

On Evil (Routledge 2004)

from the Foreword

This is a book about how we can understand the awful things people do. My main inspiration for this book has not been the philosophers and theologians who have reflected on the meaning of evil. I am a professional philosopher and I have read much of this literature. But I must say that it has given me much less of a grasp of what lies behind atrocity than the work of the witnesses, people such as Hannah Arendt, Gitta Sereny, Primo Levi, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Desmond Tutu, who have undergone or had to deal with atrocity first hand. One of the legacies of the twentieth century is the reflections of such people. I have also learned a lot from recent psychological work on dangerous people. So this book is a philosopher's reaction to the work of those who have observed, in real life or the laboratory, evil motives at work. It is not a reflection on any central texts of our culture. It does not take a traditional concept of evil, supposed to be a fixed target, and try to say something deep about it. I am convinced, in fact, that that is precisely what we should not do. Instead it asks "How should we think about the atrocities around us? What concepts do we need, if we are to know how to explain and how to react?". ...

from chapter one

We're in the midst of it, as always. Human beings are committing atrocities upon one another with the same enthusiasm or carelessness that has always marked our species. When we think of evil we think first of large scale horrors. We think of the holocaust in Europe, the Gulags of Stalin's USSR, of Cambodia and Rwanda. But equally horrifying things happen on a smaller scale. As I write young women are disappearing regularly in the Mexican state of Juarez, murdered by some systematic and as yet unknown group. A newspaper article reports that in South Africa 60 children a day are raped, some of them less than a year old. In Britain and the middle east women who are seen to have dishonored their families are frequently murdered. In the United States school and workplace shootings are far from uncommon. And these must be taken against the background of isolated everyday murders, rapes, tortures, and assaults that has always been part of life everywhere.

There is something deeply puzzling about this. Why do people do these things? We can be puzzled at our own past actions. How could I have done that? The puzzlement focuses on acts that impose death, pain, or humiliation on others, on atrocities. We find it much harder to understand how people can do these things when they involve atrocity than when it is a matter "merely" of fraud, deception, or broken promises. We find the origins of atrocity so puzzling that we label the mystery Evil, and we grope desperately for explanations of it. One way we try to understand it is to refer new cases back to a few familiar images of evil. When President Bush on Jan 29 2002 referred to an "axis of evil" he was combining everyone's reactions to the events of September 11 2001 with an allusion to the opposed ideologies of the second world war. He was comparing the states that he took to be abetting terrorism to a popular image of demonic Storm Troopers, concentration camp guards, and invading Japanese armies. The comparison is disturbingly like the one that Iranian clerics used in November of 1979 when, in justifying taking US diplomats hostage, they characterized America as "the great Satan", the demonic source of evil in the world.

This book is about evil and our capacities for understanding it. I shall argue that there is indeed something special about evil, psychologically and morally. We need to distinguish a special class of horrible actions whose causes are different in important ways from those of other wrongdoing, and to which the right reactions are also different. But I shall also argue that demonic images of evil, those that make the psychology of evil totally different from that of normal human motivation, are a trap. Not only are the extreme forms of these images, according to which the perpetrators are moved by factors beyond human comprehension, wrong, but we also have reason to avoid more nuanced forms, which see very distinctive abnormal motivational patterns behind most awful behavior. By the end of the book I hope to have convinced you that most evil acts are performed by people disturbingly like you and me, that we can have some imaginative grasp on what it is like to perform many evil acts, and that in doing so we have to grasp some very basic and important facts about human motivation. I shall describe some shifts of the imagination which give us a better grasp on our own and other people's potentialities for evil.

In arguing for these conclusions I am both drawing on and disagreeing with traditions in psychology and philosophy. It is remarkable in fact how little discussion of extreme wrong-doing there has been in the history of philosophy. With the exception of Nietzsche, the primary focus of most moral philosophers has been on wrongs whose motives are pretty easy to grasp. Telling a lie in order to gain money, breaking a promise because the circumstances have changed, killing a rival for power or love. Some of these acts are very wrong, and some may even be evil, but in order to understand them one does not have to engage with the depths of human depravity. Yet the philosopher Kant, for example, treats it as a deep and indeed insoluble mystery why anyone would do anything as unreasonable as lie to escape embarrassment. An alien reading the history of western philosophy could get the impression that our species is generally composed of reasonable people who sometimes make a mistake in calculating what is in the common good, and sometimes put their own interest above others, but otherwise have all the same motivation. Psychologists, on the other hand, are interested in pathological behavior, and have classified violent and dangerous personalities, their developmental paths, and treatments that succeed or more often fail in taming them. From reading the psychologists an alien might get the impression that our species is riddled with unpredictably dangerous and irrational individuals. From both the philosophers and the psychologists one could get the impression that we, the normal people who occasionally stray off the straight and narrow, are fundamentally different from the pathologically dangerous people studied by the psychology of deviance, whose actions lie behind the atrocities all around us. This is wrong. The average reader of this book is not unimaginably different from many of the perpetrators of evil deeds, and a large proportion of the evil in the world is the result of the actions of people well within the range of normal routines of social life. Or so I shall argue.

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contents

Foreword	
Evil and otherness	One
The barrier theory of evil	Two
Nightmare people	Three
Facing evil: reconciliation	Four
Notes	

