

Evil as Such is a Privation: A Reply to John Crosby

Patrick Lee

Abstract. I reply to an article in the ACPA *Proceedings* of 2001 by John Crosby in which he challenged the position that evil as such is a privation. Each of his arguments attempts to present a counterexample to the privation position. His first argument, claiming that annihilation is evil but not a privation, fails to consider that a privation need not be contemporaneous with the subject suffering the privation. Contrary to his second argument, I explain that the repugnance of pain is consistent with its being good in the appropriate context. Against his third argument I contend that he mistakenly supposes that a choice's being opposed to the good is incompatible with its being evil because of a disorder. I conclude by briefly reviewing one central argument for the privation position and contrast it with Crosby's arguments, which, in addition to their other problems, fail to specify any intensional content, beyond repugnance in the case of pain, for the concept of evil.

In an article published some years ago I defended the position that evil as such is not a positive something, but a negation, a privation.¹ The article was theological as well as philosophical. The philosophical arguments I presented were, first, from what must be true of goodness in general, and, second, assuming a classical theistic position, from the proposition that every being other than God is directly caused (or sustained) by him. My friend and colleague John Crosby challenged the position that evil is a privation, answering many of my arguments in his article in the 2001 *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*.² I respect John Crosby and his work, but we still disagree on an important issue.

Crosby admits that the position that evil is a privation has been held by the major Christian philosophers since St. Augustine. And he also says that “it seems to be the only alternative to a Manichean view of evil,” which, he adds,

¹See Patrick Lee, “The Goodness of Creation, Evil, and Christian Teaching,” *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 239–70.

²See John F. Crosby, “Is All Evil Really Only Privation?” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 75 (2001): 197–210.

“no one in his right mind wants to hold.”³ And yet, he declares, “I have some questions, some non-Manichean questions, about the privation theory that will not go away, and I would like to air them with my colleagues in the American Catholic Philosophical Association.”⁴ I wish to make two points about this part of his introduction. First, the introduction (and the abstract, where he notes that he proposes “to test the privation theory of evil”)⁵ sounds quite cautious. However, Crosby seems later to forget this caution; for, two pages later he claims that “this argument shows *conclusively* that the evil of complete annihilation is, however one explains it, a real evil”⁶ (which he takes to mean “positive” in a sense that contradicts the privation position), and the conclusion of the paper as a whole is expressed without wavering or doubt. Secondly, Crosby does not make it clear what should be included in the term “Manichean.” If by “Manichean” one means the position that matter is evil, and that there is an evil counter-god who has created matter, then of course his position is non-Manichean, and (as he says in the abstract) “has nothing to do with restoring a Manichean view of evil.”⁷ But if holding that evil is a positive something entails that there are beings in the world that can produce positive realities without the immediate primary causality of God, then this position does include at least one of the key points that made Manichaeism incompatible with Christian theism.

The position that evil as such is privation is entailed by the theistic position that all positive reality is God and what he creates. According to theism, God is immediately operative in every effect, and is thereby omnipresent, since a creature, not having existence as part of its nature, cannot cause new existence by itself. If evil were something positive, then one would have to say either that this evil is immediately caused by God, in which case God is in some way evil (since the effect reflects to some degree the nature of the cause), or that there is some being in the universe which is not immediately caused by God, in which case there is some creator other than the one God. If evil is not privation, then theism is incoherent.

One cannot help but think that Crosby has read into the privation account of evil an oversimplified view of what it means to say that evil is a privation. The very title of Crosby’s article is ambiguous: “Is All Evil *Only* Privation?” One wants to answer this question: “Of course not, no one ever said it was. What the great thinkers in the classical theistic tradition have claimed, however, is that what makes a thing or act evil is privation, namely, deviation from the standard

³Ibid., 197 (emphasis added).

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 199–200 (emphasis added).

⁷Ibid., 197

for what is due the kind of thing an entity is.” Of course there are evil things and evil acts. And there are acts which are evil—disordered—precisely because they are opposed to a good to which they should not be opposed. The privation position, however, is that evil things or acts are not evil because they possess a certain nature or property, a positive something or quality, but because there is in them a privation (a negation of what ought to be there). Positive entities can also be called “evil” because they cause evil (as when we say that this bacterium is evil though it is good in itself).

In his introduction Crosby suggests that his essay is an essay in phenomenology, writing that “in the space of this brief paper I will just consider the way in which certain kinds of evil present themselves to us and will ask whether they can plausibly be taken as being only privation.”⁸ However, Crosby’s case against the privation theory includes three arguments. The first (involving a thought-experiment about the complete annihilation of earth and all life on it) does not strike me as phenomenological. In the second argument there is some phenomenological analysis of pain, but this analysis seems to leave out a key component of the experience of pain and involves a claim of self-evidence that can be (and should be) denied. Regarding the third argument (on moral evil), someone holding the privation account of evil need not disagree with his phenomenological analysis of the morally evil acts he discusses, only with the conclusion he draws from that analysis.⁹

I.

The first alleged counterexample Crosby presents is the complete destruction of a being. “Consider this example: a large meteor or asteroid strikes the earth, exploding it and destroying all life on it.”¹⁰ Crosby argues as follows: this would certainly be an evil, and yet it would not be a privation since there would not be a subject in which privation could inhere. He then concludes, “This is an evil, then, which falls outside of the explanatory reach of the privation theory, which can, therefore, not be a universal theory.”¹¹

This is an interesting thought-experiment and worth considering. However, whatever one says about it, it does not support the main claim of Crosby’s article, namely, that evil is more than privation. Crosby’s argument concerning the complete destruction of an entity seems to be this:

⁸Ibid.

⁹Moreover, the position that evil as such is a privation is a metaphysical account of evil, and so its truth (if it is true) may not be apparent to immediate experience or consciousness—something with which, as far as I can see, a phenomenologist need not disagree.

¹⁰Crosby, “Is All Evil . . .,” 198.

¹¹Ibid., 200.

- (1) Privation always presupposes a presently existing subject in which to inhere.
- (2) The complete destruction of a being (substance) does not presuppose a presently existing subject in which to inhere.
- (3) But the complete destruction of a being is sometimes an evil.
- (4) Therefore there is an evil (in some sense of “is”) which is not a privation.

The first point I wish to make concerns Crosby’s particular example. In the example there *would* be presently existing beings in which privations would inhere—namely, the souls of the human beings killed in the catastrophe. I hold, and I know Crosby does also, that after death the human soul continues to be, and so the souls of those human individuals would lack their bodies. (As a Christian I also believe—as does Crosby—that this privation will be remedied at the resurrection.)

But let us for a moment forget about souls and resurrection. Suppose we were materialists and death for a human being was complete annihilation. There are further defects in Crosby’s argument. While it does raise a puzzle, that puzzle is irrelevant to the question of whether evil is a privation. One need only substitute the more general word “harm” for “privation” in his argument, and the same difficulty will be raised. (“Harm” is more general or vague than “privation.” It may mean what causes privation, or a condition or act that includes privation, or it may refer to a privation itself; also, use of the word “harm” is non-committal about what makes evil things or acts evil.) In fact something like this difficulty is the argument Epicurus presented to show that death is not harmful.¹² But denying that all harms are rooted in privations does nothing to solve that puzzle. The puzzle which Crosby raises (and which Epicurus raised) arises from assuming that the harm must be simultaneous with the subject harmed, and therefore after the annihilation there would be no subject to suffer the harm and so there would be no evil. This is a difficulty for any view that annihilation is an evil, not specifically a difficulty for the position that evil is a privation. Crosby suggests that, to solve this puzzle, we posit subsisting states of affairs to be the bearers of evil in cases of complete annihilation. This proposal, however, fails to solve the problem. Even if one believes in subsisting non-actual states of affairs (a belief I do not share), the proposal would locate the harm or evil in those states of affairs rather than in the one who dies, who is obviously the first one actually harmed by such an event.

But the most central problem with this argument is that premise (1) is false. The privation and the subject of the privation need not exist at the same

¹²“Death is nothing to us. For while we are still alive, death is not present; and when death is present, we are not” (Epicurus, “Letter to Menoecus,” in *The Essential Epicurus* [Buffalo: Prometheus, 1993], ____).

time—the two terms of the privation-relation need not be simultaneous. Persons can be deprived of things by several post-mortem events: a person suffers a privation if his will and testament is set aside, or if his children and family are left destitute upon his death, even if he does not learn before his death that such events will occur post-mortem.¹³ Looking at the event (complete annihilation) prospectively, we would rightly view it as a terrible evil precisely because in that event we would be deprived of our lives, our very being. Why should I, or why do I, fear complete annihilation? Clearly, that is because I care about my life; I desire to continue to be. So, the subject of the privation would be me—my annihilation would deprive me of the life I would have had.¹⁴ Similarly, if a baby dies and the parents do not believe in an afterlife, they still grieve—not just for themselves, for their loss, but for the life that the baby would have had. They are considering the counterfactual possibilities; the baby herself is deprived of a life she would have or could have had. Of course on their view neither the baby nor any part of the baby (her soul perhaps) now exists. But their consideration need not be tied to the present time. They are thinking of the baby when she existed, and that baby has been deprived of subsequent existence.

In sum, if (1) is taken as true, then, although the argument raises an interesting puzzle about how a complete annihilation would be evil, it lends no support whatsoever to the denial that evil as such is a privation. And, more importantly, the first premise of Crosby's argument is false, and so the argument collapses.¹⁵

II.

The second alleged counterexample is physical pain. I had argued, as others have, that pain, whether physical or emotional, is not in itself evil but is perception of and reaction to what is evil. Regarding physical pain, I pointed out that pain is a sensation and that it is part of the animal organism's adaptation to its

¹³See Thomas Nagel, "Death," in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1–10. Fred Feldman, *Confrontation with the Reaper* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Steven Luper, "Death," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/death>.

¹⁴See Ben Bradley, "When is Death Bad for the One Who Dies?" *Nous* 38 (2004): 1–28; Thomas Nagel, "Death"; Fred Feldman, "Some Puzzles about the Evil of Death," *Philosophical Review* 100 (1991): 205–27; Neil Feit, "The Time of Death's Misfortune," *Nous* 36 (2002): 359–83.

¹⁵That seems to me to be the correct answer. However, one also could answer the difficulty Crosby raises by simply maintaining that if part of the universe were destroyed, as Crosby supposes, the evil, if any, would be in the loss of it to some larger reality—say, the whole universe. And if all of reality were annihilated, then nothing would exist, and there would not in that case be any real entities for the proposition, "Such and such is evil," to be about. And so, simply speaking, there would be no evil.

environment. Pain sensations are, normally, instances of the animal organism's functioning in the way it has been designed. Crosby rejects this argument. He then claims that the position that pain is evil is self-evident. Further, he says, by way of supporting his claim that it is self-evident, "We apprehend this self-evidence whenever we understand that it is always perverse to desire pain for its own sake; pain is only rightly sought as a means for some good beyond itself to which it leads."¹⁶

This argument, however, is not successful. The assumption that everything it is perverse to desire for its own sake is evil is false. It is wrong, perhaps even perverse, to pursue money for its own sake, but money is not in itself evil. Physical pain is the animal organism's sensation of and negative affective reaction to harm, or threat of harm (here "harm" refers either to what damages, that is, what causes privation, or to a privation itself). Physical pain not only alerts the animal to a harm or threat of harm but, more importantly, it presses the animal to avoid the harm or threat—something it can do only if it is extremely repugnant. Because it is an awareness of harm (or of an imminent threat of harm) it is perverse to pursue it for its own sake, either for oneself or for another. Just as it is wrong to pursue a mere instrumental good (money) as if it were good in itself, so it is wrong to pursue the experience of a harm or threat of harm for its own sake, since pain is not good apart from the supposition that a harm or threat of harm is present. Analogously, it would be wrong to will the healing of wounds by blood clotting for its own sake since such blood clotting is good only given that a wound has occurred. In other words, pain is good on the supposition that a wound has occurred. But, pursuing pain apart from that supposition, or pursuing it as joined to that injury (that is, pursuing a painful injury) is wrong. Crosby's argument, then, fails to show that pain sensations are not healthy functions of an animal and thus part of its fulfillment and good.

Given that we live in a world where there are physical injuries, pain sensations¹⁷ are part of the animal organism's functioning as it is designed to function: they are part of the animal organism's functioning in a way that maintains or promotes its survival and flourishing. Crosby objects to this position, arguing that something can be useful, that is, an instrumental good, but still be evil in itself. And he claims this is the case with pain or suffering.¹⁸ In other words, from the fact that something leads to a good, or has utility, it does not follow that it

¹⁶Crosby, "Is All Evil . . ." 201.

¹⁷Or, more precisely, pain experiences, since pain seems to be, normally, a complex experience including both a sensory cognitive component (the sensation of the damage, that is, privation or undergoing privation, to a part of one's body, although not an infallible cognitive act) and an affective negative reaction to the sensation of damage. On this point, see Murat Aydede, "The Analysis of Pleasure vis-à-vis Pain," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* __ (2000): 537–70.

¹⁸See Crosby, "Is All Evil . . ." 201.

is in itself good. In the article I referred to earlier I replied to this argument.¹⁹ Crosby considers my reply and adds a rejoinder. In my reply I granted that the utility of a thing does not show that it is good, but I pointed out that pain is not one entity that leads to a distinct good; rather, I argued (and still maintain) that pain sensations (experiences) are part of the healthy functioning of an animal organism in certain situations (namely where he or she has been injured or is in danger of being injured). To this reply Crosby now objects:

In response I grant that there is indeed this difference between the instrumentality of pain protecting an organism and punishment bringing a criminal to his moral senses. We might mark the distinction by speaking of intrinsic and extrinsic instrumentality. But why should this distinction have any consequences for my argument? Why should pain, even though intrinsically instrumental for the good of the organism, not still be bad in itself?²⁰

One can certainly distinguish between an intrinsic and extrinsic instrument. A hand is an intrinsic instrument since one uses it for various purposes (and thus it is called an “organ,” from the Greek word meaning “instrument”) and it is part of oneself, while a lawnmower is an extrinsic instrument since it is outside oneself. But what does Crosby mean by intrinsic versus extrinsic *instrumentality*? He seems to mean this: A is intrinsically instrumental to an effect if by its nature it is oriented to producing some effect, while B is only extrinsically instrumental to an effect if C uses B to produce some effect good for C but B has its own distinct nature not internally oriented to the specific type of effect which C uses B to produce. On this view, then, a lawnmower would be an extrinsic instrument in relation to the lawn-owner but it would still be intrinsically instrumental to the effect it is used for (since it is designed to mow lawns).

Now it is possible for an entity to be bad but be an intrinsic *instrument* in relation to some good (for example, a defective knee one uses in walking). But it does not seem possible for an entity to be intrinsically *instrumental* to something good and yet be bad in itself, except by having in it a privation. If it is by its nature instrumental to something good, then in its nature it must be internally oriented to bringing about, or helping to bring about, that good result; and that surely is enough to qualify it as being good, that is, good just to that extent (for it could still have a defect or privation in it).²¹

¹⁹See Lee, “The Goodness of Creation,” 259.

²⁰Crosby, “Is All Evil . . .,” 208 n. 3.

²¹Consider by contrast an intrinsically evil act, such as murder or adultery. These acts may of course be instrumental to some good, but they are not (and it would make no sense to think of them as being) by their nature oriented to a good. The immediate object of such choices is either a privation (as in murder) or something with a privation in it (as in adultery).

Pain is not a mere extrinsic instrument in relation to a good effect distinct from it. Rather, when it occurs in accord with the way the nervous system has been designed, it is part of the healthy functioning of an animal organism in certain circumstances (namely, when it has been injured, or is about to be injured). It is true that pain is not good by itself or apart from the more complex healthy functioning of the animal. But this is not because it is bad in itself; rather, it is because it is only part of that healthy functioning. Moreover, it is good that it occur only provided that an injury, or threat of an injury, has occurred. An analogous point is true of each of the specific functions of the bodily systems. Circulation is not good, is not perfective of the organism, unless the circulated blood is oxygenated, which depends on the functioning of the respiratory system. The digestive system contributes to the overall flourishing of the organism only if the excretory system is functioning in order to dispose of toxins; similar points are true of every system. Crosby's argument would apply to an extrinsic instrument—it may be in itself good or bad. But it cannot apply to a function that is intrinsically instrumental, in Crosby's sense of the term. And so the function of an animal organism which is naturally oriented to the survival and flourishing of the animal must be, just insofar as it does contribute to that end, good. And where the qualification ("just insofar as etc.") does not obtain (for example, useless pain, toxins being circulated with blood), that is because of a disorder, that is, a privation.

Crosby also argues that the nature of punishment shows that pain, which (he says) is necessary for punishment, is evil. Punishment, he argues, consists in inflicting an evil on the one punished; this is done by inflicting pain on him, so pain is evil: "If pain were not an evil, it could not be a necessary part of all punishment, which always involves inflicting some evil."²² The nature of punishment is of course a very large issue. But I think it is simply mistaken to say that inflicting an evil on the one punished is what punishment "consists of," or is necessarily involved in it. Rather, I think punishment essentially involves contravening the erring will of the criminal or evildoer. The evildoer has taken a degree of freedom or advantage not due him, and thus injured the common good, which includes the balanced proportion of goods, burdens, services, etc. Punishment seeks to restore this proportion, and it does so by, as it were, putting the criminal (or evildoer) back in his place.²³ This can be done by deprivation of liberty, deprivation of goods, or by infliction of pain, which need not then be viewed as itself evil. The notion of punishment, then, does not require one to conceive of pain as really evil.

²²Crosby, "Is All Evil . . .," 202.

²³On the nature of punishment, see John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 262–6.

There is a problem in another argument which Crosby claims confirms (as opposed to conclusively showing) his position that pain is simply evil. He points out that according to Christian belief, there will be no pain in heaven, and perhaps on a secularized version of this argument, anyone who conceives of a world free from all evil will leave pain out of it.²⁴ And these facts, Crosby claims, suggest that pain is in itself evil. In a footnote he concedes there is a difficulty for this argument: during the oral presentation of his paper Michael Gorman pointed out to him that there are certain good things that will be absent from heaven as well, for example, marriage. So, Crosby says, “The correct form of the argument seems to be this weaker one: the exclusion of pain from glory *confirms* what we know on other grounds, namely that pain as such is evil.”²⁵ However, the argument does not confirm this claim in the least. A theory is confirmed in relation to another theory only if it accounts for some phenomenon or event that the other theory does not account for, or accounts for less well. It is true that pain’s being evil as such would account for its absence from heaven (or from one’s ideal world). But pain’s being a perception of and reaction to evil or physical harm (the alternate position) equally well accounts for this fact since the absence of evil would entail the absence of the perception of and reaction to evil.

Moreover, Crosby’s arguments regarding pain are fundamentally ambiguous because he has not made explicit just what he means by “evil.” He indicates that he intends to perform that task but he does not, I think, do so. After explaining briefly what is meant by “privation” he writes the following:

The next introductory point is to define evil as I will be using it. I use the term in the broad sense of *malum*, so that it expresses not only moral evil but all other kinds of being bad as well. As for the further question of what things are to count as *malum*—the extensional question that follows on the intensional one—I will simply rely on the fact that my interlocutor, who defends the traditional theory that evil is only privation, recognizes as evils the same things that I do, with one exception [namely, pain].²⁶

I am afraid that the intensional question is not answered here, nor, as far as I can see, anywhere else. Crosby never makes clear what concept, what intelligibility he thinks is signified by the term “evil,” when he says, for example, that pain is evil. With respect to pain, when Crosby maintains that it is evil (or bad), does he think that the term “evil” (or the term “bad”) signifies some property or characteristic which belongs to some experiences, marking them off from other sensations or experiences?

²⁴See Crosby, “Is All Evil . . .,” 202.

²⁵Ibid., 209 n. 4.

²⁶Ibid., 198.

If Crosby thinks “evil” signifies some property found in painful experiences, then not only is this not self-evident, but I think careful phenomenological analyses of pain have shown that it is false.²⁷ The clearest analyses of pain have shown, I think, that pain is a complex experience which includes both a cognitive component which is the sensation of some damage to a part of one’s body (we are speaking now of physical pain) and an affective, negative reaction to this sensory component, the negative reaction also being (or being realized in—there are different views on this) a physical event. The pain of a toothache, for example, is in one’s tooth, it is sharp or stabbing pain, and it can be awful or horrible. Other pains may be dull or throbbing, depending very much on what part of the body whose damage one is sensing, the extent of the damage, and the type of cause or the type of damage. Michael Tye is correct with respect to the cognitive component of the pain experience when he argues that pains are sensory representations of tissue damage, that is, non-conceptual representations (more or less specific) of some damage or injury, or imminent danger or injury, in some part of one’s body.²⁸ But Murat Aydede is also correct when he explains that the total pain experience is complex; it has both a cognitive component and an aversive reaction usually fused together:

Normally, the affective and sensory dimensions of what might be called “the total experience of pain” are somewhat fused together to give the phenomenological impression that we experience a singularly homogeneous quality of pain. . . . This is the basis of the illusion that pain is essentially and singularly that horrible, awful, abhorrent feeling.²⁹

Thus, the cognitive component of pain is a sensation, not of some property of badness, but of a damage (privation) or threat of damage in a part of one’s body. Evidently, the badness of pain refers to the affective component of pain, the negative reaction to the perceived damage, and of course repugnance or negative affective reaction is not a nature or property of badness. So, there does not

²⁷See Aydede, “The Analysis of Pleasure”; Michael Tye, “A Representational Theory of Pains and Their Phenomenal Character,” in *The Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debate*, ed. Ned Block, Owen Flanagan, and Gueven Guezeldae (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 329–40; Richard Hall, “Are Pains Necessarily Unpleasant?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49 (1989): 643–59; Frank T. Vertosick, Jr., *Why We Hurt: The Natural History of Pain* (New York: Harcourt, 2000).

²⁸See Tye, “A Representational Theory of Pains and Their Phenomenal Character,” 333; Michael Tye, “On the Location of Pain,” *Analysis* 62 (2002): 15–153; Bennett W. Helm, “Felt Evaluations: A Theory of Pleasure and Pain,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39 (2002): 13–30; G. Lynn Stephens and George Graham, “Minding Your P’s and Q’s: Pain and Sensible Qualities,” *Nous* 21 (1987): 395–405.

²⁹Murat Aydede, “The Analysis of Pleasure,” 552.

seem to be any property or quality in pain which the word “evil” or “bad” could designate. When one says that pain is bad, what one usually means is simply that it is repugnant³⁰ to one degree or another.³¹ At the same time, however, this very repugnant aspect of the pain experience—that horrible, awful, abhorrent feeling—is part of the healthy functioning of an animal when it is injured, and thus it is not evil or bad in the sense in which death, sickness, loneliness, broken promises, and so on, are bad. So, if by evil one means “repugnant” or “aversive,” then it is correct to say that pain is “evil,” and that is what we usually mean when we say that “that pain was very bad.” But in that same sense one might say that broccoli is “bad” and yet add that it is really good for us.

Pain is normally part of the healthy functioning of an animal when an injury has occurred or is imminent, but it is not good apart from that proper context. In this respect pain differs from what, along with others, I call “basic goods,” that is, those conditions or activities which by themselves perfect the human being (since the question of what is worth pursuing for its own sake arises with human goods). But unless pain lacks this context or orientation which is natural to it—that is, unless there is a privation in it—then pain, just insofar as it is part of the functioning of an animal in accord with its design, is perfective of the animal and is thus good. What leads us to call it “bad” is its repugnance, that is, the fact that pain normally includes a more or less strong negative reaction to the cognitive element in it, the sensation of this or that part of the body being damaged.³² This repugnance, however, is essential to the way it functions in the life of the animal. The experience of pain can press the animal to avoid what causes the damage sensed or press the animal to tend to the injury, only if it includes a repugnance to the sensed damaged. Thus, according to what it is, and precisely according to that in it which moves us to call it “bad” (meaning thereby “repugnant”), pain is perfective of the animal, and thus good when occurring in its proper context.

III.

The third alleged counterexample proposed by Crosby to the position that evil as such is privation is moral evil. Crosby of course admits that many

³⁰One could mean, but rarely, that a pain is dysfunctional, but that would mean the pain is disordered, has a privation in it.

³¹This point is supported by the experience of patients with frontal lobotomies, or people under the influence of cocaine, who report that they feel pain that does not hurt, that is, they feel what they usually feel when they say it hurts badly, but they do not find the experience repugnant. See Aydede, “The Analysis of Pleasure,” and the references to the scientific literature there. Evidently they experience the cognitive component of pain without its affective response (note that the affective response is both physical and conscious).

³²Also, prolonged or intense pain interferes with other activities and so it may be reasonable to take costly measures to remove it.

instances of moral evil are simply privations (such as moral irresoluteness), but he adds, “the privation theorist can hardly deny that most kinds of moral evil refuse to fit so conveniently into the privation theory.”³³ He then argues that in many types of moral evil—such as in Cain’s murderous envy of his brother Abel—the principle of badness is not privation, but opposition to the good—in the case of Abel, opposition to Abel’s life and to the divine beneficence shown to Abel.³⁴ Privation-theorists, he says, have tried to argue that morally evil acts such as Cain’s murderous envy are still acts which aim at some good but do so in an inordinate way. Privation-theorists argue, in other words (Crosby recounts), that even such murderous or hateful acts are good to a certain extent but are bad because they lack order, they are “deprived of right moral order.”³⁵ Instead, he holds, we must see that in such cases what is aimed at is not a good, but what is subjectively satisfying. Cain wishes to be the only one who finds acceptance with God. This privileged position with God (according to Crosby) is not something Cain views as objectively good, but merely as subjectively satisfying. Thus:

The disorder is far more fundamental; it is the disorder of claiming something for oneself outside of the realm of *bonum*. Cain’s antagonism to Abel is not just an aversion to evil that is sound as far as it goes but misdirected. It is an antagonism to Abel that cannot be mitigated by being inserted into a love of *bonum* and an aversion to *malum*. The principle of badness in Cain’s antagonism is rather the opposition to the good of Abel’s life; and this principle cannot be reduced to any lack of right order in Cain’s will.³⁶

There are two problems with Crosby’s argument and his reply to my argument here. First, he mischaracterizes the privation position in general, and my position in particular. Secondly, his argument fails to refute the position that the moral evil in an evil act is privation of due order. Those who hold that evil as such is a privation have never denied that many moral evil acts consist precisely in opposition to a good. Murder and hatred of neighbor or of God, for example, consist in the will’s opposition to real good, and that is why they are evil (and murder also involves an external act opposed to a good). But there is no logical opposition at all between the claim that some morally evil acts consist in opposition to a real good and the claim that the evil in a morally evil act, that is, what makes it evil, is privation of due order. For, the reason why opposition to (hostility toward, antagonism to) real goods of one’s neighbor or God is bad is that one ought not to have such opposition or antagonism; in other words, such opposition or antagonism is bad precisely because it deviates from the moral standard for acts of will (and external acts carrying out of such acts of will).

³³Crosby, “Is All Evil . . .,” 203.

³⁴See *ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.*, 204. See my “Goodness of Creation,” 260–5.

³⁶Crosby, “Is All Evil . . .,” 205–06.

At several points Crosby claims that the proponent of the privation position holds that the moral evil is a disorder in an act that has some good in it, and therefore denies that the act is (ever) an antagonism toward a real good. The privation theorists, says Crosby, argue that it belongs to the nature of the will to aim at some good (real or apparent). And thus, according to Crosby, “the privation theorists say that the appearance of an action being hostile to some good is only an appearance; when you look more closely you can find only a disordered love of some good, which can be interpreted as a love deprived of right moral order.”³⁷ But this is to mischaracterize the privation position. From the proposition that the will naturally aims at some good (real or apparent) it simply does not follow, nor do any proponents of the privation position that I know of claim, that an action’s being hostile to some good is only an appearance. Suppose someone wills a good, such as status (the inordinate desire of which is pride). To attain or preserve that status this person may then have hostility toward a real good—toward his neighbor or perhaps even toward God. The fact that an act of will (and an external act carrying out such an act of will) stems from a love of some good does not in the least obviate the fact that it may be an opposition, antagonism, or hostility toward a real good.

Discussing how “privation theorists” interpret moral evil, Crosby asserts the following:

A distinguished Thomist with whom I recently discussed this question of evil, tried, as part of his defense of the privation theory, to identify in the case of each of the capital sins some good, something in itself really good, that is desired in the sinful act, and he *tried to locate the sin in the disordered circumstances under which the good is desired*. Thus he said that sexual union is in itself one of the goods of creation; sin comes only when, say, I seek this good with a person who is not of the opposite sex, or with whom I am not married. As for the killing of Abel by Cain, a privation theorist continuing along these lines would say that it is entirely in order to hate some *malum* which threatens the integrity of his (Cain’s) being. Thus Cain’s murder of his brother was a *disordered version of an act that in itself makes eminent moral sense*, namely hating evil; *it was not an aggressive turning against something perceived as really good*.³⁸

In the footnote at the end of this passage Crosby cites my article in *The Thomist* and says, “This is exactly the approach of Lee.”³⁹

³⁷Ibid., 204.

³⁸Ibid. (emphasis added).

³⁹Add page number.

But this is not my position. First, neither I nor other proponents of the privation position “try to locate the sin in the disordered circumstances under which the good is desired.” That formulation suggests that the privation position is a type of situationalism, according to which the act itself is good or indifferent but its defect lies only in its being done in certain circumstances. Traditionally, the components of a human act have been divided into object, end, and circumstances, and those who believe that there are moral absolutes (specific, exceptionless moral norms) have said that there are certain acts which are morally evil because of their object, while other acts (those not always wrong) may be wrong due to their end or their circumstances. In several places I have defended this position, namely, that there are moral absolutes or specific exceptionless moral norms.⁴⁰ However, neither I nor other privation theorists hold that hatred of God or neighbor (or murderous envy, which Crosby discusses) is wrong only because of its circumstances; we regard it as evil *secundum se*, or evil without exception. It is true that in my article I said, “Hatred is an act which in some circumstances is appropriate.”⁴¹ But the next two sentences make it clear what I meant by that: “We should hate whatever is really harmful to us—but that, of course, does not include either God, our neighbor, or ourselves. *What makes hatred of God or of a human person evil is that such acts are directed toward objects to which they should not be directed.*”⁴² Hence my position—and no doubt that of most proponents of the privation position—has always been that hatred of neighbor or of God, or murderous envy, is evil because of its object, not just because of its circumstances.

The last sentence in the above quotation, too, mischaracterizes my position. Crosby writes: “Thus Cain’s murder of his brother was a disordered version of an act that in itself makes eminent moral sense, namely hating evil; it was not an aggressive turning against something perceived as really good.” On the contrary, I hold that Cain’s murderous choice was indeed a hatred of what he viewed as in some sense evil, as threatening his own good, but it simply does not follow from this that it was not an aggressive turning against something (also) perceived as really good. Someone who envies another does view the other as in one respect bad or evil—as threatening his own status—but also, of course, he may realize

⁴⁰For example, see Patrick Lee, *Abortion and Unborn Human Life* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), chap. 5; Patrick Lee, “Are There Exceptionless Moral Norms?” in *Bioethics: A Culture War*, ed. Nicholas C. Lund-Mofese and Michael Kelly (New York: University Press of America, 2004), 31–41; Patrick Lee, “Personhood, Dignity, Suicide, and Euthanasia,” *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 1 (2001): 329–44; Patrick Lee and Robert P. George, “The Wrong of Abortion,” in *Contemporary Debates in Applied Ethics*, ed. Andrew I. Cohen and Christopher Wellman (New York: Blackwell, 2005), 13–26.

⁴¹Lee, “Goodness of Creation,” 264.

⁴²*Ibid.* (emphasis added).

at the same time that the person is still good in himself, but decides to harm, or even destroy the other insofar as he views him as bad because he endangers the possession of something he desires (namely, status). Later, Crosby again mischaracterizes the privation position when he says, "Cain's antagonism to Abel is not just an aversion to evil that is sound as far as it goes but misdirected. It is an antagonism to Abel that cannot be *mitigated* by being inserted into a love of *bonum* and an aversion to *malum*."⁴³ But to say that what makes an act evil is a privation, a privation of order or conformity with the standard of moral goodness, is in no way to mitigate the evil.

In short, the morally evil act Crosby discusses does consist in opposition to what is good. But why is such opposition evil? What do we mean when we say that such opposition is evil? In what does the evil of such an opposition consist? The answer, I maintain, is: lack of order to the moral standard. To say that they are evil is to say that one ought not to oppose the good of God, neighbor, or self, and that such acts therefore deviate from the moral standard.

Whether the will by its nature aims at good, or on the contrary can aim at something under another aspect is a distinct question from whether evil as such is a privation. In my article in *The Thomist* I examined that issue (about the proper object of the will) in order to answer the question: if evil as such is a privation, then what can be the origin of a morally evil act? I wanted to counter the thought that we must have in us a tendency toward evil as such, that there is in us a type of "dark side." (I do not attribute such a position to Crosby.) One could deny that the will by its nature aims at the good (although I think this would be a mistake for other reasons) and still hold that what makes morally evil acts evil is lack of order toward the moral standard (and one could hold various positions on what that moral standard is).

Still, Crosby's argument against the proposition that the will as such aims at the good (not moral good, of course, but the perfective) is unconvincing. He explains Cain's motivation to kill Abel as follows: "Such a one need not be driven to murder Abel on the grounds that Abel's acceptance with God detracts from his own possible acceptance with God: he may simply want to be *the only one* who finds acceptance with God and may have murderous hatred towards any who contest him being the only acceptable one. . . . He may say that sharing the divine favor with others does not distress him on the grounds that it reduces his share of the divine favor [presumably what those who say that Cain viewed Abel as obstructing some good for Abel must say] but rather on the grounds that it eliminates him as the only acceptable one."⁴⁴ But, surely, even on Crosby's

⁴³Crosby, "Is All Evil . . .," 205.

⁴⁴Ibid.

analysis, it seems clear that Cain is viewing *being the only acceptable one* as a good for himself, and is thus viewing Abel as impeding that.

In the next paragraph Crosby writes: “Can you plausibly say that he [Cain] is repelling what he takes to be a threat to the integrity of his being? Hardly, because, as we just said, you would talk right past him if you explained to him why Abel does not really threaten the integrity of his being. Cain does not think that he will be deprived or harmed by Abel’s acceptance with God; he rather thinks that the privileged position that he claims for himself will be blocked by Abel’s acceptance.”⁴⁵ But it seems clear that this privileged position that he “arrogates to himself” is being viewed as a good, as in some sense improving his condition. That fits precisely with a distorted view of status—status which involves unduly excelling others, being the best, or the only one. Crosby claims in the following passage that Cain does not think of the privileged position as a *bonum*. Rather, Crosby says, “it is something that he arrogates to himself, but not under the aspect of *bonum*.”⁴⁶ He later explains that it is viewed as “subjectively satisfying” rather than as good or perfective. I do not wish to deny that there is any distinction between what is “subjectively satisfying” and what is objectively good. Such a distinction can be rightly made. Still, what Crosby and others refer to as “subjectively satisfying” must have some element that appears to be good, or is good (that is, fulfilling, perhaps joined with a distortion or privation). To be satisfying it must be viewed as having some feature which satisfies, and the feature it has that satisfies (or seems to) is thus viewed as improving in some way—perhaps not overall or in the long run, but only just now—one’s condition, which means it is viewed as perfective. Crosby claims that “I can pursue something subjectively satisfying in the full consciousness that it is not really perfective of me at all, that is, I can pursue it in the absence of any perceived *ratio boni*.”⁴⁷ And as an example he cites the heavy smoker, “who lights up, not because he is under the illusion that another smoke promotes his real well-being, but because it is subjectively satisfying for him.”⁴⁸ But having certain types of sensations can seem perfective of my well-being, even though the fact that they are fragmented from the larger activities or conditions of which they should form a part means that they lead to overall harm (privation) for myself or others, and are thus disordered pleasures. The smoker or the drinker may just want that certain feeling; but having such a feeling is viewed by him as really improving his condition, even though it may come at the cost of harming his overall health, or relationships with others, and so on. Pleasurable sensations are

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., 206.

⁴⁸Ibid.

viewed as fulfilling, even though certain ones in certain contexts involve unduly setting aside or harming other goods and are therefore disordered and morally wrong to pursue. Consider one's desire to feel moderately well as opposed to feeling sick—this is perfectly reasonable even apart from whether one is really healthy or really sick; that is, being healthy includes as one component feeling well. Problems arise if one subordinates one's overall health or relationships with others, or other goods, to feeling well. In other words, feeling well (or having a good feeling) should be pursued only as connected with the larger good or goods (health and perhaps also inner harmony of different aspects of the self) of which it is a part. If not pursued in that way, then it is a disordered pleasure and thus not simply good.⁴⁹

The relevance of this claim to the present issue, namely whether moral evil is a privation, is suggested by the conclusion Crosby draws from it: "Now I say that to destroy a fellow human being because his continued existence is subjectively dissatisfying to you is to have a hostility to the good of his life that cannot be reasonably explained in terms of a lack of due order in a will that remains directed to a *bonum*. The principle of badness of your action is precisely this hostility to a good, it is precisely this contrary opposition to a good."⁵⁰ The relevance of this issue to the question of the nature of evil concerns the origin of moral evil. If moral evil as such is a privation, then we need an explanation of how it originates. If it is a privation, then it cannot be *per se* caused by good, and so it must be caused, even in an act of will, by an agent's moving toward some other good (or apparent good) to which an evil is attached. In the case of the will, this might take the form (among others) of moving toward a good but by means of removing (willing against) some good—thus direct, though caused, hostility toward a good.

On Crosby's account, the desire for the destruction of a good (the destruction of one's brother's life, for example) or the desire for something not viewed as good (being the only one acceptable to God) seems to be an ultimate for which there is no explanation. Either that, or it is ultimately explained as a product of

⁴⁹Thus, the pleasures of the sadist or child molester are in themselves bad; it is false to say that such pleasures are bad only because of the harm or pain involved in their total contexts. It is false to say: "It was bad for him to cause so much pain, but at least he enjoyed it." Pleasure is secondary, an aspect of a larger situation or condition (such as health, physical and emotional); what is central is what is really fulfilling. Pleasure is not a good like understanding or health, which are goods or perfections by themselves, that is, good in themselves even if in a context that is overall bad or if accompanied by many bads. Pleasure is a good; for, a fulfilling activity or condition is better with it than without it. But pleasure is unlike full-fledged goods in that it is not a genuine good apart from some other, fulfilling activity or condition. In short, pleasure is genuinely a good, but if and only if attached to another condition or activity that is already good.

⁵⁰Crosby, "Is All Evil . . ." 206.

pride (“He [Cain] finds it subjectively satisfying to be the only one acceptable to God, it flatters his pride to occupy the privileged position; this is the way the will departs from every *ratio boni*.”) But surely the sheer desire for destruction of a good is a departure from what is created and natural and thus does require explanation. On the other hand, if there is some aspect of our nature responsible for such irrationality or destructiveness, then there seems to be something deep within us—a seemingly positive “dark side” not reducible to a privation and so apparently in need of sustained and independent causality by something or some things other than God—a position that does, despite Crosby’s intentions, move in the direction of full-blown Manicheism.

IV.

In sum, I believe John Crosby’s article provides a service in that it reminds us of the powerful impact that evil things and acts have (although this is fully consistent with the position that evil as such is a privation). However, none of the objections Crosby raises against the position that evil as such is a privation is convincing. The first argument mistakenly assumes that the subject of a privation must be contemporaneous with the privation, and in any case does not at all support the view that evil is ever something positive. Neither the second argument (from pain) nor the third argument (from moral evil) succeeds. The repugnance of pain—what makes it horrendous at times—is quite consistent with its being good in the appropriate context (that is, given that an injury, which is an evil or bad, is occurring). And the fact that some morally evil acts are not just failures to love the good but are oppositions to a good (a fact well known, and even emphasized by the most able and ardent defenders of the proposition that evil as such is a privation) does nothing to show that here there is an evil quality or positive something making the act evil—opposition to God, or to a fundamental good of one’s neighbor or oneself is evil because it deviates from the standard for what is due an act of will or moral act. Moreover, in none of his arguments concerning different types of evil has Crosby explicated the intension of the term “evil” or “bad.” But in order to provide a convincing case that some things, events, or acts have a positive quality signified by the word “evil” he must show that “evil” means something other than “repugnant” (as in pain), “having a privation in it,” or “causing a privation.”

Having examined Crosby’s arguments against the position that evil as such is a privation, let us now contrast them, briefly, with one of the basic arguments for that position. This argument does not leave the intension of the term “evil” (or “bad”) unspecified. Rather, it clarifies or uncovers the concepts already used in ordinary language, and builds an argument from there. There are various meanings of the word “good” (and corresponding senses for “bad” or “evil”), but

two fundamental senses are important for our purposes here. First, good and bad sometimes mean, respectively, “causes pleasant experiences” or “causes repugnant experiences.” These are the senses of the expressions when one says, for example, “Chocolate is good, and Brussels sprouts are bad.” While saying that Brussels sprouts are bad in this sense, one might also add that they are good, insofar as they are some of God’s creatures (if one is a metaphysician), or that they are good for you (as someone interested in nutrition). But aside from this sense of “good,” which one can call “sensibly good,”⁵¹ what is the other main sense of “good”? What is the sense of “good” that we are primarily interested in here, where we say that life, health, generous acts and so on are good, whereas death, sickness, murderous envy, and so on, are not good? It is clear, first of all, that good is what Peter Geach called an “attributive notion.” That is, “good” does not directly name some property or nature that is found in common in various entities. The expression does not have the same meaning when predicated of various types of entities; rather, the meaning of the expression changes or adapts according to that of which it is predicated.⁵² Bernard Williams used the following example to show this: It makes sense to argue as follows: “Tweetie is yellow; Tweetie is a bird; therefore, Tweetie is a yellow bird.” However, one cannot argue: “Joe is good; Joe is a baseball player; therefore, Joe is a good baseball player.” The reason why is that, while “yellow” and “bird” directly signify properties or natures held in common by various things, “good” is an attributive expression.⁵³ It signifies, not directly a nature or property, but a way or extent of having other properties, different properties in different cases. Evidently, as these examples illustrate, it signifies “fulfilling the standards appropriate for a specific type of thing.” This is why we can intelligibly speak of a “good burglar” while adding that being a burglar is not a good (meaning morally good) thing. “Good” does not signify some distinctive property, but the possession of whatever properties a thing (or act) must have to fulfill the standards appropriate to the kind of thing (or act) it is. In other words, to say that something is good is to say that it fulfills its possibilities or potentialities, and since the potentialities of a thing (or act) vary according to the kind of thing (or act) it is, the word “good” shifts its meaning in proportion to the kind of thing it is predicated of. How to explain this basic point, and how much to infer from it (and how to apply it to natural entities versus artificial entities) are subjects for further discussion. And there are other senses of the word “good” derivative from this one, for example: (a) having some

⁵¹Germain Grisez, *Beyond the New Theism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 289–90.

⁵²See Peter Geach, “Good and Evil,” in *Theories of Ethics*, ed. Philippa Foot (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 64–74.

⁵³See Bernard Williams, *Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 40–50.

degree of due fulfillment, but not complete, (b) what causes good in the primary sense, (c) what is a sign of good in the primary sense, and so on.⁵⁴ But it is plain that there is this meaning of the word “good,” and various senses derivative from it. It also is clear that given this sense of the word “good,” the opposite of this sense would be “lacking what is due the kind of thing one is.” Of course, as noted above, there will be bad things and bad acts, but to call them “bad” will mean either that they have a privation in them, or that they cause privation. So, what Crosby would need to show in order to refute the position that evil as such is a privation is that there is a different sense of evil besides evil (or bad) as repugnant to the senses or emotions, and evil (or bad) as privation (or having a privation, causing a privation). I do not think Crosby has done that. If that is so, then the simpler position is the one that makes do with these two basic meanings of the word “good” (and others derivative from these) and the two corresponding opposites for “evil” or “bad” (and their derivatives).

Franciscan University of Steubenville
Steubenville, Ohio

⁵⁴Another important derivative sense is the meaning of the word “dignity,” which means, roughly, that in a being which makes it such that it deserves a certain type of respect.