

Is Evil Really an Ontological “Primitive”?

Siobhan Nash-Marshall

Abstract: This paper regards the plausibility of rejecting the scholastic claim that the “good” is a transcendental property of being—that *ens et bonum convertuntur*—on the basis of two claims: (1) Stephen Cahn’s claim that evil worlds created by an evil God are intrinsically plausible—i.e., that it is plausible to think of evil as a positive and instantiable property; and (2) the claim that “evil is a primitive”—that is, that evil is a primary or basic ontological property. It argues that if an “ontological primitive” must be a property which has no basic constituents other than itself—or whose definition cannot invoke concepts or constituents other than the primitive itself—evil itself cannot be considered a primitive. Nor can it be considered a positive property.

There seems to be something baffling to many contemporary metaphysicians about the scholastic claim that “good” is a transcendental property of being: that everything that is, insofar as it is, is necessarily “good.”¹ I gather this not just from claims like the one Steven Cahn makes in “Cacodaemony,” that evil worlds which are created by an evil Creator-God are intrinsically plausible.² I also infer it from what seems to be a far more common claim: that “evil is a primitive.” What is meant by this claim, I take it, are two things primarily:

- (a) evil is a primary or basic ontological property—a characteristic, quality, attribute, or principle, in other words, that (a¹) does not in any way derive from some other more basic component (a characteristic, quality, attribute, principle, or relation), that (a²) cannot be defined other than in terms of itself, and (a³) is a necessary component of reality;

and:

- (b) evil is a positive, instantiable, property that is an essential property of that in which it is instantiated—a characteristic, quality, attribute, or principle, in other words, that (b¹) is not simply the negation of some other property (characteristic, quality, attribute, or principle), that (b²) intrinsically characterizes that thing or entity in which it is instantiated, and that (b³)

is a necessary characteristic of the thing, entity, or whatever else one wants to call the non-abstract particular, in which it is instantiated.

To my knowledge, the clearest statement of the first of these two latter claims, at least in contemporary literature, is Rosamond Kent Sprague's. She defines ontological evil as "an ever present feature of reality" (564) whose "essential characteristic" is "badness" (562), and claims that evil must be a "real being"—as opposed to merely a "rational entity"—else it would "surrender" this essential characteristic (562).³ But the belief that evil is, and should be thought of as, an ontological primitive, whether one means by this one or both of the claims above, seems also to be a presupposition common to many approaches to what has come to be known as the "problem of evil."

Consider Mackie's approach to evil in "Evil and Omnipotence." At the outset of indicating what he considers to be contradictions in classical attempts to reconcile the existence of evil and God's omnipotence, Mackie makes two primary claims with respect to evil: (1) that "evil exists" (200), and (2) that "evil is opposed—or alternatively "contrasts" to—the good" (201).⁴ He seems to believe these two claims to suffice both to explain what evil is and to eliminate both the classic belief that evil is a privation and its variant that evil is an illusion—since evil could not be "really opposed to the good" if it were merely a privation or an illusion, and this would be contrary to (2). This last point clearly shows that Mackie holds (b¹). But Mackie's definition of evil as "existing" seems to indicate that he also holds (b²) and (b³), and the fact that he believes that his claims (1) and (2) regarding evil are sufficient to explain what evil is seems to warrant claiming that he also holds at least something akin to (a¹⁻³).

Similar considerations can be made with respect to many contemporary authors who engage in the "problem of evil." Rowe simply assumes that evil is a property which is instantiated in such things as "intense suffering"—a fawn dying a lingering and painful death due to a forest fire—thus apparently also treating evil both as a positive and instantiable property, which is a necessary characteristic of a state of affairs, and as something which can only be defined through itself.⁵ Thus, Rowe too seems to believe something at least akin to (a¹⁻³) and (b¹⁻³). These same considerations also hold for Cahn, who seems to assume both that evil is to be equated with wickedness, which just seems to be a synonym of "evil," and that the existence of evil requires no explanation at all. These last points would indicate that he holds at least something like (a¹⁻³). Cahn's thought project, on the other hand, indicates that he thinks (b¹⁻³) to be at least plausible.⁶

Beliefs like these clearly entail that not everything that is is necessarily good: that *a priori* it is not necessary that *ens et bonum convertuntur*. If evil is a positive, instantiable, and essential property, there could exist such things as "evil worlds," and an "evil God." But if evil and goodness are mutually exclusive properties, such that anything which necessarily instantiates evil cannot thereby also instantiate goodness, this would entail that by definition there could exist some "worlds"—and a "God"—that are not good. Thus, if *cacodaemonies* are inherently plausible, "good" need not at all be a transcendental property of being.

Indeed, these beliefs seem to dismiss the very possibility of the “good’s” being a transcendental property of being altogether. If ontological evil *is* indeed a “primitive,” a positive and primary property—a “real being, because it cannot be taken as a rational entity without surrendering its essential characteristic, that of badness” (562) as Sprague claims—and if evil and goodness are again mutually exclusive properties, then there must *be* at least something which is not “good”: the property of evil itself. This is obviously to say more than simply that it is not necessary for the “good” to be a transcendental property of being. It is to say that the “good” cannot be a transcendental property of being: that evil is a basic constituent of reality.

The questions I address in this paper regard the plausibility of rejecting the claim that the “good” is a transcendental property of being on the basis of claims such as Cahn’s and Sprague’s. That is, granted that the plausibility of *cacodaemonies* and the “primordially” of ontological evil make the scholastic claim questionable at best, I wonder if such claims as Cahn’s and Sprague’s are really plausible. The specific questions I would like to address here are, as such, two: (a) can evil really be a primary or basic ontological property?—that is, are (a¹⁻³) plausible? and (b) can evil really characterize an entity—a non-abstract particular—both intrinsically and necessarily? that is, can God or any other existing thing really be essentially evil? or are (b¹⁻³) plausible?

1. On Evil and Primitiveness

a. definitions—primitives

To claim that “evil is an ontological primitive”—that is, a primary or basic ontological property—it would seem, is necessarily to claim at least three things:

- (a¹) that evil is a *primary* or *basic property*, a characteristic, attribute, or principle, that does not in any way derive from some other thing, attribute, principle, or relation; a property, that is, that has no constituents other than itself;

which claim might be made more simply by saying that:

- (a¹¹) that evil is an *unconditioned* or *non-composite* property, characteristic, attribute, or quality;
- (a²) that evil cannot be defined other than in terms of itself;

and

- (a³) that evil is a *necessary positive property* of reality, and not simply the privation or negation of some other attribute, principle, or relation.

All three claims, it would seem, are necessary entailments of the notion of “primitive.” This is clearly true of the first two claims. Whatever an ontological primitive is, it would seem at the very least to require what we might call “ontological and conceptual independence.” That is, the primitive must not have any basic constituents other than itself—this is what “ontological independence” would seem

to entail. Given this first point, it is clear that no adequate intrinsic, essential, or whatever else one wants to call a definition of the primitive *an sich*, can invoke concepts or constituents other than the primitive itself. This is what “conceptual independence” would seem to entail. A primitive, it would seem in other words, should be something like a prime number: something that cannot be decomposed into two (or more) distinct factors—or constituents—of which one is not itself, and that cannot therefore be defined through factors—or constituents—other than itself.⁷

This first point might, perhaps, best be made by saying that ontological primitives must be “unconditioned” or “non-composite.” For as true as it is that a conditioned, or composite reality—be it an entity or a property which has conditions or constituents other than itself—can be at least conceptually distinct from its factors—that is, its constituents or conditions—it is also true that that reality can also be decomposed into factors—constituents or conditions—other than itself. What this means, first off, is that no conditioned or composite reality can be “ontologically independent,” since it has constituents or conditions other than itself. It is clearly a derived reality. But it also means that no conditioned or composite reality can be “conceptually independent.” The very fact that this reality can be decomposed into factors other than itself necessarily entails that it can be intrinsically defined by invoking factors other than itself. If this is so, no conditioned or composite reality can be a primitive.

As for the third claim, it is clearly an entailment of the first two. A property which is unconditioned, it would seem, is by definition necessary. If it exists, it cannot not exist since it has no conditions other than itself. What is more, that property could not be a privation or negation of something other than itself, since this would clearly make it a conditioned or composite property: a property which could neither exist, nor be defined without invoking a concept or constituent other than itself. It would necessarily invoke that of which it is the privation or negation.

Given these qualifications, to ask our first question—can evil really be a primary or basic ontological property (an ontological primitive)?—is primarily to ask if evil is an “ontologically and conceptually independent property.” That is, if it is a property that cannot be decomposed into factors, or constituents, other than itself. For if evil is indeed a primary or basic property, then clearly it must also be a positive and necessary property.

b. definitions—evil

Having squared away what sort of property “evil” must be in order to be a primitive—i.e., the necessary conditions of predicating “primitive” of the property “evil”—the next question clearly has to do with the nature of the property or feature which we call ontological “evil.”

For the sake of the argument, I am going to assume that “evil,” is that property or characteristic which all commonly recognized instantiations of “evil” have in common.⁸ Thus, it is that characteristic which both murderers *qua* murderers and murder itself, which both torturers *qua* torturers and torture, which both perpetra-

tors of genocide as such and genocide, which ebola and diseases more generally, which pain and suffering, which a fawn dying a lingering and painful death due to a forest fire, which the recent tsunami, the 1988 earthquake in Armenia, and all other such things have and which makes us identify them as “evil.”

Now, the necessary requisite of calling any one of the above listed things (or things similar to them) “evil”—of claiming that it possesses the attribute or property which we would call “evil”—it would seem, is its destructiveness: the fact that it in some way negates or annihilates something, or some part or attribute thereof. Thus, a murderer is a person to whom we would ascribe the property “evil,” because he has the property of “having intentionally *destroyed* human life.” The same thing can be said of the act of murdering. A torturer is a person to whom we would even more readily ascribe the property “evil” because he is a being who has the property of “intentionally *destroying* a human being’s integrity” and the same thing can be said of the act of torturing. Pain and suffering, which are the most common candidates used to illustrate evil—i.e., what one might call obvious *tokens* of they *type* evil—have the property “evil,” it would seem, because they have the property of *negating* a being’s well-being, life, or what not, and so on. The same thing can be said of ebola, or diseases more generally.⁹

Indeed, were none of these things not in any way destructive, we simply would not call them, or consider them evil. Ebola is a good example of this point. Were that virus not to be destructive of life, or well being, we would neither call it evil, nor consider it evil. We would simply consider the virus another life form. The same thing holds for all other instantiations of evil.¹⁰

This gives us a working definition of evil:

- (1) if something is “evil,” it must be in some way “destructive:” that is, it must negate, annihilate, damage, or any such similar thing.

This might be otherwise stated:

- (1¹) if something has the property evil, it must have the property of being “destructive.”

c. evil and primitiveness—definitions

Now, for evil to be a “primitive” ontological property, it must be a property that has no constituents other than itself, and which cannot consequently be defined through factors other than itself. Thus, if our definition of evil is an acceptable one, then in order for evil to be an ontological primitive, every instance of evil would have to be destructive, and every instance of destructiveness would have to be evil—else evil would have to have constituents other than itself. Destructiveness, we have claimed, is a constituent of evil. To put the point in conceptual terms, if evil is indeed a primitive, evil and destructiveness must be coextensive—or synonymous—terms. For were “evil” and “destructiveness” not coextensive terms, then the claim that “if something is evil must be in some way destructive” would define “evil” other than in terms of “evil” itself. This would imply that the property “evil” has constituents other than itself. According to what would seem to be a self-evident definition of a

primitive—i.e., that a primitive cannot have basic constituents other than itself—this would necessarily entail that evil is not an ontological primitive.

The fact of the matter is, however, that destructiveness is not always evil: evil and destructiveness do not at all seem to be co-extensive terms. Not all destruction is necessarily what we could call “evil.” The destruction of a worn-down and broken bridge upon which no person is walking and upon which no one depends in any way, would not seem to be evil, despite the fact that it involves destruction. Indeed, it might even be a good thing, if the bridge endangers some innocent person’s life, or if its destruction is a necessary requisite of building a safer bridge, of safe-guarding the environment, or any other such thing. Nor would cutting one’s hair and burning the fallen locks, seem to be necessarily evil, although it clearly destroys the hair. There are cases in which one might indeed think that burning one’s cut hair is a morally good thing. If leaving traces of your DNA makes it possible for someone to clone you, and cloning is a moral evil, then burning one’s hair might be a morally good thing. If this is so, however, then not all destruction is necessarily evil. There are cases which are even clearer than these. Take the destruction of cancer cells, or of a loaded nuclear device which is about to explode in a densely populated area, or any other such instance in which what is being destroyed is the source of immanent destruction of the sort that we would deem “evil.” It seems obvious that destruction of this kind is not only not evil, but is positively good. Whatever the case which one wants to use to illustrate this point, the fact remains that not all destruction is necessarily evil. If this is so, however, then not all destructiveness is necessarily evil.

This clearly entails that “evil” and “destruction” cannot be co-extensive terms. Thus, if the co-extensiveness of “evil” and “destructiveness” is a necessary requisite of the primitiveness of ontological evil, it would seem obvious that “evil” cannot be a “primitive,” at least not in the sense delineated by the characteristics (a¹⁻³).

d. destructiveness and primitiveness

There is another and perhaps more significant way to demonstrate this point. It concerns destructiveness. For destructiveness itself cannot be a primitive. Destruction is a derived or conditioned fact. It is necessarily a function of two distinct elements:

(α) a force which is capable of destroying,

and

(β) an object which can be destroyed.

And a quick analysis of destruction itself indicates that:

- destruction is neither identical to either (α) or (β) alone, nor is it the necessary consequence of either (α) or (β) alone;¹¹

- both (α) and (β) are necessary conditions of destruction;¹²

and

- destruction is necessarily a function of at least both (α) and (β);¹³

That destruction is neither identical to, nor the necessary consequence of (α) a force, power, or whatever one wants to call the capacity to effect a deleterious change is obvious. 500 mile-an-hour winds are not necessarily destructive. They can be, if they blow in the midst of a forest, on a city, a car, or what not. They can be, in other words, if they hit some destructible object. They are simply not destructive, on the other hand, if they do not hit some destructible object. If 500 mile-an-hour winds blow on some barren planet which only has flat surfaces—one of Jupiter's moons, let's say—or if they blow on a windproof skyscraper, or again if one attempted to use them to destroy an immaterial being, they would simply not be destructive. As this is true of winds, it is clearly true of any other force which is capable of destroying. Thus:

- (2) destruction is not identical to, or the necessary consequence of, (α) a force, power, or whatever one wants to call the capacity to effect a deleterious change.

This point might be better expressed:

- (2¹) (α) a force capable of destroying is neither identical to, nor the sufficient condition of, destruction.

Nor is destruction identical to, or the necessary consequence of, (β) a destructible object. This too is obvious. Any object which is not its own sufficient condition, or which has necessary conditions which are distinct from it and of which it is not the sufficient condition, is necessarily destructible. Thus, a tree, which has necessary conditions which are distinct from it and of which it is not the sufficient condition—water, light, and so forth—is necessarily destructible, precisely because it has necessary conditions which are distinct from it and of which it is not the sufficient condition. A tree cannot continue to exist as a tree without water and light. But water and light are not the tree, and need not subsist simply because the tree does. Thus, a tree can be destroyed. All one needs to do in order to do so is deprive it of one of the necessary conditions of its subsistence. Destruction, however, is not the necessary consequence of the destructibility of such an object. It cannot be, precisely because the destructible object is distinct from its necessary conditions and is not the sufficient condition of these conditions. For what this distinction entails is that the necessary conditions of a destructible object need not themselves be destructible: that they need not themselves have necessary conditions from which they are distinct. They could be their own sufficient conditions. And this could entail that an object which is inherently destructible not ever be destroyed. This is, for instance, what Aquinas claimed was the case with the human soul. Aquinas did not question that the human soul was *per se* destructible. It was clear to him that it necessarily was: the human soul is not a sufficient condition of its own subsistence—it is not the condition of the possibility of its own existence—which means of course that it has necessary conditions other than itself and of which it is not the sufficient condition. He nonetheless argued that the human soul is immortal, because the sufficient condition of the soul's existence—God—is both His own sufficient condition—and consequently is not destructible—and will not cease to

sustain the soul.¹⁴ As the destructibility of the human soul does not necessarily entail the destruction of the human soul, this could be true of any destructible object. The point here is that:

- (3) destruction is neither identical to, nor the necessary consequence of, (β) a destructible object.

This point might be better expressed:

- (3¹) (β) a destructible object is neither identical to, nor a sufficient condition of, destruction.

Implicit in conclusions (2) and (3) is a third conclusion:

- (4) both (α) a force capable of destroying and (β) a destructible object are necessary conditions of destruction.

This conclusion is a direct consequence of (2) and (3). The reason why (α) a force capable of destroying is not a sufficient condition of destruction is that destruction necessarily involves a destructible object. This point is illustrated by our example. 500 mile-an-hour winds can be destructive *only* if they hit a destructible object. What this means, of course, is that a destructible object is a necessary condition of the destruction wreaked by 500 mile-an-hour winds. As this is true of winds, it is clearly true of any other potentially destructive force. Indeed, the very claim that something is destructive without actually destroying something seems contradictory, unless it is intended in something other than a literal sense. Thus, if a potentially destructive force is a necessary condition of destruction, then so too must a destructible object be. But it would seem obvious that a potentially destructive force is a necessary condition of destruction, precisely because destruction is not the necessary consequence of an object's destructibility. Thus, both a potentially destructive force and a destructible object are necessary conditions of destruction.

Now, if destruction is (2, 3) not a necessary consequence of either (α) force capable of destroying or (β) a destructible object, and yet (4) both (α) force capable of destroying and (β) a destructible object are necessary conditions of destruction, then:

- (5) destruction must be a function of at least both (α) force capable of destroying and (β) a destructible object.¹⁵

Destruction, in other words, must be what in scholastic language is called a transitive act. It is an act through which something effects some change upon something other than itself. The particular characteristic of transitive acts is that they must involve both an act and an object upon which that act effects a change. If what could be a transitive act does not involve both an object upon which some change is effected and something which effects that change, then it simply does not take place. Indeed, a transitive act can only be said to take place once the object upon which the act effects the change is changed.¹⁶ Kicking is a good illustration of this point. One actually only kicks something when one's foot strikes an object. Should there be no object to be struck, or should one to miss this object, one simply would not kick. One would swing one's leg.

But if (5) destruction is necessarily a function of at least two elements (α) force capable of destroying and (β) a destructible object, then:

(6) destruction must be a derived, conditioned, or composite fact.

After all, the very definition of a derived, conditioned, or composite fact is that it has distinct factors—constituents or components—neither of which is itself, and can therefore be defined invoking two distinct factors—constituents or conditions—neither of which is itself. If this is so, then destruction itself cannot by definition be an ontological primitive. For as we saw, a primitive cannot be decomposed into two distinct factors of which one is not itself.

The consequences of this point with respect to the claim that “evil is a primitive” are obvious. For if destruction is a composite fact, then by definition being destructive cannot be a non-composite fact. Thus, if something evil must by definition be destructive, that is, if it is true that:

(1) if something is evil, it must be in some way destructive: it must negate, annihilate, damage, or what not,

and that:

(6) destruction must be a derived, conditioned, or composite fact,

then evil is necessarily not an ontological primitive.

This is an important conclusion. It entails that evil cannot be (or be thought of as) a basic and necessary property, but rather must be a derived property. This point has enormous consequences. For if evil is a derived property, then that from which evil is derived can not itself be evil. If this is so, however, then all basic and necessary properties—all ontological primitives—are necessarily not evil.

2. On the instantiability of evil

a. definitions—conditions of instantiation

This brings us to our second question: can God, or any other existing thing, really be essentially evil? To claim that “evil is a primitive” in this second sense,” it would seem, is necessarily to claim at least two things:

(b²) evil is a property which *intrinsically* characterizes that thing, entity, or non-abstract particular in which it is instantiated, as opposed to characterizing that thing in virtue of some relation it has to things other than itself;

and:

(b³) evil is a *necessary* characteristic of the thing, entity, or non-abstract particular in which it is instantiated.¹⁷

These points seem merely to delineate some of the obvious requisites of the instantiation of an essential property. Indeed, they seem to be just the sort of requisites which Cahn himself adopts in his characterization of the evil Creator of the *cacodaemony*. When Cahn claims that it is possible to think of a world as the product of a “maximally evil demon”—an evil God—he does not mean merely to claim

that it is plausible to think of the Creator as appearing to be “maximally evil” to some bystander who cannot make sense of such things as “separating the sheep from the goats,” or even that the Creator is evil because he “maltreats” his creations. Rather, he seems to suggest that we can treat the property “evil” as a property that the Creator has independently of his relations—cognitive or otherwise—to things other than himself: a property that characterizes Creator intrinsically. Cahn seems to think that that property is wickedness. Nor does Cahn’s thought project involve thinking of evil as a property which is not essential to the *maximally evil demon*, as an accidental property: one, that is, that it might be possible for the Creator to acquire to a maximal degree, but that the Creator does not need to instantiate. Cahn does not claim that God could perhaps become “evil,” and if He did it would be a very scary evil indeed. On the contrary, Cahn seems to think that it is possible for “evil” to be a property which the Creator instantiates necessarily: a property which the Creator of the universe cannot not have.

Given these requisites, determining whether evil is a primitive in the sense in question is primarily to determine if evil can really characterize an entity—a non-abstract particular—(c) independently if its relations to things other than itself, and (d) necessarily.¹⁸

b. evil and essential instantiation

Whatever evil is, one of the necessary requisites of calling something evil is that it be in some way destructive. Thus, in our working definition we claimed that:

- (1) if something is evil, it must in some way be destructive: it must annihilate, damage, or what not.

Thus, if to claim that for something to instantiate a property essentially is for that property to characterize that non-abstract particular in which it is instantiated both necessarily and independently of its relations to things other than itself, and then it must be true that:

- (7) if something is “essentially evil,” it must be necessarily destructive independently of its relations to things other than itself.

If (7), however, then:

- (8) there can only be one thing with respect to which something which is essentially evil, insofar as it is essentially evil, can be necessarily destructive: itself.

There are a number of interesting considerations to be made at this point. To begin with, if something can be destructive only if it actually engages in actual destruction, then (8) would entail that:

- (9) something essentially evil must engage in the actual destruction of itself in order to be evil.

In itself, this is an odd thing to believe. But the corollaries of this point are even more odd. For if that which is essentially evil is also necessarily evil—which is to

say that that which is essentially evil cannot exist without being evil—then if (9) is true, we have that:

- (10) something essentially evil cannot exist without engaging in the actual destruction of itself;

or again that:

- (11) something essentially evil must actually engage in the destruction of itself in order to exist.

There seems to be something contradictory about these conclusions. They would require the negation of a given thing’s existence to be a condition of its existence. Thus, it seems credible to claim that:

- (12) something essentially evil cannot exist.

c. evil and the instantiation of composite properties

There is another way of making this point. It has to do with destructiveness. Destruction, as we saw above, is (6) a composite fact. What this means in terms of thinking of evil as a property is that:

- (13) if evil were a property, it would necessarily be a composite property.

This, in essence, is the reason why evil cannot be a primitive in the first sense. The point has bearing on this present argument too. For it would seem evident that:

- (14) it is necessary for that which instantiates a composite property to instantiate all of the elements of which that composite property is composed.

Thus, if a cup instantiates whiteness, the cup must instantiate all of the colors of which the color white is composed. Indeed, a cup could not instantiate whiteness if it did not instantiate all of the colors of which the color white is composed. By definition, if it were to instantiate only some of these colors of which the color white is composed, it would be some other color.

This is not quite right. Although instantiating all of the elements of which a composite property is composed is a necessary condition of instantiating that composite property, it is not a sufficient condition of instantiating that composite property. What is lacking here, of course, is the fact that the elements of which the composite property is composed must themselves be composed in their instantiation in order for an instantiation to be of the composite property. To continue with our example, a cup could instantiate all of the colors of the rainbow, but this would not necessarily entail that that cup be white. The cup could instantiate each of the colors of the rainbow distinctly: it could be a harlequin sort of cup. In order for the cup to instantiate “whiteness,” the colors of which the “white” is composed must themselves be composed in the cup. Thus, it is perhaps best to reformulate (14) above to read:

- (14¹) that which instantiates a composite property must instantiate all of the elements of which that composite property is composed in a property which is a compound of these properties.

Now, if (14¹) is true, then it must be true that:

- (15) that which instantiates “evil” must instantiate all of the elements of which “evil” is composed in a compound property.

Two of the elements which destruction necessarily involves, as we saw above, are: (α) force capable of destroying and (β) a destructible object. For:

- (5) destruction is necessarily a function of both (α) a force capable of destroying and (β) a destructible object.

Thus, if (15) a being which instantiates a composite property must instantiate all of the elements of which the composite property is composed in a compound property:

- (16) whatever instantiated “evil” would necessarily instantiate at least both (α) a force capable of destroying and (β) a destructible object in a compound property.

The point here is obvious in light of the arguments we formulated above. For an object which instantiates evil must instantiate destructiveness: it must necessarily be destructive. But if an object were only to instantiate (α) a force which is capable of destroying, it would not necessarily be destructive, precisely because (2¹) such a force is not a sufficient condition of destruction. Thus, an object which only instantiated (α) could not instantiate destructiveness, and could not instantiate evil. Nor would an object be necessarily destructive if it only instantiated (β) a destructible object, because (3¹) a destructible object is also not a sufficient condition of evil. In this case too, as such, the object would not instantiate destructiveness and could not consequently instantiate evil. The only way in which a being could necessarily instantiate destructiveness would be for it to instantiate the compound of both (α) a force capable of destroying, and (β) a destructible object .

But:

- (17) if a being instantiated the compound of both (α) a force capable of destroying and (β) a destructible object, the being would necessarily destroy itself.

This being would certainly instantiate destruction. It would, however, also not exist. If this is so, however, then:

- (18) no existing being can instantiate destructiveness or destruction.

But if no existing being can instantiate destructiveness or destruction, then:

- (19) no existing being can instantiate evil.

Thus, it would not seem possible to think of evil as an essential property of things.¹⁹

Conclusion

Where does this leave us? To demonstrate that evil can neither be a primitive in the two senses in which we have intended this proposition is to demonstrate two

things: (1) that one cannot think of evil as a basic constituent of reality, and (2) that one cannot think of it as a basic constituent of things, entities, non-abstract particulars. These are certainly important things. They are a far cry from demonstrating that the scholastic doctrine of transcendentals is sound. At most they allow us to claim that all that is might be good. This is important in its own right, however. It demonstrates that that doctrine can at least be plausible.

University of St. Thomas

Notes

1. In contemporary analytic terms, the claim that being and the good are convertible terms is: that the good is intentionally distinct from being, but is extensionally identical to being. It is not just a scholastic claim. Aristotle coined the phrase.

2. Steven M. Cahn, “Cacodaemony,” *Analysis*, 37,2 (1977), 69–73. Cahn’s claim is that “evil” worlds created by an “evil” God—a “maximally evil” demon—are just as plausible as “good” worlds created by a “good” God.

3. This definition would imply that Sprague believes that evil has at least the attributes (a²) and (a³). But granted her take on (a²), one can surmise that she also holds that evil has the attribute (a¹). She claims as much in the body of her article. See Rosamond Kent Sprague “Negation and Evil,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 11 (1951), 561–567.

4. J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind* 64 (1955), 200–212. Mackie does not actually list the second requisite at the beginning of the article. It is, however, clear that he assumes it as one of his opening premises. He claims as much. “This solution denies that evil is opposed to the good in our original sense” (204).

5. See, e.g., William Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16 (1979), 336.

6. Nor is there anything mysterious about the reasons why those contemporary authors, who wish to claim that God does not exist because evil does, would want evil to be a primitive. That reason, simply put, is that evil’s being a primitive would make their claims very much stronger. This is not difficult to see. For their arguments, whether logically or evidentially based, seem always to involve the claim that there is something irreconcilable—I am using this word purposely, since I don’t believe that contemporary thinkers believe that the claims result in a contradiction—about the combination of propositions that: (1) God is good, (2) God is omnipotent, and (3) evil exists. The irreconcilability, it seems, is two-fold: (a) the irreconcilability of God’s goodness and evil; and (b) the irreconcilability of God’s omnipotence and the existence of evil. Thus, if God is good, God is necessarily “opposed to” evil. If God is omnipotent, or so the claim goes, then God can ensure that His opposition is felt—i.e., that evil will not exist. By combining these claims, as such, we have the premise: if God is good and omnipotent, then evil necessarily does not exist. Assuming, then, that one does want to ensure that the conclusion that God does not exist is drawn from this premise—which I believe is a fair assumption with respect to the thinkers in question—then one must find the strongest possible way of affirming that evil necessarily does exist. Now, the strongest possible way of doing this would seem to involve the claim that evil is a primitive, i.e., an irreducible and necessary part of reality, since this would make evil indestructible. Indeed,

this claim would make these authors' basic argument run thus: God exists iff God is good and omnipotent. But if God is good and omnipotent, then, evil would necessarily not exist. But evil cannot necessarily not exist. Evil exists necessarily. It is an irreducible and necessary component of reality. Thus God cannot be good and omnipotent. If this is so, however, then God does not exist.

7. I am using Borevich and Shafarevich's definition of a prime number in this definition of a primitive: "An element p of the ring D , nonzero and not a unit, is called *prime* if it can not be decomposed into factors $p=ab$, neither of which is a unit in D ."

8. The reason for my focusing on "all" instantiations of evil, as opposed to just one, stems from contemporary approaches to evil itself. Most thinkers who deal with the problem of evil in contemporary literature focus solely on pain and suffering. The reason for this is not just historical, i.e., the fact that Hume seems to focus on these instances of evil. Pain and suffering also seem to be the closest case of what might qualify as instances of "evil" *qua* primitive. This seems to have led to thinkers to believe that they can hold that evil is a primitive forthright, rather than demonstrating that it is. Thus, I thought it best to return to the drawing board to see if the claim could be substantiated. This return should in principle not alter the case for the primitiveness of evil in any way. For if evil is indeed a primitive, it should make no difference what instances of evil we use to analyze it. Indeed, if the case is made that considering all instances of evil does alter the case for the primitiveness of evil, then one would have to posit either that there are different types of evil, or that there is a difference in "evil," as it is instantiated in different things. But positing this sort of thing would inevitably indicate that evil cannot be an ontological primitive. For if "evil" admits of different types, or varies from instantiation to instantiation, then the "evil" must be a composite property. This claim is true for a variety of different reasons. The fact remains, however, that a composite property cannot be a primitive.

9. Hence the classical definition of evil as a privation: that is, as (1) that which negates being, or (2) the negation of being. See, e.g., Boethius, *Consolatio Philosophiae*, III.12.80–82. The definition seems rather commonplace in modern philosophy too. When, for instance, Hume lists the evils of the world, he includes such things as "unhappiness," and "corruption," "pain," and so forth, all of which seem to be privations.

10. To get back to pain, serious thinkers have given serious reasons for holding that it should be thought of as a "positive property"—i.e., that cannot be thought of merely as "destructive," or "privative." I am thinking here, for instance, of Suarez. See Jorge Gracia, "Evil and Goodness: Suárez's Solution," in Scott MacDonald, *Being and Goodness: the Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, 151–178). The case Suarez makes for pain's being positive evil is that pain cannot be reduced to a privative relation with respect to pleasure: "pain is something positive we experience and cannot be analyzed negatively in terms of the privative or preventive functions it may have with respect to pleasure" (135–136). Nor can it be reduced to a "mental phenomenon without objective reality" (136). Thus, it seems to be an "intrinsic evil" (157). This point seems to be a barrier to the claim that all things are evil because they are destructive. For if pain is an "intrinsic evil"—i.e., something that is evil independently of its relations—then it would seem that pain cannot be evil because it is destructive. Destruction involves a relation. Yet, I wonder if it is true that pain is evil independently of any relations at all. If it were, then it would seem plausible to claim that all pain is necessarily evil. But this does not seem to be true. There are some pains which are not evil. I am thinking here of the pain that one feels when one's body is healing. If this is so, however, then it does not at all seem necessary

for pain to be evil independently of all relations. Thus, I find it difficult to accept that pain can be evil independently of all relations. Another consideration which would lead to this same conclusion might be this: if pain is evil independently of all relations, then it must be evil independently of its being felt, since feeling a pain seems to be relational. But this too does not seem plausible. Why should pain be an evil independently of its being felt? I doubt anyone would consider unfelt pain to be evil. This being so, I do not believe that pain is necessarily an “intrinsic evil,” or that it cannot be thought of relationally. Thus, I do not think that it is a counterexample to my point.

11. That is, $\{(d \neq a) \text{ and } (d \neq b)\}$.

12. That is, $\{if\ d, a \wedge b\}$

13. That is, $\{d = ab\}$.

14. See, for instance, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 55 § 14.

15. The reason for the qualification is that there could presumably be factors other than a destructive force and a destructible object involved in that destruction which we call evil. One might think that intentionality is one such factor.

16. Hence the scholastic claim that for transitive acts is *actio est in passio*. The source of the doctrine is Aristotle. See, e.g. *Physics*, III., c. iii.

17. The reason why one might want to define “evil” in this second sense as primitive is that it too can fall under the definition of primitive we gave above. After all, if something can be counted as ontologically primitive if it has “no components other than itself,” and as conceptually primitive insofar as “its adequate essential definition cannot invoke factors other than itself,” then since a thing’s being essentially evil implies that it is “intrinsically and necessarily evil,” a thing’s “evil” seems not to have factors other than the thing itself.

18. One’s response to these questions is not necessarily determined by one’s stance with respect to the “primordially” of the property evil itself—i.e., its being a primary or basic ontological property. The reason for this is simple: a property need not be “primitive” in order to characterize a non-abstract particular intrinsically and necessarily. Consequently, the fact that evil cannot be a primitive in the first sense—a primary or basic ontological property—does not in principle preclude its being a primitive in the second sense.

19. This last point has an added advantage of meeting a possible objection to our first argument. For the argument with which we demonstrated that destruction is a composite fact, presupposed that the two elements involved in destruction—i.e., that (a) a force capable of destroying if that force (b) a destructible object—were distinct. This present argument grounds that presupposition. For if (a) the potentially destructive force were one and the same thing as (b) the destructible object, the destructive force would necessarily destroy itself. But something which necessarily destroys itself cannot exist, let alone destroy anything. It would cease to exist the moment it existed. Thus if there is such a thing as a destructive force: then the (a) a force capable of destroying must be distinct from (b) a destructible object.

