

Bad versus Evil

rough version for the Yale genocide studies seminar
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I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and to condemn it. But it was too terrible for that. When I tried to understand it, I had the feeling I was failing to condemn it as it must be condemned. When I condemned it as it must be condemned, there was no room for understanding. But even as I wanted to understand Hanna, failing to understand her meant betraying her all over again. I could not resolve this. I wanted to pose myself both tasks - understanding and condemnation. But it was impossible to do both.

Bernhard
Schlink,
*The
Reader*

1 understanding and condemning The quotation above is from a fine novel that explores the connections between love, understanding, and moral judgment. The narrator loves someone who, as he learns later, has been a camp guard who has participated in a particular awful incident. His love does not survive the discovery, or is buried by it. He also learns a number of facts that help explain why she acted as she does. They could be put together to make some sort of plausible story of why someone who was not a deeply vicious person, not a psychopath or a sadist and not deeply in the grip of intoxicating ideology, could do what she did. Schlink does not put the story together, but leaves it to the reader to construct their own version. Instead, he focuses on a more subtle issue, the intuitive graspability of the explanation that the story would give. Suppose that we give an account that satisfies some abstract criteria for being an explanation of some evil acts, so that it in some sense says why a person committed them. Will that account give us the feeling of understanding, as well as its outward shape? Will it make us see how we might have done the same things if we had been in different circumstances or wanted different things? Very often the answer is No. And very often there is a tension, as this quotation attests, between thinking of the action as evil and getting an intuitive feel of why the person did it.

There are some obvious reasons for this tension. Intuitive psychological explanation is closely linked to imagination. To understand someone else's action can be to imagine how you could do the same, and this is near to imagining yourself doing it, which is near to imagining yourself as evil. So our moral self-respect warns us not to undertake the imaginative exercise. A somewhat more subtle reason concerns the social use of explanation. We often explain what someone did in order to master a way of thinking

that we can take over for our own uses. ('Why did she move her knight when her bishop was in greater danger?' 'Because then her opponent would think she hadn't seen the danger, and would concentrate on his attack on that side of the board, not realizing that her check-mate trap would have been sprung before he had his pieces in place.' And then by understanding what she was up to we come to learn how to spring such traps ourselves.) Explanation rehearses useful patterns of motivation. But then explanation of evil action rehearses evil motivation, helps one learn it. This is not something that we encourage, in ourselves or others. We are more comfortable taking evil as inexplicable.

My larger target is this general tension between understanding and condemning. I want to understand it better, and to describe ways around it. I am preparing to write a book on the subject. This is too big and too difficult - and too easy to say careless misleading things about - for me to discuss today, though. Instead I shall do some work on the word 'evil', trying to see why we use it for certain special purposes. (Why for example I used it six times above, when I could instead have written 'bad' or 'wrong' or 'reprehensible'.) The line I want to take on the concept of evil does have some surprising consequences. In particular I shall defend the following claim:

Sometimes one act can be more evil than another, but less wrong.

That may seem to you clearly mistaken, so read on and see how I get to it. Towards the end of the paper I very tentatively apply what I have been saying to issues about genocide. Again I have a fairly startling claim:

There could be cases of genocide which were not among the maximally wrong acts that humans can perform.

That too may seem obviously mistaken, so you may be curious what kind of intellectual insanity has led me to it. But I should utter a **WARNING**: I'm a philosopher, and philosophers produce thought-experiments and imaginary cases, and experiment with defining words one way or another. That's what philosophers are for. So if you see me flirting with dangerous or offensive conclusions about deeply important matters, don't get upset. Either dive in and see where I've gone wrong, or just decide that you would rather not get philosophical about these matters.

2 the case against evil There is a quite unproblematic use of 'evil' in which it means just 'very bad' of situations or people, or 'very wrong' of acts. (Perhaps stronger: extremely wrong.) We can also use 'wicked' or 'terrible' in this way. Call this the "moral intensifier" use of the word. If this is the central or only meaning of 'evil' then the question of the barriers to understanding evil acts is "why do we have difficulty understanding acts that are extremely wrong?". (Or "why when we condemn an action do we find it harder to understand how someone could have committed it?") I have two arguments against taking this to be the core meaning of 'evil'.

The first is a pragmatic reason. If this is our concept of evil and if we are going to use the word to characterize actions, their outcomes, the motives

that lead to them, and the people who commit them, indiscriminately and without differentiating ways in which a terrible result can come about, then there is a case to be made for its being a harmful concept, one that we might well be better off without. For the appropriate reaction to what is really really appalling is disgust and aversion. Facts about what people have done to other people - there is no shortage of them - should turn our stomachs, make us weep and despair. We should react as we do to decay or shit: wash it away, spew it out or bury it. At any rate this is the natural reaction to some extremely bad things, and we are imagining that we can bundle all extremely bad things together and call them evil. So given an action that makes you puke there ought to be nothing wrong in transferring your reaction to the person who performed the action. You ought to be able to think the person, in the words of Colin McGinn (*Ethics, evil, and fiction*) as having a "boiling inner ugliness". Let us, for the sake of argument for the time being, accept that there are people to whom that is a good reaction. But then thinking of evil as a moral intensifier suggests that when the act is a little less awful or the motive a little less brutish our reaction should be as if to something still disgusting, though a little less so. If evil is very disgusting and evil means very bad then somewhat bad things must be somewhat disgusting.

The assumption that all bad things are of a kind is clearly doing much of the work in this reasoning. But it is implicit in the idea of evil as a moral intensifier, as it doesn't make sense to think of degrees, more and less, of something that doesn't have a single nature. If by 'pet-like' we mean 'similar to dogs, cats, and goldfish (but not pigs, pumas, wolves, or barracudas)' then 'very pet-like' isn't a usable concept; it takes us in too many directions at once. So there is a way of getting from the moral intensifier idea to the thought that people who tell white lies are (slightly) disgusting. Still, someone could block the reasoning by refusing to grant that any wrong act was disgusting, or by allowing that 'evil' is an extremely vague and not very useful concept which covers many essentially different things.

Although someone could make these concessions and avoid some unwanted consequences, the reasoning I have been describing does describe an unfortunate self-fulfilling aspect to describing acts as evil. People who very readily think of acts and people as evil are prone to over-applying the concept in ways that lead them to perform acts that others can then describe as evil. It goes round in circle, A thinks that B is evil and so moves B into the category of people to be treated with disgust, to be flushed away or buried, so A finds it easier to do something awful to B, so B - or some C - now has reason to think of A as evil, and so ... There are many ways of blocking the cycle, but its availability helps explain what I take to be a sad fact about human life, that ex-victims become dangerous. People who have undergone awful experience cannot be blamed for thinking of those who brought about their suffering as revolting people, but this removes an obstacle to considerate treatment of those people, and sometimes an obstacle to considerate treatment of others. Nations whose national mythology centers on their suffering at the hands of others can think too readily in terms of what you have to do to survive the awful others.

So, to sum this up, there is a logically quite loose argument from evil as a moral intensifier to the justification of evil actions. The argument can be blocked, but we might be better off making less available the concepts that help people find it when they are desperate, terrified, or appalled.

3 bad versus evil The self-fulfilling aspect to thinking in terms of evil comes from taking all wrong acts to be wrong in the same way. Seeing how false this is gives us another argument against the moral intensifier view, and opens up a more interesting way to think about evil.

Think of all the ways that bad things can happen, and all the ways in which people can be at fault in making or allowing them to happen. There is negligence, to begin with, not thinking carefully enough or gathering enough facts about the likely consequences of one's course of action. Suppose that I am in charge of a famine relief project and I mismanage the fuel supplies for the planes that parachute food to people in the desert. I put them where corrupt warlords can seize them. The planes cannot fly, the food is not delivered, and people starve. I feel guilty, as I have allowed these people to die. The administrators running the project have doubts about whether I should be employed. Contrast my faults, though, with those of the people who stole the fuel. Suppose that they know very well that the effect will be that others will starve, and suppose that the facts make them insensitive to the fate of others, prejudiced about the value of people of other ethnic groups, and inclined to deliberately cause death for the sake of material gain. They are killers. These are very different faults from mine, but it is not clear that they are worse. It depends on the purpose of the valuation. If you are trying to get the famine relief project to succeed then you may regard me as a greater menace to your aims than them. They can be bought off, threatened, or distracted, while I am likely to cripple anything I touch with my negligence.

You may think that the negligence in this case is not a moral fault. It's just that I'm not smart enough for the job. Well, sometimes one *ought* to be smarter, especially when other people's vital interests are concerned but, leaving that aside, we can tell the story so that my faults are clearly moral faults. I should feel shame as well as regret. Suppose for example that I habitually stay up all night drinking and playing cards and then during the working day I'm too tired and hung over to do my job properly. So I make mistakes that cause deaths. Then I should be blamed, dammit: it's a moral fault rather than simply a morally relevant fact. So there are ways in which I am acting wrongly, indeed ways in which I am a bad - morally unworthy - person. But my badness has a different flavor to that of the killers.

For a different kind of case, a different kind of badness, consider someone who has very misleading moral convictions. Suppose that - as a result of reading certain philosophers, perhaps - a person thinks that the only obligations people have to one another are those that arise from mutually beneficial social contracts. So one person should not harm another, since the deal "I won't hurt you if you don't hurt me" is something everyone would sign up for. And we should keep our promises and honor our contracts and do business as straightforwardly and honestly, and profitably, as

possible. (The view is likely to be more complicated than this, of course.) But we are not obliged to help one another unless there is some possible two-way gain involved. Imagine that such a person buys the rights to an invention that makes it possible to manufacture most products with the use of almost no human labor. (And the maintenance and production of the invented device needs no labor either.) This is so successful that most conventional manufacturers go out of business and there is no work for millions of people. Faced with the social havoc that his business is producing our person says "Tough, that's business. I'm keeping my promises and fulfilling my contracts, and that's all that can be expected of me." Now this would seem - to anyone not blinkered by similar convictions - wrong, perhaps very wrong. But our person is not evil. He is bad news in some other way, consistent with his being an honorable man with some sort of respect for others.

For a third kind of case - and there are many others - consider someone who thinks that the only important thing in life is to be near to God, and who thinks that you can't be near to God unless you are part of her church, whose beliefs entail love and benevolence towards all humanity. Suppose that she and other members of the church as a result persuade destitute mothers around the world to give up their children to be raised in comfortable conditions by the church. Materially comfortable, that is: years later the mothers deeply regret giving up their children, and the children feel an emotional emptiness at the lack of real parents. Our person, though, has no regrets. It was all done out of love of the children, who otherwise would have had no chance of the only important thing in life. (This case is a variation on the aboriginal children example that I use in section 7.) Her motives are deeply flawed, most of us will agree, there is something very wrong with her and with what she does. But it is a special kind of wrongness.

Now my main claim, the central moment of this paper. None of these motives would very plausibly be called evil. None has the requisite whiff of brimstone. The reason is that although the acts in the cases I have described - the incompetent famine-reliever, the ruthless businessman, the benevolent baby-snatcher - are wrong, they are not wrong in the required way. The simplest gap in their wrongness is malice. None of the people in my examples acted out of a desire to bring harm to others. Yet a desire to harm is not in itself enough for evil. Someone who thought that pain was necessary for salvation and inflicted corporal punishment on people while hating doing so - 'this hurts me more than it does you', but sincerely - would not be evil, though they would be mistaken and their acts would be wrong. A sadist, though, does count as evil, since the infliction of pain is an end in itself for the sadist. More generally, acts motivated by a desire to humiliate, or to erode a person's self-respect, or the mutual respect of a group of people, are evil. By saying these things are evil I mean that they are the kinds of things we intuitively describe with the word, when we are not using it just as a dramatic way of saying that we disapprove.

I am not going to give a general definition of evil acts, motives, or people. (Interesting attempts at giving definitions, most of which I am in sympathy

with, can be found in articles in the special issue, which I edited, of *The Monist* on Evil - April 2002, vol 85 no 2. Those by Steiner, Garcia, de Wijze, Haybron and Garrard are especially relevant.) I am content to have made the point that when we talk of evil we focus on some special kind or kinds of wrongness. (It is important to say "kind or kinds" so as not to beg the question of whether all the things that we really do call evil, in its real non-intensifying sense, are morally or psychologically similar. Do sadists, serial killers, and ideologically driven terrorists really have something fundamentally in common?) And I take it that it is extremely plausible that the motives to harm and humiliate and undermine respect play an important role in these kinds of wrongness. I won't get more specific than that.

To sum up this second argument: there are different ways in which acts and motives can be wrong, so there is room for reserving some special terms of condemnation for particular forms of badness. And in fact it seems that this is what we do do with terms such as evil.

4 small-scale evil The important point shouldn't be very surprising: there are many very different ways in which an act can be wrong, many very different grounds for disapproval. I suspect that one thing that obscures the point is that in our desire to defuse the puzzlingness of right and wrong we tend to grab onto blanket explanations of The Nature of Morality - morality is following the rules of your culture, or serving the will of God, or adhering to an implicit social contract, or shifting the overall balance of happiness. But in fact we may need a cluster of loosely tied handkerchiefs rather than a blanket. There is an interesting corollary, though. The features that mark the kinds of wrongdoing which count as evil do not seem to be essentially linked to large-scale awful acts. The argument has to be a bit loose and tentative here, as I am not committing myself to a definite list of these basic features. But we can safely take it that taking pleasure in someone else's pain, aiming at the humiliation of others, and undermining people's capacity to live human lives, have some important place in differentiating evil from other kinds of wrong. And these features can be found in acts that are not major transgressions.

For example. There is the minor sadism of watching someone sit on a tack. You are a kid in school and a particularly unpleasant and stuck up teacher is about to sit down. There's a thumb tack on the chair, point upwards, and you do not warn her. In fact you watch in delight when she sits down on it, makes a face, tries to pretend nothing is wrong for a few moments, and then rushes out of the room. It would be a peculiar kid who did not enjoy this. But it is taking pleasure in someone else's pain. The pain may be no greater than that of a kitten, say, which some sadistic child sticks a pin into. That sadistic child arouses horror in us, and we take his character to have at least a potentiality for evil. But similarly when commiserating with the teacher, we would, only half hypocritically, say "yes, they are awful at that age".

Another: consider the pleasure we take at seeing rivals fail. Suppose that you have all your life been in the shadow of a clever and ambitious contemporary. He does better than you at school, is a better athlete and musician, and eventually becomes a promising playwright. His

first major play is about to appear off Broadway, and you happen to be in a conversation with an editor of the *NY Times* about which of two critics he should send to review it. One is generally impartial and reflective, while the other is notoriously prone to instant enthusiasms or hates, and writes raves or vitriolic polemics. You have a sense that this second critic might not like your acquaintance's work, and you persuade the editor to assign him to review the play. ("This is just the break he needs" you say hypocritically "if X liked it, he'd immediately be noticed.") The critic hates the play, and writes a devastating review, noting real faults and underlining them with gleeful contempt. You read the review the next morning, and you chuckle with amusement at the humiliation of someone you have always envied.

I have presented these examples in the second person: "you". This was deliberate. They are situations in which we can imagine playing the role of the person who brings pain or humiliation to another. And we can imagine on reflection feeling remorse - quite mild in the tack case and rather deeper in the review case - so that we are imagining both the motivation for the act 'from the inside', and that the act is wrong. Since I am drawing continuities with seriously evil acts, it is also important to notice that we can imagine not feeling remorse in these cases. We can imagine being the kid who defiantly rejoices in having been part of the teacher's discomfort, and being, say, a grumpy professorial character who years later writes a memoir of a long career of putting down upstart writers who think they can emulate the classics. But, unless we want to wallow in condemnation of the ways we humans just are, in imagining these people we are not imagining being really bad people doing extremely awful things. We are imagining being morally flawed, as we all are, and doing things that don't live up to our ideal of how we should be.

Examples like this could be multiplied. There are small scale analogs of the main features of serious evil. Indeed there are trivially bad analogs. They differ only in scale: they do not involve large amounts of pain or humiliation or disruption of basic human requirements. So, as a matter of linguistic usage, we do not usually call them evil. But then we do not usually call snow water, or call the sun a star, or think of squids and snails as cousins. But all these things have more in common than ordinary usage allows. So, I claim, in a more enlightened and almost natural way of speaking, these acts are evil, just slightly evil.

So now we have got to the stage of seeing that much wrongdoing, including seriously bad stuff, is not evil, and some evil, or at any rate acts that have essential features in common with evil acts, is not extremely wrong. As a result there are many instances of evil acts that are less wrong than acts that are not evil. For example the acts in the pin case and the review case just above are less wrong than the acts in the famine relief, ruthless businessman, and baby snatcher cases described earlier. I think this is an important fact. You may think it is an artifact of some creative definitions. But the conclusion still holds if we ignore the idea that there are trivial cases of evil. For as long as we allow that there are extremely wrong acts that are not evil and that evil acts vary in their wrongness, then the possibility is open. For example a sadistic rape is

clearly evil, but its consequences, bad as they are, will usually be much less bad than the consequences of the incompetence in the famine relief case. We condemn the agents of both deeds, and though we may react to the rapist with more disgust or horror, our condemnation of the person who allowed thousands to starve may be even more severe. Imagine that you can campaign to have just one person exiled from the country. There are rapists and murderers among the bandits, but you devote your energy to getting rid of the incompetent who is preventing the food getting to the starving people.

(Again general pictures of morality may get in the way of seeing this. We may think that how much someone is to be condemned is a matter of how stained their soul is, and the soul of a rapist is more deeply stained than that of a bungler. That may be, but when we judge people we do so for many purposes, and the force of our judgments can depend on many things, some of them shaped by our need to live good lives together rather than the desire to rank everyone in order of worthiness. If you do want simple metaphysical images try this alternative: suppose you were present at the creation and could persuade God to make just one fore-destined person not be born. Would it be the rapist or the bungler?)

5. Truman versus Milosovic A test case. Harry Truman ordered atomic bombs to be dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. About a hundred thousand people died, some of them immediately and some painful lingering deaths. Let us suppose some things that may not be true. First suppose that there were alternative courses of action that could have ended the war with smaller loss of life. (Dropping an atomic bomb on an unpopulated area, perhaps.) Suppose that Truman rejected these courses of action on inadequate grounds. (The military wanted to try out their new toy by really using it, say, the way weapons are meant to be used, and he went along with this, without appreciating their lack of imagination.) But suppose that all those deaths were for him an inevitable but very regrettable side effect. (He didn't think "so many fewer Japanese: good.") If these supposes were true, then Truman would have acted wrongly. Very seriously wrongly: thousands died needlessly. But on this account his act is not one of enormous evil. It is simply a very bad thing to have done.

Compare Harry Truman to Slobodan Milosovic. Again it is a partly invented person I am comparing, filling in facts to make my example work. And Milosovic is on trial at this moment, so some of the facts are being decided by authorities with access to a great deal of evidence, and being contested in an adversarial fashion. (Something that never happened in the case of Truman. It helps to be on the winning side.) But I shall suppose the standard newspaper version, which is that Milosovic planned a program of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and parts of Kosovo, in the course of which many people died and were tortured, rapes were committed for strategic purposes, men were held in appalling conditions subject to torture and summary execution. Probably he did not know the details of all of this, but he set in motion processes that he knew would result in such events. And - remember that as in the case of Truman I am coloring the picture to make a contrast - he intended these horrors to fall on people because they were non-Serbians in what he took to be Serbian land. He took death,

misery, and social disintegration among non-Serbians, especially Muslims, to be desirable as such. If this description is right then Milosovic's acts are central cases of evil.

Which was worse, though? It is often a mistake to compare horrors. In cases of long-running conflict each side counts up the massacres committed by the other as if they excuse their own atrocities. The debate of the past fifteen years over whether Hitler or Stalin committed greater crimes seems to me completely misguided. (It's as if both were before a judge who can execute one and spare the other: but it's not like that.) Yet there is a case, I won't say more, for arguing that the Truman of my invention did something worse than the Milosovic of standard accounts. More people died, though fewer were made refugees, and there were more alternative means to his ends. Yet, as I have been telling the stories, there is more evil to Milosovic and his acts than there is to Truman. So we see how there can be cases in which one act is more evil but less bad. In assessing my claim here there is a danger that we will get bogged down in the details of the cases. How many died, what alternatives were really viable, what were the foreseeable longer-term results? These are not really relevant to what I am arguing, which is not a comparison of these two actual men but a use of them to point in two different directions, one a moral miscalculation from decent motives that has a very bad result and the other an accurate calculation on awful motives. It doesn't really matter to me whether the actual cases fit my descriptions, as long as they are near enough that we can conclude that major disparities of this kind can easily happen. An easier case to make is that the Truman of my invention did something worse than a minor war criminal, such as the Bosnian Serb Arkan, or a less powerful evil politician, such as the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić. The contrast is less neat as we are not now comparing heads of state making historic decisions, but these too give us a grasp of how with events of great awfulness one person (one act, one decision) can be more evil but less bad.

6 explanation, imagination and remorse There is a simple connection between these ideas about small-scale evil and the question of the intelligibility of evil. We can imagine enthusiastically inflicting pain or humiliation on another person, as long as the infliction is relatively minor and the purpose is relatively trivial. So we can imagine doing things that are in many ways continuous with acts of serious evil. Does this mean the only obstacle to imagining serious evil is the scale of awfulness? This would be like the obstacles to imagining the space of the universe: we extrapolate from the inches and miles we are familiar with to the light-years and parsecs of the universe, going beyond what we can actually imagine but hoping that the metaphor does not let us down completely. Space has roughly the same properties at the large and the small scales: does evil?

That is a hard question to make sense of, let alone answer. An easier question to grasp is: are the motives that motivate people to commit atrocities similar to those that motivate the smaller scale evils of the kinds I have described? I think there is a consensus among psychologists, philosophers, and historians on this, though this consensus has yet to be articulated explicitly. It is that the answer is Yes if we are dealing with the

kinds of large scale atrocities that occur in historical and political contexts: European massacres of native peoples, the holocaust, Rwanda, Bosnia. People's motives here are like yours and mine, but exaggerated and combined in awful ways. In principle if we could see our own motives clearly and follow them into unusual contexts, and then understand how the actions of other people influence them, we could see these things as part of the intelligible range of human activity. (I have not argued for this, note. I have just appealed to a tradition that runs from Arendt through Staub, and more recently Sereny. There is a fair amount of evidence for the conclusion, but in addition I find myself impressed with the human qualities of some of these writers, notably Sereny, and I trust their intuitions about the motives of particular other humans.) On the other hand when we are dealing with serial killers, psychopaths, sociopaths and other kinds of unusual dangerous personality, extrapolation from the familiar is of very little use. These people just do work in a very different way. (But they are a source of a very small proportion of the horrors of the world. Don't put them at center stage.)

An important consequence of this is that it puts a protective frame around the image of the mysterious diabolical evil-doer. In fiction we find characters - Iago, Richard III, Lady MacBeth, to take three just from Shakespeare - whose mysteriousness is part of what makes them qualify as baddies. We're not supposed to identify with them or think of them as intelligible. (When in imagining the plot the reader's narrative point of view switches from one character's perspective to that of another, it does not easily take on that of these villains.) They are present as Other, as pure threat. They are like forces of nature or wild animals, except that they can calculate and imagine. So the temptation is to think of the perpetrators of evil as being like this. But this is very misleading. Most evil deeds are done by people who are a lot more like us, though in large-scale atrocities psychopaths are recruited and used by ordinary evil doers. So again we have a warning against the self-fulfilling tendency: if we think of evil as unintelligible then we think of those who do it as outside the range of humanity, not among those we mean to protect when we make barriers against malice.

We sometimes take our own actions as unintelligible. We look back at things we have done and wonder "how could I have done that?" Some element of this is a standard part of remorse. In one way this is a tribute to the barriers against understanding evil: even when we performed the action the realization that it was wrong makes it hard to see the motive. In another way, though, this suggests that the difficulty is superficial. At the time your motives were reasonably clear to you, so in order to understand them now you have only to undo the change of attitude you have undergone, not transform yourself into an utterly different creature. As I said at the beginning of the paper, I am not going to go deeply into questions such as this. The relevance to our immediate concerns is that it suggests that some of the barriers to understanding may be connected with remorse and revulsion rather than with badness as such. Remorse is a self-directed version of the disgust that we direct at the evil actions of others, and is much less often directed at other wrong actions. (There's a

long story here, so I'm simplifying.) And inasmuch as scaled down versions of remorse - in a limiting case embarrassment - apply to the small-scale versions of evil actions, an interesting suggestion arises. It is that our capacity to feel we understand evil actions, of the non-psychopathic kind, is not a function of their wrongness in itself, but of their tendency to evoke shame or disgust. If this is so, then we should expect to find some degree of bafflement at our and other people's actions when they are embarrassing or to a very small degree shameful. A topic worth exploring.

(Relevant to this section: Raimund Gaita *A Common Humanity* Routledge 1998.)

7 genocide This is a presentation to a genocide studies seminar, so I should end by making some connections. You might think that the connections were obvious. I have contrasted core examples of evil, large and small scale, with other kinds of wrong. So genocide should count as a core example of large scale core evil. Shouldn't it? In fact I think things are not so simple, though I would not deny that nearly all actual historical cases of genocide are cases of large scale evil. I am going to be pedantic and use the word 'genocide' in its strict sense, to mean the murder of a large number of people of the same racial or ethnic group. In the quintessential case the intention is to eliminate the whole target group. Genocidal intentions are always then somewhat mistaken or confused, since racial differences are very superficial. If someone wanted to kill all the people whose names begin with Q we probably would not think of their ambition as genocidal, but simply as grotesque. But the human genome is such a rich structure that we probably could find some combinations of genes that are to a reasonable probability correlated with having a last name beginning with Q. Suppose someone - God forbid - succeeded in killing all the Q-people. That would be a terrible thing to have done. But the main component of its wrongness would be simply the fact that a large number of people had been murdered. It is the unnecessary loss of all those individual people, each one of them unique, that would be awful. The confused intention to get the Q-people would be secondary, though it would underline our sense of how warped the personality is.

Thus the death of a large number of people all of whom are closely related is not worse than the deaths of a large number of less closely related people. Studies of the genetic similarities among Armenians or Jews are not relevant to assessing how bad the acts committed against them were. So if someone markets some substance - a food additive say, or an infant formula - that they know will result in the deaths of millions of unrelated people, their action is as bad as that of someone who massacres many people (who they take to be) related to one another. I take it that this would be an awful thing to do, and if we tell the details right could rank high on evil as well as on general wrongness, which is not genocide. In fact it could easily be a worse action than an act of genocide that did not target a large number of people. If one Scottish clan decides to wipe out another, and largely succeeds, then we have a small-scale genocide, but something that is run of the mill by the grim standards of human history, and which would be less wrong than the commercial murder of millions I have just imagined. (Perhaps less wrong than the bombing of Dresden or that of Hiroshima.)

We have now got to the second outrageous conclusion I advertised at the beginning. It becomes possible to imagine how an act of genocide can be considerably less wrong than other non-genocidal acts, and thus not be among the worst things we can do. We can strengthen this conclusion, I think, by reflecting on something that I have been overlooking when discussing genocide. When characterizing evil I emphasized the intention to cause pain or humiliation for its own sake, or to disrupt the relations between people on which a human life depends. The last of these is a general form of humiliation, since it is the intention to prevent people living the kind of life that sustains self-respect. And it is an intention that is found in most genocidal projects. There is a target group that identifies itself as such a group: its members think of themselves as members of the group and relations between individuals are mediated by an awareness that they share this membership. Then the genocidal intention is to take away this dimension in the crudest possible way, by eliminating the people. There might be survivors, but they would not be numerous enough and would not have enough of their social structures intact to identify themselves as a group. (Surely thousands of demoralized survivors of the original native population of America, those who were neither killed nor chased away nor kept on reserves, quietly integrated into the European settlers in this way. Their grandchildren did not think of themselves as members of any tribe.) What we have then is the murder of a culture, of a social structure and a way of life. It is usually a central part of the genocidal ambition. In some cases, for example the Cambodian case as I understand it, the aim was much more to cause a cultural change than it is to eliminate any identifiable group. It has the evil characteristic of taking as its target an essential component of human dignity.

One can eliminate a culture without eliminating the individual people, though. Examples are the sometimes well-meaning attempts of dominant cultures to 'educate' away the traces of dominated ones. Remember the policy of forcing children of Australian aborigines in the 1950s to leave their families and be brought up in boarding schools in ignorance of their ancestral traditions. In retrospect we can see that this policy has a lot in common with standard examples of genocide, or with rape: it is an attempt to take away an essential component of a self-respecting human life. And indeed many of the individuals who underwent this process emerged thinking of themselves as being deeply damaged. Now many of the perpetrators here - teachers, church leaders, social policy makers - in some way did not know what an awful thing they were doing. They thought it would be better for the children. So though the acts are awful we have difficulty thinking of the perpetrators as straightforwardly evil. (But then we usually have this difficulty, once we start looking at real human motives. It's all shades of gray.) It is not hard, though, to think of an imaginary case much like this in which the motives are classically evil. Suppose that racist European Australians had thought "Murder is forbidden, but we don't want Aborigines around. We don't mind if there are a few ex-aborigines wandering in the cities, with none of their original culture, not much of ours, members of no society at all. So let's put them all in schools." The very occasional actual Australian may have thought this way. Then that person and their actions would have been extremely evil, as I expect you will agree. And, though I expect you resist the idea, this extremely evil act is less bad than some acts of mass murder, and

indeed of some non-evil acts of moral miscalculation.

My theme throughout has been the danger of using too few labels. Evil and Wrong are different labels. Genocide is itself a label that covers morally different possibilities. Nearly all genocide is very wrong, but the component that is evil is often less associated with the intention to kill than the intention to humiliate and de-culture. To complete the separation of components let me point out that there could be cases of genocide that were not evil, as I am understanding it. They are not real cases (or at any rate I have not found or remembered real cases that have the shape I want.) But they are in a science-fictional way possible. Suppose that aliens arrive and demand the elimination of the Swedes. Unless in a hundred years time there are no people of Swedish descent left, they will wipe out life on earth, down to the last cockroach. (Don't ask me why. Perhaps they don't like Bergmann movies.) Now it is possible that the morally right response is: OK, we humans stand together, kill us all. But someone who believed that would be forced to extreme positions on other matters, which we usually do not take. And we have a hundred years to play with. So another policy is to forbid the Swedes to reproduce - being reasonable people the Swedes might voluntarily abstain - and then to gently euthanase the few surviving centenarians at the end of the period. As a result we have deliberately brought it about that there are no Swedes, and no Swedish culture. It falls under the definition of genocide. But the motives are not evil, and are not even in the circumstances bad. They are the best course open to us in a bad situation.

This is a deliberately unreal example. The main thrust of the paper is to make us think about what *is* real. Human acts have real causes, which we can try to understand. To do so we have to grapple with the fact that the causal similarities among acts may not line up easily with the categories of our everyday moral and everyday psychological thinking. Then we have to think: what is really wrong here, how objectively similar are these acts that we react to in similar ways? When we do this we must be prepared to find unexpected possibilities in familiar ways of thinking.