see R Grossman, Phenomenology and Existentialism: An Introduction (London: Routledge, 1984), pp. 232–236, for defence of Sartre's view.

[18] Phil Dowe, Physical Causation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 125.

[19] *Ibid.*

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or 2) he can retain evil's causal power by admitting it is a kind of thing – a 'substantial' part of reality.[20]

I suspect Davies would prefer 1) to 2), but then he has to explain in what way evil is meant to be taken seriously – it cannot, after all, really do anything. Recall that his way of distinguishing his thesis from Mary Baker Eddy was that evil has causal power, and because of this should be taken seriously. But evil, if it is analysed in the way Davies describes, is causally entirely powerless. In what way, then, is it distinguishable from an illusion in the sense given? This then is my first challenge to Davies' claims (and the whole tradition of evil being a *privatio boni*). Evil is consigned to powerlessness. But surely the problem is that we are subject to powers and dominions whose power is real and all too effective.[21]

It is time now to consider another argument against the idea that evil is a privation. Let us think through a real case of evil. Susan is suffering from clinical depression. She feels utterly terrible. Often she feels like something awful and momentously horrible is going to happen to her, that horror lies just around the corner. Dread accompanies her every waking moment. Tight bands, like a metal cage, seem to crush her chest. She feels sick, nauseous, frightened – gut-wrenching waves of anguish sweep across her. She feels utterly alone and isolated. She feels like the feelings will never go, and that she can never be happy again.[22]

How could these evils – these hopeless, terrible feelings – be accounted for under the evil as privation account? We might say that her feelings have certain background conditions: she has *not* enough self-esteem, or that she *mis*understands the nature of her situation, and that if she knew the truth instead of a *lie*, she would feel better. We might seek out whether she *lacks* self-love, and what *deficiency* in childhood might have caused these feeling. So far so good for the

[20] I am, like Davies, using the word 'substantial' to mean anything which is real, that has being, and is not a privation. In this sense even a property like 'being egg-shaped' is substantial. If the correct understanding of evil is that it is a kind of property, then, evil would have enough of a 'foothold' in being to be substantial.

[21] Evil is attractive. That is why it has so many people in its grip. If evil were literally a privation, a certain kind of absence, then, it becomes impossible to explain why so many people are in its dominion. St Paul talks, of course, in terms of 'principalities and powers', which seems to imply real force and causal effectiveness in evil, rather than the sheer powerlessness that seems to be implied by the privative account.

[22] One possible route I do not explore in this essay is that depression and dread actually have repressed intentional objects. So if Susan is depressed she is depressed about something even if she does not know what this actually is. I think that depression is more a mood than an emotion – and so does not have to have an object. See R Grossman, Phenomenology and Existentialism, pp. 71–76 for an exploration of the idea that all dread actually has a (repressed) intentional object. Neither do I explore the proposal put forward by Hegel that somehow being and non-being form some kind of fundamental continuum, which forms the basis of reality. For able criticism of Hegel's ideas see R Grossmann, The Existence of the World: An Introduction to Ontology (London: Routledge, 1992), 122–125.

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privative account, but note what we have done – we have identified certain deficiencies as being possible background conditions of her depression, but we have not literally identified the depression with the deficiencies. Why? Because the feelings of hopelessness, despair and sickness are real – they might be partially explained by an absence or deficiency, but they cannot be literally identified with such lacks. Depression, we might loosely say, is the result of deficiencies, but depression itself is real. It is an evil which has substantial reality.[23]

Let me try to make the argument clearer by supposing, for the sake of argument and vividness of illustration, that some form of mind brain identity theory is true. I do not think this is the case, but I think that the literal physicalizing of Susan's feelings will help us appreciate the argument better. Let us imagine, then, that there are certain firings between neural connections in Susan's brain that are literally identical with her feelings of utter hopelessness, dread and sickness. In certain situations these connections begin to fire, and Susan has the all-too-familiar horror come over her. Now there have been no mentions of absences here. It seems difficult to equate a feeling of mind-numbing horror with absences, a difficulty made all the more clear by literally seeing her terrible feelings as identical with physical stuff. We might talk of the shape of the neural net being responsible for certain over-arching mental tendencies, but it is the shape of the net we talk about here rather than the shape of the absences. Of course, in our search for a remedy for Susan's terrible feelings we might try to identify which synapses are not firing.[24] We might look how much dopamine is present in her brain. This exploration is, however, trying to identify what might help stop the feelings; it is not an examination of the feelings themselves. We look to see what synapses are firing and what chemicals are present when

[23] See John Hick, Evil and the God of Love (Glasgow: Collins, 1968), 59–64 for his argument that the privation account might be fruitful on the level of metaphysical reality, but on the empirical (phenomenal) level it fails miserably. I think the privative account fails on the metaphysical level since it denies some obvious empirical truths, truths it should actually reflect.

[24] To my mind, the idea that absences are causes is precisely due to our seeking out of remedies to situations we think are undesirable. We ask ourselves, 'What is it, if present, that would make this situation better?' So I might say that the lack of the crucial beam caused the roof to crash in upon me. What I mean by this is: 'If there had been a beam the roof would not have caved in." We are remedying animals, and, so to speak, honour that which is absent as a cause when, of course, the mere absence can have no such power. Imagine the world absent of human interests and desires, and a cave falls in. Is it the absence of a 'crucial' bit of rock which caused the cave to fall in, or is it the slow effect of gravity and the weathering of the ages? Isn't the lack a *condition* (along with countless billions of others like the lack of roof supporting dryads), rather than a *cause*? Naturally enough, if ordinarily we employed dryads as beams, we would then think of their absence as crucial and look with bemused astonishment at those who proposed that absent wood was the cause. Such is the relative and non-objective nature of the idea that lacks are causes.

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we try to locate the feelings themselves. How can the not happening of something (some synapses failing to fire, or a lack of a certain chemical) be identical with the feeling? How can this feeling I am experiencing right now be identical with an absence? It would be natural to say that because that synapse is not firing or is faulty, she is feeling depressed. But the feeling of depression itself, if it is to be identified with something physical, is not to be identified with the failing-to-fire synapse, but with the rest of the relevant (positive) part of the brain. The notion that something, e.g., a horrible feeling of utter dread, is actually identical with nothing does not seem to make any sense.[25]

Another analogy we might employ is architectural. Think of a building. It is, to begin with, beautiful, but it fails into disrepair. Bits of it fall off. The roof caves in. There is a lack of support for certain parts of it, and it becomes a dangerous ruin, an eyesore, an architectural blemish. Now can we sensibly assert that the absences are *identical* with the dangerous ruin, the eyesore, the architectural blemish? This is, of course, nonsense. The lack of a crucial beam is a condition of what is left becoming dangerous and ruinous, but the absences themselves are not identical with a dangerous ruin, instead they are part of the story as to why it became so ruinously dilapidated. I contend that at least some of our evil is like that. Our evil tendencies, our miseries, our depressions may be partly explained by absences or lacks, but they themselves are real, substantial things.

Imagine just sheer absence – it has no definable characteristics, no shape, no features, it is just a sheer undifferentiated blank.[26] It can

[25] It should be noted how the argument has been set up to avoid a familiar reply from those who want to defend the privative analysis of the nature of evil. I could have used a thought experiment where Susan had an evil *desire* to *please* herself by stealing some chocolates. Then I could have argued that a desire (or pleasure) cannot be identical with an absence. And so I could have pursued the argument. However, this kind of example would expose the argument to this kind of reply: *Desires and pleasures, in themselves, are good things. They are positive, substantial aspects of reality and in as far as they have being are good. It is only when desires and pleasures are misdirected or lack a correct application that they can be said to be evil, but then it is the lack of a correct direction which is the evil, and so falls under the idea of privation being identical with evil.* I am suspicious of this kind of reply since it seems to imply that the pleasure and desires of the Commandant at Belsen, as he rules his camp, should be seen as in themselves good as if the only bad is the end to which the pleasure and desire is directed. It seems to me, however, that his immorality is only *augmented* by his taking pleasure in the death of his victims. One would think that if pleasure or desire were goods in themselves, then, the rapist's and the sadist's actions would be *ameliorated* by their desires and pleasures. However, as I say, I have tried to avoid dealing with this kind of rejoinder. It would surely be a desperate move to argue that feelings of utter hopelessness and despair can be seen as goods in themselves.

[26] There is a tradition of thought that maintains that the idea of absolute nothing is actually incoherent. On this see T. L. S. Sprigge, God of Metaphysics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 93 n. 16. Bergson also claims that the idea of sheer nothingness is meaningless. See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* pp. 272–298).

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only gain shape when bounded by something – something positive. If the mind is the brain – if Susan's feelings are to be identified with material stuff, then, it is the brain – the positive stuff, not the absence of stuff – that her feelings are identified with. We would not trace the gaps, the holes, the absences in Susan's brain and call that shape evil, rather we would look at what is actually there. It is *that* shape that is evil. It is that shape that is a kind of architectural blemish. The shape of the material stuff that is there *is* evil. The presence of evil can, as I have said, be (partially) *explained* by what has been taken away, but it is what is actually there that is to be identified as evil.[27]

Let us consider some possible lines of reply that may be offered by those who defend the privative analysis. Brian Davies tells us that 'God . . . is the cause of the being of all that is real apart from himself, and that evil suffered is not something with being, not something that is actual, and, therefore, not created by him . . . Considered as amounting to a gap between what is there and what should be there, it is neither creatable nor created.'[28] He goes on to liken evil to holes and being blind: 'There are holes in walls only because there are walls with something missing. There are blind people. But blindness has no independent existence. In a similar way, evil suffered has no independent existence. It 'is there' only in the sense that something is missing.'[29] Now if we are persuaded by the idea that blindness has no independent existence, then, can we extend the idea to the case of something like depression?[30] It does not seem that we can. Depression is a set of feelings – feelings of dread, despair, hopelessness . . . etc. As I have said, it might be said that lacks are part of its ancestry, but it is, in itself, a something or a set of

[27] We do not have to believe in the mind brain identity theory for this line of thought to be convincing. If we believe in soul stuff, it would be the soul stuff itself, not its absence that would be evil. Again, absences or deficiencies in soul stuff could explain the evil of the stuff that was still there, but it is what is there – the positive stuff – that would be seen as evil.

[28] Davies, The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil, pp. 177–178. Aquinas distinguishes between 'evil suffered' and 'evil done'. Roughly this is the distinction between natural evil, and moral evil. Davies argues that much more natural evil is related to human decision making than we sometimes realize. See pp. 173–175.

[29] *Ibid*., p. 178.

[30] I am not persuaded. I agree with him about blindness not being an *entity*, but this is true of all universals like blueness or braveness, but 'John's being blind' (a particular) is certainly a set of determinate experiences with a certain phenomenology. Is Davies suggesting that there is nothing it is like to be blind? Surely not. Also what does Davies mean by blindness having no '*independent* existence'? For a believer, nothing created has independent existence, so being dependent cannot serve as a characteristic of the non-existent unless we want to say that nothing created actually exists at all. What Davies appears to be saying is that blindness per se has no existence at all, but this is deeply implausible. As I have said, there is something it is like to be blind. There is nothing it is like to be in a non-existent state.

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somethings. There is something it is like to be in the midst of depression – the feeling themselves are not absences. Furthermore, if my first argument is correct, then, the depression has to be caused by something positive. An absence is causally inert, powerless, and so cannot lead to depression.[31]

What, then, can be said in reply to the argument that I have given about the substantial reality of depression – that fact that it has, fairly obviously, a foothold on reality? Davies, I think, would use the following argument. Aquinas, he informs us, believes that anything in the category of being is caused by God. So when someone performs a bad action – an act of sin – we cannot claim that God does not cause this action to take place. The act is a real one. God sustains the reality and being of all the movements that accompany or constitute the action. So all *acts* of sin are caused by the all-pervasive causal activity of God.[32] But does God cause the *badness* of the act of sin; does God cause the *sinfulness* of the act of sin? No, says Aquinas –

> Sin can be called a being and an action only in the sense that something is missing. And this missing element comes from a created cause, i.e., the free will in its departure from order to the First Agent who is God. Accordingly, this defect is not ascribed to God as its cause, but to the free will, just as the limp in a cripple comes from his deformity and not from his power to move even though this power enables him to limp. Hence God is the cause of the act of sinning but not the cause of the sin for he does not bring about the defect.[33]

If we return to Susan's depression (and again, for illustrative purposes, imagine that her depression is literally identical with the physical processes of her brain) Davies would, I think, say that God sustains and causes every movement, every firing of every neuron, every synaptic connection's activity is caused by God, but He does not cause the badness of the feelings of dread and hopelessness.[34] We have to say, if we stick to our pretence that mind brain identity theory is true, that God is causing the feelings of dread and sickness

[31] This has serious consequences for a major part of Davies' overall strategy in the book – the exercise of absolving God, who causes all things, of any kind of causal impetus in the genesis of evil. If evil is not a 'substantial' part of reality, then, Davies can claim it need have no positive causal origin.

[32] Here the Thomist tradition seems to be in a quandary. It wants all causes to be in the end attributable in as far as they are real to God. God is the causal powerhouse of the universe and the best causation we can offer is secondary. So, in a certain way, the tradition acknowledges the powerlessness of evil I have argued must exist if the evil as absence account is correct. The tradition still wants evil to be able to do things however. To consign evil to the epiphenomenal would surely be a wildly implausible move.

[33] Quoted by Davies p. 189.

[34] In Ontology and Providence in Creation: Taking Ex Nihilo Seriously (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 119–125, I briefly explore the relationship between God as primary cause and human actions as secondary.

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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2012.01516.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

and despair since they are literally identical to certain neuronal happenings, but Davies would add that God does not cause the *badness* or *evil* of these feelings. But what, I want to know, *does this mean*? The evil of depression lies precisely in the qualitative phenomenology of the accompanying feelings (and, of course, what it leads to – often suicide). The reality of depression is in the substantial qualitative reality of the dread and despair: it is this that is an intrinsic evil.

Let us try another reply on behalf of the privative analysis. In *Aquinas: God and Action* David Burrell examines Jung's objections to the privation account of evil. Many of Jung's arguments have similarities with the ones we have pursued here. Jung, in particular, does not think that the idea of evil as a privation can do justice to the positive reality of evil forces and tendencies in our lives. To see evil as a mere absence cannot account for evil's destructive powers. Burrell's reply repeats a theme that recurs again and again in the book (and throughout many other of his works)[35] – that Aquinas, in his treatment of the nature of good and evil, is proposing a set of *grammatical* injunctions. In other words, he is looking at the metaphysical geography of the issues, rather than attempting an analysis of empirical reality. To complain that the account fails as an account of the empirical reality, when it is meant to be some other kind of account, cannot be a legitimate complaint. My own sympathy is with Jung here: evil's empirical reality needs to be matched by a much more robust metaphysical account of its nature. Any metaphysic of the nature of evil should have some kind of correspondence with evil's empirical reality. However, Burrell says that, in fact, the metaphysical account proposed by Aquinas *can* do justice to the empirical reality of evil. One area is the senselessness of evil.[36] Burrell uses Augustine's famous account of stealing pears. Augustine tries to rationalize what he has done, but finally has a moment of self-revelation. He stole the pears for no reason. His action makes no sense. It is pointless and destructive. The good of the act, that is, the actions on a purely physical level, are all activated by the divine all-pervasive cause – but that it is a transgression (because it is entirely without sense) is not something attributable to God. Burrell puts it like this:

> . . . what makes an evil act evil is that it makes no sense. It simply answers to no reason. In action-theoretic terms, such an action has no

[35] See, for example, David Burrell, Knowing the Unknowable God (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

[36] In a recent essay John Milbank has defended the privative account of evil and the notion that evil is banal and senseless, without any positive foothold in reality. See 'Evil: Darkness and Silence' in John Milbank, Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1–25.

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> cause. Aquinas understands that. In fact, he so organised his grammatical analysis that the necessary conclusion that evil has no cause would answer quite neatly to our experience . . . God is the cause, ultimately, of what we do, even of the action whereby we transgress the order of things. But he cannot be made responsible for that action's being a transgression.[37]

This seems to me a good account of the evil of a senseless act.[38] Such an act has, at a particular level, a kind of absurdity. We often stare in stupefied disbelief at the senselessness of what we do. I must, however, point out that I do not think that this would cover the example of depression and its awful phenomenology. It is simply impossible to say that the evil of depression lies in its lack of cause – its purported causelessness is irrelevant (and, as I have argued, impossible). The evil is directly inherent in the phenomenology. It is an evil in itself. And it exists, and is substantial.

As I said at the start of this essay, I cannot do justice to this rich and interesting tradition. I hope, however, that this essay has succeeded in making clear some of the difficulties of thinking of evil as a kind of privation. I invite those who disagree with my conclusions to engage with the arguments in this essay.

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[37] David Burrell, Aquinas: God and Action (London: Routledge, 1979), p. 100.

[38] See also the very clear account given by Charles Mathewes, Evil and the Augustinian Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 77–81.

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