Evil

Definition: evil 2 from Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate(R) Dictionary
(bef. 12c) 1 a : the fact of suffering, misfortune, and wrongdoing b : a cosmic evil force 2 : something that brings sorrow, distress, or calamity

Summary Article: EVIL
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Evil and moral evil

In its widest sense, evil is the antithesis of good: according to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, “whatever is censurable, mischievous or undesirable.” On this broad understanding of the concept, any and all of “life’s ‘minuses’” (Adams and Adams 1990: 1) count as evils, including even such trivial events as my painfully stubbing my toe on a kerbstone. According to St Thomas Aquinas, because “good properly speaking is something inasmuch as it is desirable,” evil, as the opposite of good, “must be that which is opposed to the desirable as such” (Aquinas 1995: 5). The equation of evil with the undesirable is echoed in many later writers, including Hobbes and Sidgwick, and it receives eloquent expression from Josiah Royce:

> By evil in general as it is in our experience we mean whatever we find in any sense repugnant and intolerable... We mean [by evil] precisely whatever we regard as something to be gotten rid of, shrunken from, put out of sight, of hearing, or memory, eschewed, expelled, resisted, assailed, or otherwise directly or indirectly resisted.

(Royce 1915: 18)

Amongst “life’s minuses” it is traditional to distinguish between moral and natural evils. By the former is meant the intentional harm or wrong done by moral agents – “sin, wickedness” is the dictionary’s gloss – whereas the latter includes such harmful natural contingencies as diseases, famines, earthquakes and floods. (However, since human beings are themselves a part of nature, any intentional harm they cause might itself be classed as a species of natural evil.) “Natural” and “moral” evils typically evoke different cognitive and emotional responses in the victims, only the latter being liable to generate anger or resentment. They also call for different kinds of explanation, since only moral evil raises the question (which has puzzled philosophers from Socrates to the present day) of why any rational being should ever deliberately choose evil in preference to good.

Some recent authors have proposed withholding the label “evil” from purely natural harmful events that involve no moral agency. So Claudia Card has argued that earthquakes, fires and floods that are not the result of human activity are only improperly called “evil” (Card 2002: 7). In a similar vein, Susan Neiman suggests that “modern evil” is primarily envisaged as being “the product of will” (Neiman 2002: 268). Yet if modern history has prompted much intense reflection on man’s inhumanity to man, ordinary usage does not (yet) justify looking on the expression “natural evil” as an oxymoron. While it is arguably odd to apply the adjective “evil” to events such as the Black Death or the 2004 Asian tsunami, speakers at least of UK English feel no strain in bringing these under the substantive “evils.”

Evil as a special category?
This chapter will not be further concerned with natural evil, nor with human wrongdoing in general, “moral evil” in the traditional sense. In recent years, the liveliest philosophical discussion of evil has centered on the question of whether the term “evil” has a more particular application to certain specially reprehensible or shocking acts, persons or characters. Should we distinguish, within the deep of human wrongdoing, a lower deep of evildoing, in which human beings are at their worst and most depraved? Or, as Luke Russell has put it, is there a point at which wrongdoing moves into the “red zone” and becomes something worse, namely evil (Russell 2007: 92)? This philosophical debate has run in tandem with the striking revival of public discourse about evil since the Second World War, prior to which the concept of evil was becoming relatively unfashionable outside theological circles. To many people reflecting on the Holocaust and other atrocities of the twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, the language in which we appraise more common-or-garden-variety wrongdoing has seemed inadequate to express the appropriate condemnation of Auschwitz, My Lai, the Cambodian “Year Zero,” Srebrenica or the events of 9/11. To talk of Nazi “wrongs” rather than Nazi “evils” sounds mealy-mouthed and insipid to many ears, as if the speaker recognized no difference in kind between genocidal mass murder and stealing apples from the corner shop. When, following the 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, President George Bush told the American people that “Today our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature,” his words resonated with those who saw the attacks as a fundamental assault on American core values and the country itself.

While some philosophers have been sympathetic to the idea of treating “evil” as a moral natural kind term, denoting a category of the morally horrific which is qualitatively and not merely quantitatively different from more ordinary objects of moral indignation, others have been skeptical or hostile. They point out that, however popular it may be with preachers, politicians and tabloid newspaper editors, calling someone or something “evil” – the “most severe condemnation our moral vocabulary allows” (Kekes 1999: 1) – often substitutes for more fine-grained judgement and psychologically illuminating analysis. Worse, it can be used, or abused, to promote dubious political, social or religious agenda, where damning opponents as “evil” puts them beyond the pale of ordinary modes of engagement, representing them as alien, devilish creatures who pose a permanent threat to our security and ideals. As Adam Morton observes, “evil” often figures as “part of the vocabulary of hatred, dismiss, or incomprehension,” a word used to divide friends from enemies, us from them (Morton 2004: 4). Phillip Cole similarly complains that the concept of evil “obstructs our understanding, blocks our way, brings us to a halt,” because its historical associations make it a term of demonization; someone described as “evil” is deemed to be “not really human,” and so beyond the scope of “communication and negotiation, reform and redemption.” In Cole’s view, it would be wise to ditch the language of evil, as practically inflammatory and theoretically unilluminating (Cole 2006: 236).

Ironically, both those who defend the use of the language of evil and those who oppose it appeal to a form of moral sensitivity which they accuse their opponents of lacking. Defenders assert that, without it, we would lack an adequate vehicle for expressing our disapproval of and indignation at the worst things that human beings do to one another. Offenses of different moral colors, some in the red zone and some not, would end up indiscriminately lumped together. In contrast, opponents charge that talk of evil too often displaces trying to understand other agents, impugns their humanity and intrinsic value, disregards their interests, and supports a Manichean caricature of a world sharply divided between good and evil. One thing at least seems clear from this debate: that if the term “evil” is to play a legitimate role in our moral appraisals of persons, acts and events, it must be stripped of its more rhetorical overtones and cease to be used as a mere term of dismissal – still less as a firecracker label.
Modern analyses of evil

Philosophers who agree that the concept of evil has a valuable role to play in moral thought have not all agreed on what that role should be, and there have been numerous proposals about what sets evil people or acts apart from "merely" bad people or acts. It is doubtful, though, whether the word "evil" in ordinary speech possesses the precision of meaning that some theorists attempt to impose on it, and the pretensions of any theory to locate the real meaning of "evil" may justly be viewed with some skepticism. As we shall see, the notion of evil has struck different chords in different people, and there is probably little point in trying to force anyone and anything that can be called evil into a single definitional frame. From this perspective, it may be better to read the various accounts on offer for the complementary lights they throw into some of the darker corners of human experience than as rival accounts of the "real meaning" of evil.

Some characterizations of evil have focused on the greater severity of the harm involved in cases of evil than in cases of more ordinary wrongdoing. John Kekes has defined evil as "serious unjustified harm inflicted on sentient beings" (a definition that allows that animals as well as humans can suffer it) (Kekes 1999: 1). On this view, the motives of those who do the harm may be less important than the amount of harm they (intentionally) do in making that harm evil. Hannah Arendt’s famous conception of “banal evil” might be thought to be an account of this kind, since a central theme in her psychological analysis of Nazi architects of death such as Adolf Eichmann is the chronic thoughtlessness they exhibited when they murdered millions (Arendt 1994). However, what made Eichmann’s activities evil, in Arendt’s eyes, was not so much the amount of suffering they produced as the vast and absurd disproportion between the quantity of harm done and the paucity of his reflection about it.

Comparatively few writers have thought that there is nothing more to evil action than the intentional production of serious harm. Some have not even regarded the causation of serious harm as necessary for evil. Those who hold the quintessential feature of evil action to be its origin in malice or misanthropy or moral blindness or some other serious cognitive or emotional fault or deficiency in the agent may class as evil some deeds that cause no harm at all, so long as they stem from an evil-making motivation. (One example here would be the practice of malicious but ineffectual black magic.)

Even if not all evils involve harm on a massive scale, Claudia Card rightly notes that it is atrocities such as the mass murders perpetrated in the Nazi death camps that provide us with our main paradigms of evil. This, she suggests, is for the epistemological reason that “the core features of evils tend to be writ large in the case of atrocities, making them easier to identify and appreciate” (Card 2002: 9; cf. Lara 2007: 25). But an equally important reason may be that, while not all evils are atrocious evils, atrocities are the most horrifying examples of the genre, the ones that make us catch our breath in dismay and incredulity. In a refinement of his earlier view, Kekes observes that the harm involved in evil acts is typically “not just serious but excessive” – as when a robber, having taken his victim’s money, proceeds to torture and murder him as well (Kekes 2005: 2). One might quibble that any morally wrong act is “excessive” or “over the top” in so far as it goes beyond the morally permissible, but Kekes, like Card, is drawing attention to the element of gratuitous injury or insult frequently found in those acts we call “evil” – an element which appears to owe more to their agent’s hatred or malevolence than to their instrumental rationality. In contrast with more ordinary wrongs, evils inflict suffering not so much (or not only) as a means to an end, but as an end in itself.
Among philosophers who think that the most notable thing about evils is the peculiar malice or nastiness of those who perpetrate or enjoy them are Todd Calder and Daniel Haybron, who point out that there would be something evil about a person who did no harm himself but took sadistic satisfaction in witnessing or contemplating the harm that other human beings inflicted on one another (Haybron 1999: 133–4; Calder 2002: 56). Taking this line further, it would show an evil disposition if a person delighted in watching realistic computer-generated scenes of torture and mutilation where he knew that no actual suffering was going on at all. Eve Garrard likewise places the major emphasis on the bad minds of evildoers, rather than on the amount of harm they bring about. A person who mistreats an animal or gloatingly bullies a terrified child does something evil, and not just wrong, she asserts, even though “in the scale of the world’s catastrophes the disvalue produced by these actions is pretty insignificant” (Garrard 1998: 45).

Another view focuses less on the harm associated with evils than on the existential impact they have on their victims – though this could be regarded as a special form of mental harm. Some evils attack the things that ground the meaning of people’s lives, assaulting their values, beliefs and traditions, and undermining their self-respect. Stephen de Wijze remarks that a common object of evil action is the dehumanization, humiliation and denigration of its victims, making them feel that they and their lives are utterly worthless (de Wijze 2002). Sergio Pérez speaks of evil as a lack of humanity exhibited in acts that are “carried out against human beings or against something meaningful to human beings,” observing that some kinds of political oppression may have this result even where they do not impose much physical pain or hardship (Pérez 2001: 189). Having our moral principles ridiculed, our friendships belittled, our projects denigrated, or our religion derided can be as hurtful and damaging as severe physical pain, especially if it causes us to start questioning our own commitments. A related sense of disorientation can be caused by the treachery or desertion of a trusted friend which, even if it should cause only minor concrete harm, may give us a sense that our world is falling apart.

**The evil character**

Not all evil acts are done by evil agents, i.e. agents whose character is fundamentally attuned to the doing, or enjoying, of evil. Extreme circumstances can generate extreme behavior in people who in normal life would never think of treating others in cruel or debasing ways. Morton remarks that “far more evil acts are performed by perfectly normal people out of confusion or desperation or obsession than by violent individuals or sociopaths” (Morton 2004: 53–4). Such out-of-character evildoing has been the subject of extensive empirical research over recent decades, when it has become increasingly recognized what evil such “ordinary men” as the members of German Police Battalion 101, whose murderous exploits in Western Russia in 1942 were famously studied by Christopher Browning, are capable of when removed from their customary moral and social environment (see Browning 1992). Still, there exist some individuals who display a more consistent and characteristic tendency to cause suffering when they get the chance, and these have attracted considerable attention from both psychologists and philosophers.

Among these are people suffering from innate antisocial personality disorder (APD), whose essential feature, as defined by the American Psychiatric Association, is “a pervasive pattern of disregard for, and violation of, the rights of others,” a condition commonly referred to as psychopathy or sociopathy. Subjects of APD “lack empathy and tend to be callous, cynical, and contemptuous of the feelings, rights, and sufferings of others” (see Kekes 2005: 103). Because such people are not responsible for their natures, calling them “evil” might seem unjust; yet to say that someone has an evil disposition need not
be read as imputing blame to that person for having it. Many of the serial killers that we know from real life as well as from fiction and film fall into this category, and it would run strongly contrary to everyday usage to deny the epithet “evil” to them on the ground that they could not help their behavior, having the misfortune to have been “born like that.”

Thoroughly evil persons – human monsters, if ever there were any – are sometimes conceived of as the diametrical opposites of moral saints. Hume gives us a thumbnail sketch:

*A creature, absolutely malicious and spiteful, were there any such in nature, must be worse than indifferent to the images of vice and virtue. All his sentiments must be inverted, and directly opposite to those which prevail in the human species. Whatever contributes to the good of mankind as it crosses the constant bent of his wishes and desires, must produce uneasiness and disapprobation; and on the contrary, whatever is the source of disorder and misery in society, must, for the same reason, be regarded with pleasure and complacency.*

*(Hume 1902: 226)*

A person who fitted this description would be as bad as bad could be, though Hume is rather outlining a conceivable figure than claiming that any human beings are actually like this. In fact, individuals who are invariably malicious and spiteful, and never wish well to anyone besides themselves, may be as mythical as unicorns. (Moral saints – people who are always as good as good can be, and never slip below the highest standards of virtue – are probably equally creatures of fantasy.) Even some of the worst men and women in history have had their softer sides. Hitler killed millions but was sincerely fond of certain members of his own family; he was also kind to animals and a committed vegetarian. The Emperor Nero had his mother Agrippina cruelly murdered and delighted to torture prisoners, yet he loved his mistress Poppaea. Some of the most notorious serial killers of modern times have shown themselves capable of an unsimulated affection towards a few favored others.

Central to Hume’s idea of the evil character is the malice, the wishing ill (Latin *malum*) to others, which lies at his heart. Several contemporary writers have followed and defended a similar Humean line. Hillel Steiner defines evil acts as “wrong acts that are pleasurable for their doers” and understands the psychology of evildoers in terms of the perverse satisfaction they take when things go wrong for other people (Steiner 2002: 189). Colin McGinn has proposed that the “basic idea” of the evil person is one of a character that derives pleasure from others’ pain and pain from others’ pleasure (in contrast to the virtuous person, who takes pleasure in others’ pleasure and pain in their pain) (McGinn 1997: 62). McGinn instances both real and fictional cases of evil characters, and suggests that for some individuals – such as the malicious master-at-arms Claggart in Melville’s novel *Billy Budd* – the distress of others has a primitive psychological attraction; they are, so to speak, wired up to enjoy other people’s distress. But McGinn is careful not to claim that *all* evil characters conform to this “basic idea.” One common and powerful motive for wanting to harm others is envy of what is perceived to be their better fortune (an attitude that may even be extended to animals on account of their “free, comparatively serene, and unencumbered” lives) (McGinn 1997: 79–80, 82). Even a confirmed sadist may occasionally be driven less by a primitive delight in others’ pain than by “a kind of existential envy – a feeling that his life is intrinsically less valuable than other people’s,” which impels him to reduce them to his own “dismal level” (McGinn 1997: 80). The envious Iago in Shakespeare’s *Othello* could be proposed as a type of the existentially dissatisfied person desirous of leveling down those whom he perceives to have been more successful than himself. Such malice born of envy should be distinguished from that more primitive kind which McGinn thinks is grounded in an innate sadistic streak.
Despite the undeniable intuitive appeal of the Humean tradition's analysis of evil character as malicious character, some have thought it overly narrow in implicitly excluding from the category of evil people men such as the SS chief Heinrich Himmler, overlord of the Nazi genocidal project, who inflict terrible suffering on others from a perverse sense of duty and without any special relish for what they do. As Luke Russell notes, on Steiner's theory, Himmler's horrific acts, since they brought no pleasure to their doer, do not qualify as evil: a very counter-intuitive result (Russell 2007: 670). But perhaps it should be allowed that Himmler's deeds, though evil in themselves, do not issue from an evil character. Maybe we should say that Himmler (if we accept his self-description as a reluctant killer) was not evil, but tragically mistaken, in thrall to a false ideology, morally benighted, disastrously inclined to follow his principles rather than be guided by his emotions. But some philosophers (especially those who incline in a more Arendtian direction) prefer to see a man like Himmler — stern and pitiless, ruthless and unbending, exceptionally lacking in the milk of human kindness, unable to recognize the moral "stop" signs that most people respect — as having one kind of evil character.

Their position may draw some indirect support from a popular traditional view, espoused by such influential Christian writers as St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, that evil is best understood not as some positive thing in itself but in negative terms, as a privation of good. Aquinas illustrated the claim with the example of physical blindness which, though a very real and harmful evil, is nevertheless not a thing but an absence, namely the absence of the faculty of sight (Aquinas 1989: 10). The privative theory of evil has often been criticized on metaphysical and empirical grounds, most stridently by Schopenhauer, who thought it absurd to hold that evil was something negative when "evil is precisely what is positive, that which makes itself palpable" (Schopenhauer 1970: 40). Yet the theory does at least nod in the direction of one important insight about evil: that many of the worst things that human beings do to one another are causally associated with some crucial lack or shortfall — of thought, or imagination, or love, or empathy, or the capacity to put oneself in another's shoes. So Himmler's case could be explained in terms of his emotional stuntedness, his inability to grasp what other lives were like from the inside, and his consequent moral blindness to the humanity of his victims. Even in the absence of malice, this lethal combination may not unwarrantably be deemed to constitute his character an evil one.

Some evil agents recognize that their victims' misery provides a reason against mistreating them but refuse to heed it; others, still more morally or psychologically incomplete, may not even see it as a reason. Not all philosophers are willing to call those who come within the latter group "evil"; they may alternatively be regarded as a kind of moral imbecile. But it is people of this description that Arendt was referring to when she spoke about the "banality of evil," and we might accordingly wish to class such killers as Himmler and Eichmann as men of banally evil character, in contrast to those whose mainspring of action is malice. When Arendt attended the trial of Eichmann in 1960, the defendant she saw standing in the dock in Jerusalem was not a monster or perverted sadist but a quiet, unimpressive figure who (in so far as he had thought at all) had thought it his duty to obey the will of the Führer to the best of his ability. "The longer one listened to him," Arendt reported, "the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else" (Arendt 1994: 49).

An account of evil character in Arendtian vein has been offered by Eve Garrard, who defines the evil agent as someone who cannot hear as reasons the moral considerations telling against certain kinds of act. Evil agents are afflicted by a special sort of moral blindness (in contrast to virtuous ones, who are

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blessed with a distinctive kind of moral insight). Someone who performs an act that is merely very wrong is aware that there are considerations that tell against the act but allows them to be outweighed by the selfish reasons in favor, whereas for the evil agent “such considerations as the suffering of his victims are silenced. They don’t weigh with him at all, not even to be outweighed” (Garrard 1998: 53–4).

Garrard’s account has been criticized both for what it includes within the category of evil and for what it excludes. Christopher Hamilton has pointed out that, on this view, Macbeth’s treacherous murder of King Duncan very implausibly fails to qualify as evil, or Macbeth as an evil character, since Macbeth has to struggle with his conscience before he can bring himself to commit the fatal deed (Hamilton 1999: 124). Garrard in response has suggested that Macbeth’s act was “appallingly wicked” rather than evil, but this appears a forced distinction in the light of ordinary usage (Garrard 1999: 139). Russell has objected that, since Garrard does not insist that evil acts should cause serious harm, she implies that even a minor act of shoplifting would be evil, and show evil character, if the shopkeeper’s right to keep his property were not a reason that weighed with the shoplifter (Russell 2007: 673). Garrard might best be able to meet this objection, while preserving her conviction that evil has more to do with the psychology behind the acts done than with the amount of harm produced, by borrowing from the more fully fleshed-out picture of the evil agent presented by Daniel Haybron. On Haybron’s portrayal, the evil person is “thoroughly or consistently” vicious and has no redeeming virtues whatsoever (or hardly any). To be evil “is to be disposed to be neither moved nor motivated (positively) by the good to a morally significant extent” (Haybron 2002a: 63, 70). Such a person is unlikely to confine herself to an occasional bout of shoplifting, but will show her obnoxious side consistently and predictably. If the reason why the shopkeeper’s right to keep his property fails to weigh with the thief is that such reasons never weigh with her, then her act of shoplifting, though minor in itself, will fit into a pattern of evil behavior.

It would be unwise to look for a definitive conception of the evil agent, or to hope to distinguish with precision people who are evil from those who are “merely” very bad. More disturbingly, perhaps, there may be no more than a fuzzy boundary to be drawn between truly evil characters and moral imbeciles. Many doers of gross wrong proceed with a breathtaking disregard of moral considerations or the feelings of others, while displaying no trace of malice. Often in such cases we may think that the agent could, and consequently should, have paid more attention to the morally significant reasons against acting as he did. To say that Eichmann was a thoughtless man is not to say that he was incapable of thought; and, being able to think, he should have questioned the orders he was given and the principles he honored. His negligence in this regard may persuade us to label him an evil man rather than a moral imbecile. Yet there are further issues that could be raised. Why did Eichmann fail to see the need to raise such critical questions? Did that failure itself result from an innate lack of moral intelligence? If we suspect that the answer might be yes, then we may feel renewed uncertainty how to pigeon-hole him.

**Evil and explanation**

Finally, is the concept of evil ever useful in explaining why people do the bad things they do? This is doubtful, for two closely related reasons. The first is that, as we have seen, the concept admits of no single, simple or uncontested analysis. It would be dogmatic to claim that such-and-such is the quintessential feature belonging to all those persons, acts and states of affairs that we bring under it (though, as we have also seen, that has not stopped philosophers proffering such claims). “Evil” does not distinguish a unitary motive for doing harm and certainly not some impulse of pure diabolism; moreover, the existence of several contrasting conceptions of evil poses a risk of serious confusion.

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where evil is cited in an explanatory role.

The second reason is that describing someone or something as evil says nothing that cannot be better expressed in more precise and illuminating language. Inga Clendinnen, in her book on the Holocaust, has remarked in rejecting the appeal to evil in the explanation of Nazi atrocities that such appeal is usually "of no use whatsoever in teasing out why people act as they do" (Clendinnen 1999: 88). Calling a deed, an agent, an event, or a state of affairs "evil" is no substitute for articulating the particular psychological, sociological, historical or situational factors that are at work, and those factors in their turn will require explanation. What causes a person to enjoy inflicting pain on others, or to wish to destroy the meaningfulness of their lives or the basis of their self-respect? Why do some agents suffer from the serious cognitive deficiencies to which Garrard alludes, being blind to the reasons against performing certain harmful acts? How is it that prolonged exposure to negative ideological messages sometimes induces such insensitivity even in relatively intelligent and kindly people? Even where we can explain a case of moral blindness, we will still not fully understand the agent's evildoing until we have identified the positive motives that impel him to act in the absence of the usual restraints. In short, evil is usually the *explanandum*, not the *explanans*.

Appealing to evil for an explanation of atrocious or horrifying acts may be mischievous as well as misleading where it is associated with a flawed conception of "a world of simple binary oppositions of Good and Evil" (Bernstein 2005: 50). Many politicians in recent years have played on the dark, if vague, resonances that the term "evil" sets off in many minds, trusting that once people have docketed the enemy as evil, they will feel they know all they need to know to justify his destruction. Thus pseudo-explanation replaces genuine explanation, throttling all but the most superficial reflection and reducing those whom it takes in to a level of thoughtless acceptance of the state or party line indistinguishable from Eichmann's. (Eichmann himself believed that the Jews were evil.) Small wonder that some philosophers and political commentators have suggested that we should jettison the language of evil altogether. But there is no necessity to take that drastic step and discard a mode of discourse that is at least as old as the Bible, provided that we employ it with due discretion and sensitivity to its ambiguities and limitations.

See also Conscience (Chapter 46); Blame, remorse, mercy, forgiveness (Chapter 48); Torture and terrorism (Chapter 68).

References


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Further reading
• Tabensky, Pedro Alexis (ed.) (2009) The Positive Function of Evil, Basingstoke, and New York:

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/evil
(Explores the controversial idea that evil may in some contexts make a positive contribution to human life.).

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