MORAL EVIL, PRIVATION, AND GOD

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Abstract. On a traditional account, God causes sinful acts and their properties, insofar as they are real, but God does not cause sin, since only the sinner causes the privations in virtue of which such acts are sinful. After explicating this *privation solution*, I defend it against two objections: (1) that God would cause the sinful act's privation simply by causing the act and its positive features; and (2) that there is no principled way to deny that God causes the privation yet still affirm that the sinner causes it. I close by considering a limitation of the privation solution.

I. DIVINE UNIVERSAL CAUSALITY, MORAL EVIL, AND THE PRIVATION SOLUTION.

According to the traditional theistic doctrine of divine universal causality (DUC), necessarily, God causes all being — all entities — distinct from himself.[1] An implication of DUC is that God causes all creaturely actions, since such actions are entities distinct from God. But some creaturely actions

1 For classical proponents of DUC, see Anselm, *Monologion* 7 and 20; Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 2.15.6 and 2.21.3, *Summa theologiae* 1.8.1 and 1.44.2; and Suarez, *Disputationes metaphysicae* 22.1.25. There are many contemporary affirmations of DUC, but for a particularly clear instance, see Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 154-6.

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are sins. So, given DUC, it looks as if God causes sins. And yet most theists wish to deny that God causes sins.[2] Hence, an apparent conflict between two common theistic claims: that God causes all being distinct from himself, and that God does not cause sins.

How might this conflict be resolved? Although classical theists such as Anselm and Aquinas clearly affirmed that God causes the *act* of sin, they denied that God causes sin, for they held that only the sinner, not God, causes the privation in virtue of which such acts are sinful. Thus, in *On the Fall of the Devil*, Anselm writes:

> Insofar as the will and its movement or turning are real they are good and come from God. But insofar as they are deprived of some justice they ought to have, they are not absolutely bad but bad in a sense, and what is bad in them does not come from the will of God or from God as he moves the will. Evil is injustice, which is only evil and evil is nothing. … Therefore, what is real is made by God and comes from him; what is nothing, that is evil, is caused by the guilty and comes from him.[3]

Similar to Anselm, Aquinas holds that

> God is the cause of every action, in so far as it is an action. — But sin denotes a being and an action with a defect: and this defect is from a created cause, viz. the free-will, as falling away from the order of the First Agent, viz. God. Consequently this defect is not reduced to God as its cause, but to the free will … Accordingly God is the cause of the act of sin: and yet He is not the cause of sin, because he does not cause the act to have a defect.[4]

In his reply to the second objection of the same article, Aquinas states his approach this way:

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2 To take two examples, see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1-2.79.1, and the Westminster Confession, ch. 3, wherein it is denied that God is the author of sin.

3 Anselm, *On the Fall of the Devil* 20, trans. Ralph McInerny, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 223. See also Anselm's *De concordia* 1.7.

4 Aquinas, *ST* 1-2.79.2. Earlier in the same article, Aquinas had remarked that "The act of sin is both a being and and act; and in both respects it is from God. Because every being, whatever the mode of its being, must be derived from the First Being, as Dionysius declares." Aquinas makes this same point at *De malo* 3.2. All quotations from Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* are taken from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Father of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1948).

> Not only the act, but also the defect, is reduced to man as its cause, which defect consists in man not being subject to Whom he ought to be, although he does not intend this principally. Wherefore man is the cause of the sin: while God is cause of the act, in such a way, that nowise is He the cause of the defect accompanying the act, so that He is not the cause of the sin.[5]

What, then, are Anselm and Aquinas proposing?[6]

As I understand this *privation solution*, any sin of action consists of two elements, an act, and a defect in virtue of which the act is sinful and in which the act's sinfulness consists.[7] We can certainly speak of bad or sinful acts, but since the acts are bad or sinful in virtue of defects distinct from (i.e., not identical to) the acts, to cause a sin of action requires causing both the act and the defect. As the universal cause, God causes the act and all its positive properties, since these are entities distinct from God. But the defect is not an entity, and so is not something God must be said to cause just in virtue of DUC. Rather than an entity, the defect is a privation, a lack of something that should belong to the act. Anselm characterizes the privation as a lack of justice. In the passages cited above, Aquinas characterizes the defect as the act's lack of proper order, or subjection, to God. In other places, Aquinas speaks of the act's lack of conformity to the rule of reason or the divine law.[8] In what follows, I will talk simply in terms of the act's lack of conformity to the moral standard, however that standard is understood. The claim, then, is that, while the sinner causes both the act and the defect, God causes the act and its positive properties, but not the defect. Thus, the sinner, but not God, causes the sin.

Consider, more formally, the argument with which we began:

(1) God causes all creaturely actions (an implication of DUC).

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5 Aquinas, *ST* 1-2.79.2 ad 2.

6 Their approach was, in fact, common within the scholastic tradition, and was also endorsed by Descartes, for instance, in his Fourth Meditation.

7 As I am using the term, a "sin of action" is any sin, which consists, at least in part, in a positive act or choice. I use this term rather than the more familiar "sin of commission," because we often contrast as contraries "sins of commission" and "sins of omission." But some sins of omission might include a positive choice on the part of the sinner not to do that which is morally required. That choice would constitute (or partially constitute) a "sin of action."

8 See *De malo* 1.3 ad 13, and *De malo* 2.2.

(2) Some creaturely actions are sins.

(3) So, God causes sins.

We can now see how the privation solution enables a response. There is an ambiguity in the term "creaturely actions." Since a sin of action consists of an act along with the act's lack of conformity to the moral standard, premise (2) is true only if "creaturely actions" means actions along with their lacks of conformity to the standard. Yet, according to this meaning of "creaturely actions," premise (1) is false; for God does not cause acts along with their lacks of conformity to the standard, but only the acts themselves. Premise (1) is, thus, true, only if "creaturely actions" means just creaturely acts, not including any lacks of conformity to the moral standard those acts may have. In short, there is no consistent meaning of "creaturely actions" on which both premises of the argument are true. And, of course, if the premises equivocate on the meaning of "creaturely actions," then the argument commits a fallacy.[9]

If defensible, the privation solution not only enables us to block the inference from DUC to God's causing sin. For those wishing to deny that God causes sin, it also provides a potential way of making sense of passages in scripture that describe God, not merely as allowing or permitting sinful acts, but as actively at work in their production.[10] Given the privation solution, one might say that God *is* actively at work in the production of sinful acts, since he causes every act of sin; yet God does not cause sin, since he does not cause the defect in which an act's sinfulness consists. The solution allows us to say, on the contrary, that, while causing acts of sin, God only permits sin since God merely allows the defects in virtue of which these acts are sinful.

9 We have seen that Aquinas wants to deny that God causes sins. But some readers, sympathetic with the general thrust of Aquinas's solution, may be happy to allow that God causes "sin," where "sin" denotes only what I'm calling the act of sin, and not also the privation in which the act's sinfulness consists. Such readers will argue that there is no problem in God's causing "sin," so understood, provided that God not cause an act's sinfulness, or that in virtue of which it is a sin. While a reader who takes this approach will not find the conclusion of the argument set out above problematic, he will still make use of our solution to reconcile DUC with his denial that God causes that in virtue of which a sin is sinful.

10 See, for example, Isaiah 63:17: "Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?" Obviously, the proper interpretation of such scriptural passages is a controversial matter.

Despite its appeal, some may wonder, initially, whether the solution is even consistent. For DUC claims that God causes all entities distinct from himself. Yet the solution, though it denies that God causes the privation in a sin of action, appears to speak of the privation as if it were an entity. For instance, just above, the privation was spoken of as one of two elements or constituents in a sin of action; and it was spoken of as caused by the sinner. Aren't constituents of things, and objects of causation, entities? And if they are, won't the proponent of DUC be required to say that God causes the privation after all?

Appearances notwithstanding, a proponent of the solution need not admit that privations are entities. Consider Aquinas's distinction, borrowed from Aristotle, between two senses of "to be:"

> Note then that Aristotle says there are two proper uses of the term being: firstly, generally for whatever falls into one of Aristotle's ten basic categories of thing, and secondly, for whatever makes a proposition true. These differ: in the second sense anything we can express in an affirmative proposition, however unreal, is said to be; in this sense lacks and absences are, since we say that absences are opposed to presences, and blindness exists in an eye. But in the first sense only what is real is, so that in this sense blindness and such are not beings.[11]

So, we speak truly when we say that privations, like blindness, exist. But that does not make privations real; it does not make them entities, the sort of things that fall within Aristotle's categories, or within the scope of what DUC says God causes. To say that a privation exists is not to say that there is something real there, an entity, but rather that what should be there is missing.[12] Now, any human act issuing from reason and will should conform to the moral standard. If such an act does not so conform, then what should be there is missing. And, since, according to the privation solution, an act's sinfulness

11 The passage is from Aquinas's *De ente et essentia*, 1. Translation from *Aquinas: Selected Philosophical Writings*. Trans. Timothy McDermott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 91-2.

12 Accordingly, someone uncomfortable with the language "X exists" or "There is an X," where X does not name an entity, can understand "X exists" or "There is an X" as paraphrases of "There does not exist some Y." For example, "There is a lack of conformity to the moral standard" could be understood as a paraphrase of "There is not a relation of conformity to the moral standard." Of course, to characterize the lack of conformity as not just a lack but also a privation is to say that the relation of conformity to the moral standard ought to exist in the act so deprived (or between the act and the standard).

consists precisely in its lack of conformity to the moral standard, we can say that this lack is an "element" within the sin of action. But that doesn't imply that the lack of conformity is a real entity, like the act itself. Similarly, we can speak of the cause of a privation — as when we say that a man's blindness was caused by too much sunlight — without thereby committing ourselves to the claim that the privation, like the man himself, is an entity. A cause of a privation is just whatever is explanatorily responsible for the fact that the deprived thing we are talking about lacks what it ought to have.

Yet even if we put this initial worry aside, there are formidable objections to the privation solution, objections that require more extended discussion. For starters, the privation solution depends on a privation account of moral evil, according to which the badness of a morally bad act consists, not in the positive act or any of its positive properties, but rather in a privation of conformity to the moral standard. While such an account has its contemporary defenders, it also has a number of critics, whose objections must be answered for a complete defense of the solution.[13]

In the remainder of this paper, I set aside a defense of a privation account of moral evil in order to address two objections that threaten the privation solution even if a privation account of moral evil can be defended. Despite the gravity of these objections, they have not received much attention by contemporary philosophers. But they did find an able spokesman in the early Leibniz.[14] According to the first objection, even if we allow that the badness in a sin of action consists in a lack of conformity to the moral standard, God will be the cause of this lack of conformity simply by causing the act and its positive properties. After all, it is because the act and its positive features are what they are that the act fails to conform to the standard. Moreover, the lack of conformity would seem simply to follow on the act and its positive features. As Leibniz puts it, "The privation is nothing but a simple result or infallible con-

13 I discuss these objections, and attempt to answer them, in my "The Privation Account of Moral Evil: A Defense," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 55 (2015): 271-86.

14 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi: Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil*, 1671-1678. Edited and translated by Robert C. Seligh, Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). For helpful discussion of Leibniz's views on the privation account of evil, see Samuel Newlands, "Leibniz on Privations, Limitations, and the Metaphysics of Evil," in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52 (2014), 281-308.

sequence of the positive aspect."[15] Thus, says Leibniz, "It would be a joke to say that [someone] is the author of everything real without … being the author of the privative aspect."[16] Of course, if God is the cause of the privation as well as the act and its positive features, then the privation solution fails.

The second objection is that appeal to privation as a way of blocking the claim that God causes sin will make it impossible to affirm that the sinner causes sin. For if God can cause the act and its positive features without causing the privation, won't the same be true of the sinner? As Leibniz puts it, "I am amazed these people did not go further and try to persuade us that man himself is not the author of sin, since he is only the author of the physical or real aspect, the privation being something for which there is no author."[17] Of course, proponents of the privation solution insist that the privation *does* have a cause, namely, the sinner. But how? As Samuel Newlands asks, "If God does not cause absences, how can we? And if we can, why cannot God?"[18] Without an answer to these questions, the privation solution appears feeble, indeed.

Fortunately, I think both objections can be answered, and I explain how, treating each objection in turn, in sections two and three below. I conclude in section four by pointing out a limitation of the privation solution concerning its usefulness in responding to the problem of evil. As may be clear from the foregoing, my aim is to offer a partial speculative defense of a solution along the lines suggested by Anselm and Aquinas, not to offer an exposition or interpretation of the texts in which they present their solutions.

One final note before continuing. The problem of this paper never gets off the ground without the assumption that DUC, with its implication that our acts are caused by God, is consistent with our having whatever sort of freedom and power is required for us to be morally responsible for our acting or failing to act. Were this assumption false, DUC would be incompatible with our committing sins, since we cannot sin unless we are morally responsible. But if DUC is incompatible with our committing sins, then, of course, there could be no worry that, given DUC, God causes our sins. Since the problem of the

15 Leibniz, 113.
16 Leibniz, 111.
17 Leibniz, 113.
18 Newlands, 288.

paper doesn't get off the ground without the assumption that DUC is consistent with our having the freedom and power requisite for moral responsibility, I will adopt this assumption throughout the paper.

II. THAT GOD DOES NOT CAUSE THE BADNESS IN SINFUL ACTS SIMPLY BY CAUSING THE ACT AND ITS POSITIVE FEATURES.

According to the privation solution, the badness or sinfulness of a sin of action consists in its lack of conformity to the moral standard. This is a crucial part of the explanation of how the sinner alone causes sin, even though both the sinner and God cause the act of sin. Yet, in order for the privation solution to succeed, it must be shown further that, unlike the act itself, the act's privation of conformity to the moral standard is caused by the sinner alone, and not also by God. This may seem a difficult task. For, to begin with our first objection, even though a lack of conformity to the moral standard is not an entity, and hence not something God causes as an implication of DUC; one might, like Leibniz, still think that God at least indirectly causes an act of sin's lack of conformity simply by causing the act and its positive properties. This first objection admits of at least four variations. After offering specific responses to the first three, I will offer a response to the fourth which is effective against all of them.

First Version. An initial version of this objection points out that the moral standard being what it is, it is not possible for, say, an "intentional killing of the innocent" to exist without lacking conformity to the standard.[19] Since, given the standard, it is not possible even for God to cause such acts without their lacks of conformity accompanying, this initial version of the objection maintains that God's causing such acts causes also the privations in which their sinfulness consists.

This initial version appears to rest on something like the following principle:

19 Here I assume for the sake of discussion that all intentional killings of the innocent, in fact, lack conformity to the moral standard. One who disagrees can replace my example with his or her own.

Principle A: If, in the circumstances, it is not possible for *x* to exist (or hold or obtain) without *y*'s existing (or holding or obtaining) and *z* causes *x*, then *z* causes *y*.

Fortunately, I think it pretty clear that Principle A should be rejected; for it has absurd entailments. For example, on the traditional theistic assumption that it is impossible for anything contingent to exist unless God exists, were Principle A true, I couldn't cause anything contingent without thereby causing God. But, surely, it is absurd to hold that whenever I cause something contingent I also cause God. And it is just as absurd even if we add that I am fully aware that it is not possible for the thing I cause to exist without God's existing. So, Principle A should be rejected, and with it this initial version of the objection.[20]

Second Version. A more plausible principle might be the following:

Principle B: If *x* is a logically sufficient (that is, necessitating) cause of *y*, and *z* causes *x*, then *z* indirectly causes *y*.[21]

Now, suppose that an act of sin, such as an "intentional killing of the innocent," is a logically sufficient cause of its lack of conformity to the moral standard. By DUC and Principle B, it would follow that God indirectly causes the act's lack of conformity. Thus, Principle B together with the claim that the act of sin causes its lack of conformity gives rise to a second version of the objection.

Yet, the claim that the act of sin causes its lack of conformity to the moral standard is highly questionable. After all, we do not typically speak this way

20 Of course, an analogous *reductio* of Principle A is available for Platonists about numbers, properties, propositions, states of affairs, etc. Since the Platonist takes these to be necessary beings, it is not possible for anything I cause to exist without their existing, and so, given Principle A and Platonism, I would cause the number 2 any time I caused anything.

21 The adjectival phrase "logically sufficient (that is, necessitating)" is needed in the present context. For, we are considering an objection to the privation account to the effect that the account implies that God indirectly causes sin. But, if we omitted the phrase, then anyone who held to the standard theistic claim that God causes all creaturely substances would be committed by the principle to God's indirectly causing sin, at least given the assumption that creaturely substances cause sin. Such commitment is avoided by including the phrase in question, provided one denies that creaturely substances are logically sufficient (necessitating) causes of sin.

in analogous cases where things lack conformity to their standards. Consider, for example, a newly built house that lacks conformity to the design of its architect. Would we normally think of the house as causing the lack of conformity to its standard, the architect's design? That seems doubtful. Instead, I suspect most would say that the cause of the house's lack of conformity was the builder's failing to follow the design, or perhaps some feature of the house in respect of which it lacks conformity. Since, it seems odd to say that the house causes its lack of conformity to its standard, so also is it odd to say that an act of sin causes its lack of conformity. For this reason, the second version falters.

Third Version. But what if the immediate cause of the lack of conformity were not the act itself, but some property or feature belonging to, but distinct from, the act; say, the property of being done for the sake of harming someone who is innocent, or the property of being opposed to the good of innocent human life?[22] This proposal seems initially more plausible. Consider the example of the house, above. While it is odd to say that the house causes its lack of conformity to its design, it is not at all odd to say that the house lacks conformity to its design *in virtue of* some property, for example, the property of having 7 foot high ceilings when the design calls for 8 foot ceilings. If "in virtue of" is interpreted in such cases as expressing a causal relationship of the property to the lack of conformity, then perhaps there is precedent for thinking that a thing's lack of conformity to its standard can be caused by a property belonging to, but distinct from, the thing. If such a property were a logically sufficient cause of an act of sin's lack of conformity to the moral standard, then by DUC and Principle B, God would indirectly cause the lack of conformity by causing the property in question. Hence, a third version of the objection.

Yet, a proponent of the privation solution can respond to this third version by simply denying that, in such cases, "in virtue of" expresses a causal relationship. To say, then, that an act lacks conformity "in virtue of" its property of being opposed to the good of innocent human life is not to claim

22 I am not asserting that there are such positive properties, understood as entities distinct from the acts. I am only considering the implications were there to be such. One who prefers a different example of such a property may think in terms of his or her preferred example.

that the property *causes* the lack of conformity. Rather, it can plausibly be understood as claiming that the property is that *in respect of which* the act lacks conformity. Similarly, we can deny that the property of having 7 foot high ceilings causes the house to lack conformity to its design. Instead, we can simply say that the house lacks conformity in the height of its ceilings, or in respect of their height.

Fourth Version. While this interpretation of "in virtue of" may be plausible, and while it circumvents the third version of the objection; the move is, arguably, not enough to save the privation solution. For, won't God at least indirectly cause an act of sin's lack of conformity just by causing that *in respect of which* the act lacks conformity, even if that which God causes is not, strictly speaking, a cause of the lack of conformity. With this question we have a fourth and final version of the objection. And the answer to the question will be "yes" if we accept a new principle:

> *Principle C:* If *x* lacks conformity to its standard in respect of feature *y*, and *z* causes *y*, then *z* indirectly causes *x*'s lack of conformity to its standard.

Fortunately, I think there is good reason to reject Principle C. Moreover, this reason constitutes a very general grounds for denying that God causes an act's lack of conformity to the moral standard simply by causing the act and its positive features. Thus, the reason also counts against the earlier versions of the objection.

To appreciate the reason, observe that, in order to get an act's lack of conformity to the moral standard, we need more than the act and the properties or features in respect of which the act lacks conformity. We also need the standard itself. It takes *both* the act with its positive features *and* the moral standard in order for the act to lack conformity to the moral standard. But this point suggests that a cause does not cause the lack of conformity to the standard *simply* by causing the act and its positive features. To cause the act and its positive features is not enough.

The foregoing reasoning is an application of a more general point. To get a relation R between two *relata a* and *b*, or the lack of a relation R between *a* and *b*, or the truth of a relational proposition "*a*R*b*," one needs both *relata*, *a* and *b*, and all their relevant properties. But, for this reason, a cause C can-

not plausibly be thought to cause R, or the lack of R, or the truth of "*a*R*b*" simply by causing one of these *relata* and its relevant properties. Suppose, for example, that Cecilia makes a sandwich and Elizabeth makes an omelet and Elizabeth's omelet weighs more than Cecilia's sandwich. It is, of course, true that Elizabeth has made an omelet that weighs however many ounces. And it is true that she has made an omelet that weighs more than Cecilia's sandwich. But has Elizabeth, simply by causing her omelet and its relevant properties, caused her omelet's *being heavier than* Cecilia's sandwich (or caused the truth of "Elizabeth's omelet is heavier than Cecilia's sandwich")? I think not. Nor, if a spider spins a web and a robin builds a nest, and the spider's web is more beautiful than the robin's nest, does the spider cause its web's being more beautiful (or the truth of "The web is more beautiful than the nest"). The reason for these negative judgments is that to get the relations or relational truths, you need both *relata* and their relevant properties. So, it is implausible to think that Elizabeth or the spider causes the relations or truths simply by causing one of the *relata* and its properties.

Nor would it seem to make any difference if we added that Elizabeth *knows* that the omelet she is making is heavier than Cecilia's sandwich. For that knowledge does not make her any more responsible for the sandwich and its properties, which are needed every bit as much as the omelet, in order to give rise to the relation. Nor would it even matter if we said that Elizabeth made her omelet a certain weight in order that it be heavier than the sandwich. For, while her goal certainly explains *why she made it the weight she did*, that goal, together with her making the omelet the given weight, does not bring about the omelet's actually being heavier, since that relation depends also and immediately on the sandwich and its weight, which Elizabeth plays no role in bringing about.[23]

Perhaps, Elizabeth could plausibly be thought to cause the omelet's being heavier than the sandwich, if she had made the sandwich as well as the

23 Notice also that it is not significant to the judgments about Elizabeth and the spider that the *relata* they don't cause (the sandwich and the nest), and their properties, are caused by something else (Cecilia and the Robin). The spider's web is less beautiful than God. God and God's unmatchable beauty has no cause. But the spider no more causes its web's being less beautiful than God than it causes its web's being more beautiful than the nest. And the reason is the same. All the spider has done is cause half of what gives rise to the relation.

omelet. In such a case, she would have caused all of that on which the relation follows. By the same token, it arguably *would* be enough for God to cause the lack of conformity to the moral standard if God caused not only the act of sin and its positive features, but also the moral standard to which the act fails to conform. But very many theists deny that God causes the moral standard, even if they believe that God shapes the content of that standard in certain ways. For even if a theist thinks, for example, that God brings it about that intentionally killing the innocent is wrong through a command, that command constitutes a moral standard for us only on the supposition that we must abide by God's commands. And it would be a very radical divine command theory which held that this most general norm to abide by God's commands is brought about only by God's commanding it. Suppose, alternatively, a moral theory that understands what we ought to do (or refrain from) to be determined by what's required to flourish given the nature we have. A theist may reasonably deny that the content of human nature is caused by God; human nature may be an idea that God has from all eternity prior to any causal act on his part. And even if a theist holds that the content of human nature is brought about by God, God will not have caused the moral standard unless God also brings about the truth of the very general principle that what a thing ought to do is determined by its nature, a claim which proponents of this sort of theory may deny. In short, very many theists will deny that God causes the moral standard. But, given this denial, just as God doesn't cause the lack of conformity to the standard simply by causing the act and its positive features, neither does he cause the lack of conformity by causing the act and its features along with the standard.[24]

24 How do these considerations bear on the first three versions of our first objection? With respect to the first version, they provide another reason for denying that, if God causes an act that cannot exist without a lack of conformity to the standard, then God causes the lack of conformity. For simply causing the act won't be enough to cause the lack of conformity, since it takes both the act and the standard to give rise to the lack of conformity. With respect to the second and third objections, these considerations give us additional reason to doubt that either the act or some property of the act causes its lack of conformity. For, again, it takes not only the act and its relevant properties, but also the moral standard, to give rise to the lack of conformity. And, of course, if neither the act nor its properties cause the lack of conformity, then God won't, by Principle B, cause the lack of conformity in virtue of causing the act and its positive properties.

The foregoing seems a welcome result. But did it prove too much? The privation solution requires relieving God of causal responsibility for the act's lack of conformity to the moral standard, but it also requires that the lack of conformity be imputable to the sinner. But, presumably, the sinner no more causes the moral standard than God does. So, if causing the lack of conformity requires causing the moral standard, then the sinner does not cause the lack of conformity either, and the privation solution fails.

Here we come up against our second objection. How can one plausibly deny that God causes the lack of conformity without at the same time making it impossible to affirm that the sinner causes it? Are there grounds for imputing the lack of conformity to the sinner and only the sinner?

III. HOW THE BADNESS OF SINFUL ACTS IS CAUSED BY THE SINNER ALONE.

According to the privation solution, in order to cause a sin of action, one needs to cause both the act of sin and the lack of conformity to the moral standard, in which the sinfulness of the act consists. I have argued that God does not cause a sinful act's lack of conformity simply by causing the act and its positive features. While this conclusion is necessary for preserving the privation solution, it also raises a question about the basis for our affirming that the sinner causes sin. For, if the simple fact that God causes the act and its positive features is not enough to make God cause of the lack of conformity, neither is the lack of conformity imputable to the sinner simply from the sinner's causing the act and its features. Moreover, holding that the sinner causes the moral standard will likely seem even less attractive to theists than holding that God causes the standard. Thus, it won't do to say that the sinner causes his act's lack of conformity by causing the moral standard along with his act.

Yet, I have not claimed that causing the lack of conformity requires causing the moral standard. What I have argued is that, to cause the lack of conformity, it is not enough simply to cause the act and its positive features. Causing the moral standard in addition to the act and its features would seem the most obvious and straightforward way for something to cause the lack of conformity. But there is another way. There is a way in which an agent might cause or account for a lack of conformity to a standard despite not causing

the standard. In what follows, I suggest an explanatory framework according to which, indeed, the sinner causes the lack of conformity, but God does not. Let us begin by considering some examples.

Suppose I make a kite for my daughters. The kite doesn't conform to FAA standards for commercial airliners. I built a kite that lacks conformity to FAA standards, and I am well aware of this fact. But have I caused the kite's lack of conformity to the standards? Have I caused the truth of "The kite doesn't conform to FAA standards"? No more, I think, than Elizabeth has caused her omelet's being heavier than Cecilia's sandwich.

Suppose, similarly, that I make a sled for my daughters to go sleigh riding. The sled lacks conformity to the standards for Olympic bobsleds. I have built a sled that lacks conformity to Olympic standards, but I have no more caused the sled's lack of conformity than I cause the kite's lack of conformity in the example above.

But now suppose I have been *hired* to build a sled for use in the Olympic bobsled competition. And suppose, again, that I build a sled that lacks conformity to Olympic standards. Although I did not cause those standards, I am, this time, responsible for my sled's lack of conformity to them. The lack of conformity is imputable to me, because, unlike before, I ought to have built a sled that conforms to those standards. I account for my sled's lack of conformity in virtue of my having neglected to build according to the standards to which I was responsible.

Notice that my claim here is not simply that this time, but not before, I am at fault for having built a sled that lacks conformity to Olympic standards. That much is true, but I want to claim further that this time, but not before, there is a way in which I, or my negligence, explains or accounts for the lack of conformity. The fact that I have an obligation to build according to the standards means that this time, but not before, I have responsibility for *whether* the sled conforms. When the sled does not conform, the lack of conformity is, thus, accounted for by my not having built a sled of the sort I was obliged to build.[25] My responsibility to abide by the standard compensates for my not having caused the standard and substitutes for my having caused it in the role of making me explanatorily accountable for the sled's lack of

25 I assume here a normal case wherein whether the sled conforms is within my power.

conformity to it. Even though I do not cause the standard, I have an obligation to act in conformity with it such that, when I don't, the lack of conformity is imputable to me.

Implicit in the foregoing suggestion is the idea that something can explain or causally account for an effect in virtue of not doing what it ought to have done. We often offer such explanations. "Why did she miss the jump shot?" "Because she didn't 'square up' beforehand." "Why did he fail the test?" "Because he didn't study." "Why did the dough not rise?" "Because she forgot to put yeast in." Such explanations include also the not-doings of non-rational, or non-moral, agents. "Why did he fall?" "Because the rope didn't hold." "Why is the mouse still in the basement?" "Because the cat didn't catch it." In such cases, we commonly impute an effect to an agent on account of the agent's non-performance. *She* caused the dough not to rise by forgetting to add yeast. The *rope* accounted for his fall by not holding. In such cases, it is the fact that the cause, in some sense, "ought" to have performed the act in question that makes its non-performance explanatory. While we might well explain the mouse's continued existence in terms of the non-performance of the cat, we wouldn't explain it by the non-performance of the crickets, hopping happily about the basement. Unlike cats, crickets don't solve rodent problems. Killing mice is not among the things crickets ought to do.[26]

Recognizing causation by non-performance conforms, then, to common explanatory practice. It is also enjoys at least some philosophical precedent. Consider, for example, the following from Aquinas:

> One thing proceeds from another in two ways. First, directly; in which sense something proceeds from another inasmuch as this other acts; for instance, heating from heat. Secondly, indirectly; in which sense something proceeds from another through this other not acting; thus the sinking of a ship is set down to the helmsman, from his having ceased to steer. But we must take note that the cause of what follows from want of action is not always the agent as not acting; but only when the agent can and ought to act. For if the helmsman

26 Perhaps, it goes without saying that the applicable sense of "ought" varies among these examples. Indeed, the variety of examples illustrates that a number of different senses of "ought" can help ground causal explanations by non-performance: moral oughts, prudential oughts, oughts used for the behavior that would be expected of a good or healthy member of its kind in the circumstances in question; oughts used for the activity that a thing has been designed to perform, or that a thing has been adopted as an instrument to perform; etc.

> were unable to steer the ship or if the ship's helm be not entrusted to him, the sinking of the ship would not be set down to him.[27]

Here Aquinas makes especially clear what we have seen already, namely, that whether an agent ought to have done something is causally or explanatorily relevant. In particular, we can explain an effect by an agent's non-performance only when the agent ought to have performed the act in question.

Return, then, to the sleigh building examples. In neither scenario do I cause the standards for Olympic bobsleds, and in both scenarios I build a sled that lacks conformity to those standards. But my sled's lack of conformity is imputable to me only in the second scenario, not the first; for, only in the second scenario is it the case that I ought to have built a sled that so conforms. The fact that I ought to have built a sled that so conforms is what makes it such that my sled's lack of conformity to the standards can be explained by me, even though I built only the sled, and did not also make the standards. The lack of conformity can be explained by me in virtue of my not having built as I ought.

Note, however, that there is a slight ambiguity in the presentation thus far. On one way of putting it, I account for the lack of conformity in virtue of my not having built according to the standards, as I ought. On a second way of putting it, I account for the lack of conformity in virtue of my having built a sled that does not conform to the standards by which I was obliged to build. On the first way, which perhaps more neatly fits the examples of causing by non-performance discussed above, I have a non-performance — my not building according to the standards — that is explanatorily prior to my sled's lack of conformity to the standards. The lack of conformity is imputable to me because of what I don't do. On the second way, there is no explanatorily prior non-performance. Rather, I account for the lack of conformity in virtue of what I do — my building something that lacks conformity to the standards according to which I ought to have built.

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27 Aquinas, *ST* 1-2.6.3. Aristotle also seems to recognize causation by non-performance, albeit less explicitly. In *Metaphysics*, Bk. 5, Ch. 2, Aristotle holds that that which when present is the cause of some particular effect is, when absent, the cause of the contrary effect, and gives as his example a ship's safety being caused when the pilot is present, and its loss be caused when the pilot is absent. Presumably, if the presence of an agent explains some effect and the agent's absence the opposite effect, it is only because, when present, the agent performs and when absent the agent does not perform.

In my view, either way of construing the account provides a plausible explanation of why my sled's lack of conformity is imputable to me, even though I make the sled and not also the standards. And as intimated above, this same explanatory framework can be used to show how the sinner accounts for his act's lack of conformity to the moral standard. The sinner does not cause the moral standard, but he has a responsibility to it. He ought to govern himself in accordance with the moral standard. When he acts in a way that does not conform to the standard, his act's lack of conformity can, therefore, be explained either by his failure to do what he ought (a not-doing) or by his doing something contrary to what he ought (a doing). Either way, his responsibility to abide by the standard compensates for his not having caused the standard and substitutes for his having caused it in the role of making him explanatorily accountable for his act's lack of conformity to it. Suppose, for example, that I lie for the sake of avoiding embarrassment, and that the moral standard includes a prohibition against lying. Since I ought to govern myself in accordance with the standard, I ought to have applied the rule against lying by choosing to refrain from telling the lie in question. My failure to govern myself by the moral standard to which I am responsible makes me accountable for the lack of conformity to the standard in virtue of which my lie is sinful.[28]

Yet, in response to our second objection, this same framework does not imply that God causes the sinful act's lack of conformity to the moral standard, at least not given an almost universally shared assumption about God. For, given this framework, God would cause a sinful act's lack of conformity to the moral standard only if God had a responsibility not to cause any creaturely acts that lacked conformity to the moral standard, that is, only if God ought not cause such acts. But if God has such a responsibility, if he ought not cause such acts, then God has manifestly failed to do what he ought. And yet it is an almost universally shared assumption that God cannot fail to do what he ought. It follows from this assumption that, if God causes a creaturely act that lacks conformity

28 This seems also (at least roughly) to be Aquinas's account of how the sinner causes the privation in virtue of which his act is sinful. Thus, at *ST* 1.49.1 ad 3: "In voluntary things the defect of the action comes from the will actually deficient, inasmuch as it does not actually subject itself to its proper rule." Aquinas predominantly thinks in terms of the first way discussed above, in which the defect is imputable to the sinner in virtue of what the sinner doesn't do, the sinner's non-consideration or non-use of the moral rule.

to the moral standard, then he has not failed to do what he ought; he did not have a responsibility not to cause such acts. But, then, unlike the sinner, our explanatory framework does not imply that God causes the sinful act's lack of conformity to the moral standard.

There is, then, a principled basis for holding that, even though God causes the act of sin and all its positive features, only the sinner, and not God, causes the lack of conformity to the moral standard in which the badness of the sin of action consists. For this reason, both our first and second objections to the privation solution fail.

IV. A LIMITATION OF THE PRIVATION SOLUTION.

In assessing the foregoing response, it is important to keep in mind the dialectical context. I am responding to the objection that, if God causes the act of sin and its positive features, then there are no grounds for saying that the act's lack of conformity to the moral standard is caused by the sinner, but not by God. In response to this objection, I have presented an explanatory framework on which there *are* grounds for saying that the act's lack of conformity is caused by the sinner, but not by God. My response helps itself to the entirely uncontroversial claim that God never fails to do what he ought, from which it follows that, if God causes an act that lacks conformity to the moral standard, it is not the case that God ought not to have caused that act.

One may, of course, raise a different sort of objection. Notice that the privation solution, coupled with my particular defense of it, supposes the truth of the following:

(i) There are creaturely actions that lack conformity to the moral standard;

(ii) God causes all creaturely actions (an implication of DUC); and

(iii) God never fails to do what he ought.

(i) and (ii) are built into the privation solution; the solution can't be expounded apart from them, and without them, there wouldn't even be a need

for the solution.[29] (iii), in addition to being affirmed by virtually all theists, is a critical assumption of my defense of the solution against our second objection.

Now, the different objection one might raise is, in effect, a version of the problem of moral evil to which the conjunction of (i)-(iii) might be thought to give rise. In particular, one might doubt that the conjunction of (i)-(iii) is consistent, thinking that the conjunction of (ii) and (iii), perhaps with some other putatively safe assumptions, implies the falsehood of (i); which, given the evident truth of (i), would suggest the non-existence of a God of whom both (ii) and (iii) are true. Were a goal of this paper to respond to the objection that (i)-(iii) are inconsistent, then it would, of course, be illegitimate to respond in a way that assumes the truth of that conjunction. But that's not the objection to which I'm responding in this paper. I'm responding to the objection that, if God causes the act of sin and its positive features, then we cannot say that the sinner, but not God, causes the act's lack of conformity to the moral standard. In responding to this objection, it is perfectly legitimate to assume all the conjuncts in (i)-(iii), since the truth of their conjunction is not what's at issue in this objection.

Still, the foregoing suggests what may seem a surprising limitation of the privation solution. It might have been thought that the privation solution, in supporting the point that God does not cause sin, assists in responding to the problem of moral evil, helping to explain why moral evil of the amount and type we find in the world is consistent with the existence of an all-powerful God who never fails to do what he ought. But the privation solution coupled with my defense of it, supposes the truth of (i)-(iii). And, as we have seen, one might object to the conjunction of (i)-(iii), along the lines of an argument from moral evil. Unfortunately, since the privation solution (at least on my defense of it) supposes the truth of (i)-(iii), the solution (on my defense) cannot be used in a response to this objection without being guilty of supposing the very claim at issue in the objection. And, so, there is a significant problem of moral evil to which the suppositions of the privation solution (on my defense) give rise, and

29 Strictly speaking, instead of (ii), it would probably be enough for the privation solution to suppose only (ii)* "that God causes some creaturely actions that lack conformity to the moral standard." I set up the problem in terms of (ii) rather than (ii)*, because the stronger (ii) is implied by DUC, and I think it is commitment to DUC that traditionally gives rise to the need for the privation solution.

to which it can be of no help in responding. Indeed, it looks as if an ultimate vindication of the privation solution as accurately describing the way things are will depend on a defense of the conjunction of (i)-(iii) that does not make use of the solution.

Now, the fact that the privation solution can be of no help with the foregoing problem does not mean that there aren't other ways of reconciling (i)-(iii), or, more generally, of reconciling (ii) and (iii) with the amount and types of moral evil we find in the world. While exploring those ways would be a project for another paper, it is fairly clear that what would be needed is some account of how God's causing creaturely acts that lack conformity to the moral standard could be consistent with his never failing to do what he ought. Perhaps, the reason is that God has no obligations of any sort, and so no obligation to refrain from causing creaturely acts that lack conformity to the moral standard. Or, perhaps, the reason is that causing some acts that lack conformity to the moral standard makes other important goods possible. Obviously, such strategies would need further development.

Nor does the fact that the privation solution is useless with respect to answering a particular version of the argument from moral evil imply that the solution is altogether useless. On the contrary, assuming that the conjunction of (i)-(iii) can be vindicated, the solution still has the significant function of reconciling DUC with the important claim that God does not cause sin. Sin is supposed to be something of which God disapproves in its own right, even if he sometimes permits sin for the sake of other goods. Yet, there is at least a significant tension between the claim that God disapproves of sin and the claim that God causes it. It is no surprise, then, that the denial that God causes (or authors) sin has made its way into confessional statements, such as the Council of Trent and the Westminster Confession.[30] Since the privation solution enables the proponent of DUC to concur with these denials that God causes sin, the solution is very much worth defending for anyone wishing to retain the traditional doctrine that God causes all being apart from himself.

30 For the Council of Trent, see the sixth canon concerning justification from the Decree on Justification (1547). For the Westminster Confession (1646), see chapter 3.1 and chapter 5.4. See also the thirteenth article of the Belgic Confession (1561).