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# Giving evil its due: radical evil and the limits of philosophy

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Thesis

**GIVING EVIL ITS DUE: RADICAL EVIL AND THE LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHY**

by

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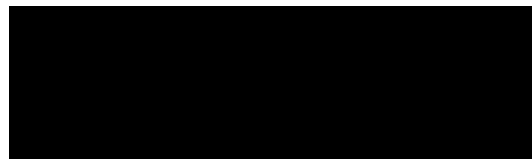
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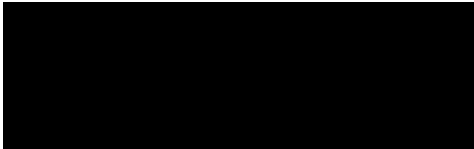
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with his wry sense of humor and appreciation for the fragility of human existence and what is important in life.

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# **GIVING EVIL ITS DUE: RADICAL EVIL AND THE LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHY**

**JOHNATHAN IRVING KELLY**

## **ABSTRACT**

Despite Hannah Arendt's prediction in the wake of World War II that "the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of post-war intellectual life," the majority of postwar philosophers have preferred to stay away from the idea of evil. But at the same time that philosophical reflection on the notion of evil has dissipated, there is no denying the fact that referring to "evil" has remained very common among the public at large, among political leaders, and in popular culture. To better understand what meaning the concept of evil might have for us today, in this paper I will address two main questions. First, recognizing the problems recent philosophers have raised against the idea of "evil," we should ask if we should simply take our leave of the concept of evil, admitting that it has been exhausted by overuse, shifting intellectual paradigms, and a triumphant secular age. In other words, does it make any sense for us today to go beyond calling something wrong or unjust or harmful or unspeakable and to speak in terms of "evil?" Is talk about evil simply a relic of a way of speaking and thinking about the world that we have long left behind? Is "evil" in fact one of those terms that have always drawn people into error and sometimes even into committing horrific acts?

Second, if we believe we can begin to address this first set of questions about the notion of evil, it remains to be seen what exactly we might mean by evil. What are we



pointing to when we call something "evil?" What makes something evil rather than merely wrong or unjust? What kinds of things do we reserve the judgment of evil for? This set of questions leads us to come up with a substantive account of evil, an account of what evil is and what distinguishes evil from other wrongdoing.

To address these questions, our argument will proceed as follows. We will begin with an overview of the recent return to discussing evil after a turn away from evil by the majority working in philosophy. After giving a brief historical overview of these shifts we will then begin to argue for the need for philosophers to think about evil and the concept of evil. In short, as I will argue, because we continue to turn to the notion of evil in response to extreme forms of wrongdoing, philosophical reflection is warranted in trying to clarify what we might reasonably mean when we call an agent or action evil.

Moving to a discussion of the idea of radical evil, we will begin with a close reading and interpretation of Kant's account of radical evil, pausing to discuss what he gets right and where he may err. We will then move to recent discussions of evil in contemporary philosophy, much of which can be understood as revolving around Kant's account of radical evil. In these contemporary accounts, evil is no longer used in an inclusive, wide sense, but almost exclusively to refer to the kinds of extreme, unforgivable wrongdoing we might classify under the notion of radical evil. In these recent accounts, there is an attempt to distinguish degrees of evil, between the "normal" or "ordinary" evils of serious wrongdoing that we nevertheless can understand, punish, and cope with, versus the "radical" or extreme evils that we cannot really understand, punish, or fit into our intellectual and moral frameworks.

After discussing these recent accounts and appreciating the progress they make, we will nevertheless ask whether they can really help us grasp the kinds of horrendous evil they were developed in response to. In particular, we will argue that these recent accounts still fail to appreciate the notion of radical evil to its full extent, preferring to focus on the harm caused and on notions like the banality of evil and ordinary evildoers, projects which may end up distorting the nature of evil. Looking to some recent reflections on radical evil, we will argue that the Kantian notion of a perversion of the will and an evil heart help us to understand that radical evil is something that is usually anything but banal, but is a fundamental breach of our normal standards of wrongness and that this quality of excess and the inversion of the moral is what lies at the core of the acts and agents we deem evil. We will conclude by looking at the necessary limits of any abstract discussion of evil in general and how particular evils such as those experienced at Auschwitz cannot even begin to be explained by such accounts, arguing that our discomfort and horror in the face of evil nevertheless remains but that such attempts at reflection and understanding evil remain necessary and urgent.

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## INTRODUCTION: PROBLEMS WITH EVIL

Writing with a sense of urgency few philosophers have matched, Emmanuel Levinas opens his great work *Totality and Infinity* by famously declaring: "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality."<sup>1</sup> Why would Levinas choose to begin his far-reaching magnum opus with this provocation? What does it mean to wonder if we are duped by morality, and why is the question so urgent and personal for Levinas as he begins the book which will stand as the supreme expression of his thought? After opening the book with this jarring question, Levinas provides a clue to the historical events which have made this question a constant preoccupation for him personally in the next few paragraphs of *Totality and Infinity*, where he writes of the destruction that war has brought on humanity and the toll it has taken on our belief that morality is more than something simply illusory and disposable. In a later interview, Levinas makes clear that it is the recent horrors in Nazi-occupied Europe that have made questions about the status of morality unavoidable: "The essential problem is: can we speak of an absolute commandment after Auschwitz? Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?"<sup>2</sup> Unlike most other major figures in 20th century philosophy on both sides of the Atlantic, the absolute failure of morality and of all standards of human dignity which reigned under the Nazi regime animates much of

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 21

<sup>2</sup> See *The Provocation of Levinas*, Edited by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (New York and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), p. 176

Levinas's work and leads him to explore the questions of the mysteries of good and evil and to argue for his distinctive views about the primacy of ethics.

In this paper, I want to address a question very much in the same spirit of the worry that preoccupies Levinas. Like many people today, I am somewhat uneasy about simple judgments of "good" and "evil," especially those made by public figures. The overuse and exploitation of the idea of evil by politicians, religious fundamentalists, and in popular culture makes one rightfully weary about the use of the term "evil." Meanwhile, in recent philosophy, moral and political philosophers have had a hard time in the 20th century with coming to much in the way of a shared understanding of what makes an action, agent, or institution virtuous, just, good, or morally praiseworthy -- so coming to any shared understanding of what evil may mean seems like an even bigger long shot. And yet, on the question of evil (and immorality more generally), there does seem to be a consensus of sorts in academic philosophy -- a silent consensus, a consensus to not talk about evil and instead to stick to other topics in moral theory and practical ethics. This silence, along with a more general skepticism of the notion of "evil," makes us pause to wonder whether anyone who employs the term "evil" today is not simply duped or mistaken.

Echoing Levinas, we might say that despite the ease with which many people continue to speak of "evils" and "evil" actions and agents, it remains of utmost importance whether we are saying anything meaningful when we employ the concept of evil. In this paper, we will take up Levinas's troubling question and bring it to bear on two sets of related questions. First, we must ask if we should simply take our leave of the

concept of evil, admitting that its use has been exhausted by overuse, shifting intellectual paradigms, and a triumphant secular age. What possible meaning can the concept of evil retain for us today, besides as something we might explore as an important subject for historians of philosophy or religion? Does it make any sense for us today to go beyond calling something wrong or unjust or harmful or unspeakable and to speak in terms of "evil?" What use can this concept have for us in the 21st century? Is it simply a relic of a way of speaking and thinking about the world that we have long left behind? Is it even one of those terms that have always drawn people into error or sometimes even into committing horrific acts?

Second, if we believe we can begin to address this first set of questions about the notion of evil, it remains to be seen what exactly we might mean by evil. What are we pointing to when we call something evil? What makes something evil rather than merely wrong or unjust? What kinds of things do we reserve the judgment of evil for? This set of questions leads us to come up with a substantive account of evil, an account of what evil is and what distinguishes evil from other wrongs.

While these two sets of issues raise a host of difficult questions, too many to even scratch the surface of here, we will nevertheless try to work towards an account of evil in this paper that shows that the concept of evil is an important moral concept that we should preserve in our moral judgments for dealing with the undeniable instances of evil-doing that continue to confront us. With this groundwork laid, we can then move on to compare conceptions of evil and argue that the most viable account of evil for us today is a version of the notion of radical evil, an account first developed by Kant and that

retains much value today in making sense of the kinds of extreme, unjustifiable and unforgivable instances of wrongdoing we rightly describe as evil.

Before moving to discuss this account of radical evil, we must first address the many obstacles standing in the way of developing a viable conception of evil that will be useful to us in our moral judgments and reflections. Beginning with the lingering doubts about the notion of evil and its abuse mentioned above, we can admit that there is of course much to point to in questioning whether we might be duped by talk about evil. There is no doubt that much discourse about evil, especially in recent politics and during the upheavals of the 20th century, has been deployed either to dupe the public or to justify the violence and policies of certain groups or regimes against the innocent. For good reason, we are therefore skeptical when we hear political leaders speak about the evil of another nation and its leaders. But being critical and skeptical in thinking about the use and abuse of the concept of evil should lead us to think more deeply about evil and what it might mean for us today, rather than simply dismissing reflection on an idea that many will continue to use in everyday conversation and in political and religiously charged rhetoric.

Richard Bernstein, one of the key figures in recent philosophy to return attention to the idea of evil, has raised the alarm about what he calls "the abuse of evil." Bernstein's work on evil preceded the September 11 terrorist attacks, but he sees that talk about evil suddenly became a big part of Americans' public discourse following 9/11. As Bernstein reflects on this change,

"But something happened on 9/11. Overnight (literally) our politicians and media were broadcasting about evil. We were flooded with headlines about evil and images displaying evil—from the repetitive TV images of the crumbling of the World Trade Center Towers to the smirking faces of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. Suddenly the world was divided into a simple (and simplistic) duality—the evil ones seeking to destroy us and those committed to the war against evil. What is so disturbing about the post-9/11 evil talk is its immense popular appeal. Few stop to ask: What do we really mean by evil? What are we saying when we label our enemies evil? And who are these enemies? It is presumably self-evident. In a world in which there is both genuine and manipulated fear about the threats of terrorism that can strike at any place and any time, it is psychologically reassuring to label our enemies 'evil.'"<sup>3</sup>

Bernstein and others are right to be worried about the uses the idea of evil can be put to, in particular in the long-practiced tradition of labeling some enemy "evil" in order to justify the hatred or harm perpetrated against them. And yet despite the discomfort recent philosophers and others may have with using the term evil, there seems to be no letting up in the way people continue to speak about evil in everyday conversation and moral judgment. As Manfred Kuehn notes in a perceptive article on the concept of evil, "There is a sense in which the existence of something like 'evil' cannot be doubted. Apart from its verging on a daily topic of conversation, the discussion of evil pervades our

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Bernstein, "The Abuse of Evil," in *Deliver Us From Evil*, Edited by M. David Eckel and Bradley L. Herling (Continuum: New York, 2008), p. 102



theological, philosophical, literary, and political traditions. We have no problem referring to the 'evils of humanity' or describing someone as 'evil'; we know 'evil acts,' 'villainy,' and 'maliciousness'....I know of no language—and I think there is no such language—in which one is unable to distinguish between 'good' and 'evil' or in which this distinction does not play a foundational role. Common sense and ordinary language attest to the phenomenon of evil."<sup>4</sup> Like it or not, Kuehn points out, the concept of evil seems to be here to stay, and we can either refuse to recognize its enduring place in our understanding of the world or we can ask ourselves why the concept continues to be used and ask what it might mean. The resilience of the concept of evil reminds us that no matter how much we may be wary of speaking about evil, the phenomena we have difficulty describing other than in terms of evil continues to outpace our intellectual discomfort with the notion.

This reticence about speaking in terms of evil rather than in terms of wrongdoing or injustice and human rights may account at least in part for the absence of discussion of evil in much of 20th century philosophy. But one wonders whether there is more to it than this general move away from moral and religious absolutes. As Berel Lang suggests in one of his essays exploring the almost total absence of discussion of the Holocaust in philosophy, recent Anglo-American philosophy has taken a decidedly non-historical or even anti-historical turn as it has tried to find its footing as a distinctive discipline.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Manfred Kuehn, "How Banal is Evil?," in *Deliver Us From Evil*, p. 133

<sup>5</sup> See the essays by Lang collected in his book *Post-Holocaust: Interpretation, Misinterpretation, and the Claims of History* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, Indiana, 2005), and in particular the concluding chapter, "Philosophy and/of the Holocaust."

Under pressure from within and outside philosophy, academic philosophy has recently been resistant to getting too intertwined with history, current politics, and other realms that were seen earlier as relevant for philosophy and which were subject to philosophical criticism and exploration throughout the history of philosophy. As Lang points out, this apparent shift in relation to history does not serve philosophy or historical understanding very well, as Kant well understood in his famous warning about severing the relationship between theory/philosophy and history/concrete reality: "Concepts without percepts are empty, percepts without concepts are blind." This is a very familiar complaint against the current state of academic philosophy, but it bears repeating given the near absence of reflection on evil in an ever-exploding and wide-ranging academic literature on all kinds of problems, sub-problems, and hyper-specialized debates in moral philosophy.

## HOW RADICAL IS EVIL?

While the subordination of the notion of evil to other topics in ethics -- and the very much alive assumption that evil is merely privation or absence -- continues to be influential, the horrific events of the 20th century have caused many to rethink whether evil is indeed merely a lack of goodness rather than something radical, active, and enormously disruptive and powerful. In the article "Transcendence and Evil," Levinas speaks of evil as inherently an excess, an essential break with the normative, something active and transgressive. As Richard Bernstein writes of Levinas's account, "Evil as excess initially suggests the excess of its quantitative intensity, 'of a degree surpassing measure.'"<sup>6</sup> In another formulation of this idea, Levinas stresses that "evil is an excess in its very quiddity."<sup>7</sup> Evil is not an excess simply because suffering can be terrible and unendurable. Rather, evil's "break with the normal and the normative, with order, with synthesis, with the world, already constitutes its qualitative essence."<sup>8</sup> The etymology of the English word "evil" supports this notion of evil as excess and something active, even radical. The word "evil" is derived from the Old English "ofel," which fundamentally means "over" or "above," "exceeding due measure" or "overstepping private limits."<sup>9</sup> As the etymology of "evil" demonstrates, for English-speakers evil has long been understood

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<sup>6</sup> Bernstein, "Evil and Theodicy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, Edited by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2004), p. 260

<sup>7</sup> Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 158

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, OED Online. June 2014. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/65386?rskey=gR6VvS&result=3> (accessed June 11, 2014).

not as a void, nothingness, or an absence, but from the beginning has been understood as some sort of excess, as something over and above the norm or normal.

Like Levinas, James Dawes points to the paradoxical yet necessary place we reserve for the term evil to speak about those wrongs which exceed or go beyond our normal categories of wrong in an article summarizing his recent book *Evil Men*. The radical or "going beyond" quality that Dawes points to is similar to the excess of evil that Levinas describes and will also be among the key features I single out as what distinguishes radical evil. Dawes begins by conceding the many difficulties with employing the term "evil," difficulties that in the end are only outweighed by the horrors that we can find no other word when confronting them: "'Evil' can be a sloppy word, an impediment to understanding. It means 'bad' plus unidentified metaphysical stuff.' Saying something is evil is often a way of ending a conversation, stopping further analysis, letting ourselves be satisfied with thought-dulling mystery. 'Evil' can also be a dangerous word. To say something is evil is to say it can't be understood; it can only be hated. We use the word 'evil' when we need to prepare ourselves to do violence. Evil is the ultimate 'other.' But to talk about these [mass killers], I need a word that insists there are acts that exceed our normal categories of wrong. I need a word that insists that, no matter how long you stare at it, no matter what light you put it in, there will always remain something beyond what you are able to see or say. These were evil men."<sup>10</sup>

Paul Ricoeur also draws attention to evil as an excess, a defining quality so powerful that it gives rise to the absolute no or prohibitive character of morality, which

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<sup>10</sup> James Dawes, "Understanding Evil," [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), July 1, 2013.

receives this distinctive prohibitive character largely by opposing evil with the "thou shalt not." As Ricoeur writes, "This sinister — though not exhaustive — enumeration of the figures of evil in the intersubjective dimension established by solicitude has its counterpart in the series of prescriptions and prohibitions stemming from the Golden Rule....you shall not lie, you shall not steal, you shall not kill, you shall not torture. In each case, morality replies to violence. And if the commandment cannot do otherwise than to take the form of a prohibition, this is precisely because of evil: to all the figures of evil responds the no of morality. Here, doubtless, resides the ultimate reason for which the negative form of prohibition is inexpugible."<sup>11</sup> In other words, as Kuehn and Ricoeur both stress, the unequivocal "no" to evil which is spoken by moral judgment is a necessary, powerful response to evil's transgression of the ethical. As Ricoeur argues, moral judgment's negative/prohibitive form is the basic human response to evil; "thou shalt not commit evil" is at the essence of all major moral traditions, where prohibitions against evil form a central, irreplaceable role.

In other texts discussing the phenomenology of evil, or the experiences of evil as suffering and fault, Ricoeur provides an important discussion of the several stages and transformations that the problem of evil has gone through, from the early phases of myth and spiritual texts to theodicy and philosophy.<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur draws attention to the ways evil

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Translated by Kathleen Blarney (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1992), p. 221

<sup>12</sup> See, in particular, Ricoeur's early book, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1967), and one of his late essays, "Evil: A Problem for Philosophy and Theology," Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Vol. 53, No. 4, p. 635-648. Ricoeur also discusses radical evil in his important late work *Oneself as Another*.

has been represented in various forms of discourse and narrative, early on as impurity and stain, then as sin and then guilt; and more generally as a cosmic force along with good, and as enduring problems for theology and philosophy, for theory and practice. Evil has also always had a two-fold character, as "evil done" (sin, guilt, fault) and "evil suffered" (stain) -- in other words, evil is always experienced on two sides, the experience of the evildoer and the experience of the one who suffers. Of course, reflections on evil often focus almost exclusively on one or the other of these two sides, on the actions of the perpetrators or the suffering of the victims. But as Ricoeur, Levinas, and others have tried to make clear, evil has a fundamental relational or interpersonal nature, which makes a more integrated account of evil connecting suffering and wrongdoing all the more necessary.<sup>13</sup>

Ricoeur also pays special attention to the pre-theoretical expressions of evil found largely in early myths and religious texts.<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur marks a key shift in thinking about evil when philosophy and theology take up the challenge of confronting evil (and approach it via the prior representations of evil in myths and other symbols of the experience of evil). Although what has come to be known as "the problem of evil" has long had a moral/practical dimension -- regarding blame, human responsibility, the will, human nature, etc., -- it nevertheless began as mainly a theoretical (largely theological)

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<sup>13</sup> In his two-volume history of the Holocaust, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, Saul Friedlander also attempts to develop what he calls an "integrated history" of the Nazi crimes against the Jews, shaping his narrative through a close look at the Nazi documents, the diaries and memoirs of the victims, and previous studies of the period. By interweaving these elements into his far-reaching historical narrative, Friedlander brings together the wrongs and intentions of the perpetrators with the suffering and responses of the victims and survivors.

<sup>14</sup> See Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*.

problem, raising questions about God's existence and justice and the question of the origins of evil. Ricoeur discusses in detail how evil and suffering are conceived in largely cosmological/theological terms in several key early cosmological myths, the Greek myths, the book of Genesis and the story of the Fall, the theology of Augustine and the theodicy of Leibniz. Ricoeur draws attention to a key shift first towards the ethical in the discourse about evil first emerging with Kant, who rejects the project of theodicy and sees evil mainly as a practical or moral problem. Evil then becomes an issue of explaining the nature of human evil-doing and how evil is possible in the human will and as the result of free choice. Evil, for the heirs of Kant's philosophy, is therefore mainly a practical/moral problem, more a problem related to moral judgment and practice than theodicy, the origins of the universe, or other far-reaching metaphysical problems.

And yet, as Ricoeur's explorations of the various forms of discourse of evil testifies to, human responses to evil still retain a quasi-religious status, a way of thinking and speaking that is perhaps more at home in religion, where acknowledging the fundamental experiences of doing evil (sin) and suffering evil are a constant subject in religion, and the inexplicable, irrational qualities of extreme evil-doing are given voice by those crying out for help or justice from God or who protest God's allowing evil to go unpunished. In this light we might see the idea of evil as a notion that is both philosophical/ethical and deeply religious, something we know to be human and pervasive and yet retaining qualities that are not fully at home in our secular moral frameworks and which forces us to look beyond familiar categories. As Ricoeur memorably put it in his book on the stages in the discourse on evil, "the image gives rise

to thought" -- the experience of evil captured in myths and religious texts lies at the bottom of our conception of evil, and thus however much we may think our moral or abstract conceptions of evil depart from the mythical or religious they can never quite escape from these powerful beginnings.

In this spirit, Maeve Cooke also suggests how radical evil may force us to move beyond our usual ways of thinking into something closer to a religious, post-secular mode:

"But what can explain the horror aroused by radical evil, if we do not want to link that horror with the transcendent nature of that which is violated by radical evil? If we accept Plato's and Kant's idea that no human being acts in a deliberately immoral way, following a principle aimed at destroying the moral point of view, then the horror aroused by radical evil comes from among other things the realization of the extreme extent to which our representations and moral judgments may, when wrong, lead us to lose touch with reality. Moral communities always discover afterwards—ex post facto—that what was done by their members in pursuit of shared views of the good was radically evil. The horror we experience when thinking of the Holocaust or of other episodes of radical evil is linked with the horror that the abyss of psychosis arouses—the horror at the idea of total loss of touch with the reality as seen by other human beings, or total encapsulation into a world no one understands, of total unrelatedness between the meaning we assign to our actions and the meaning they acquire in the world of all other human beings. When we look at radical evil



from the perspective of the victims, the horror is aroused by the abyss that separates their innocence from their fate, again, the meaninglessness for them of the destruction they suffered or the total unrelatedness of their deeds and their fate. That is why Habermas speaks of a 'reflection on the incomprehensible' in relation to Auschwitz."<sup>15</sup>

In each of their distinctive accounts, Ricoeur, Dawes, Cooke, and Levinas each point to the apparent explanation-defying qualities of evil. While this may make evil into something like "wrongness" plus something metaphysical or inexplicable, as Dawes suggests, Kuehn addresses this issue from a different perspective and argues that evil is not something we need to understand (or should want to understand) in going about making moral judgments about evil-doing:

"[Those who judge something to be evil] may not have any idea about what evil 'really is' psychologically speaking, and they may, in fact, doubt that an act that is judged to be 'evil' can really be understood as evil by looking at the motives of the perpetrator. But this does not matter. To say it again: trying to understand evil is different from passing moral judgments or deciding whether particular actions or practices are evil....The principle of evaluating an action and the reason for which someone committed an act need not mirror each other. I can say that an act is evil without knowing anything about why a perpetrator committed it, and I want to suggest that, whenever we judge an act to be really evil, we should not

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<sup>15</sup> Maeve Cooke, "An Evil Heart: Moral Evil and Moral Identity," in *Rethinking Evil: Contemporary Perspectives*, Edited by Maria Pia Lara (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2001), p. 187

really care to understand it. Perhaps we can say that whenever it is necessary to judge the actions of normal criminals, we should attempt to understand them.

However, from this it does not follow that we should not judge horrific crimes to be bad or evil, if we are incapable of understanding these acts."<sup>16</sup>

Kuehn draws attention to this distinct understanding of evil as a moral and practical problem rather than a psychological or explanatory concept employed in order to give an account of why some horrific wrongdoing was committed:

"When I look for the psychological causes of an action or a particular mode of conduct or practice, I am of course taking the standpoint from which [as Kant writes] 'we contemplate ourselves with reference to our actions as effects we see before our eyes,' that is, from the theoretical standpoint of causality or from natural or social science. I am attempting to explain why someone has taken this or that particular course of action. And it is completely legitimate and important to understand how and why we or others decide to take a particular action.

However, and this seems important to me, when we ask such questions we are moving into the descriptive realm of psychology and not in the normative region of morals. Moral judgments introduce considerations that differ from psychological descriptions or theories. Admittedly, I do not want to go so far as Kant, who thought that all psychological considerations were irrelevant for morality. But I am worried about whether the importance of understanding is not

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<sup>16</sup> Kuehn, "How Banal is Evil?," p. 145

often exaggerated today. Once one reduces fundamental moral categories to things purely psychological, like 'thoughtlessness,' one has to wonder indeed whether evil has not become an everyday occurrence. Understanding evil and judging evil do not seem to me as closely connected as many thoughtful people think."<sup>17</sup>

As Susan Neiman helpfully notes, the problem of evil is in this sense not just a philosophical problem of constructing definitions and testing out accounts to see which has the most explanatory power -- anyone writing about evil faces a pressing moral problem as well. Neiman singles out the work of the Holocaust survivor Jean Amery as a powerful messenger of this point of view:

"There are, very broadly, two sorts of positions which can be taken toward the problem of evil, and that both have been taken toward Auschwitz as toward Lisbon. Each stems from moral, not metaphysical, grounds. One holds it indecent to attempt to explain the existence of evil. For, protests to the contrary, to explain something is to justify it—at least to a point....The idea that Auschwitz was so absolutely evil that it should defy our capacities for comprehension has been maintained by a number of contemporary thinkers, but none better than Jean Améry. His account of the intellectual at Auschwitz is one of the most deep and chilling left by any survivor, and it may lead us to conclude that this is an event of which we should not make sense....Améry's work wrestles with questions of meaning which straddle the range from metaphysics to morals. His answers are

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 143

inconclusive, but they raise at least a warning: where events call the value of reason itself into question, we should be wary of the urge to comprehension.

Even Kant found the idea of theodicy to be noxious: solving the problem of evil would be a moral mistake."<sup>18</sup>

In short, in agreement with the warnings offered by Kuehn, Levinas, and others, I do not believe that we can or should even set out to offer a complete resolution to the problem of evil or hope for an account that serves as a definitive explanation of evil and all evildoing. As Ricoeur stresses, evil will always pose a challenge to philosophy and theology, and to our other ways of making sense of ourselves. Therefore, no serious attempt to grapple with evil will drastically ease the sense of discomfort and perplexity that evil confronts us with. While some may find solace in finding apparent solutions to the "Logical Problem of Evil," such efforts arguably end up distorting the nature of evil and underserved suffering in order to buy some sort of logical consistency. With such projects in theodicy, the concept of evil is drained of much of the meaning it has held in previous discourse, and an inevitable fall into what Levinas calls the "temptation of theodicy,"<sup>19</sup> the alluring intellectual possibility of explaining evil so successfully that we feel no discomfort by the continued existence of evil and horrific suffering in our world. Probing the reality of evil in the 20th century is therefore a double edged sword in a sense. A focus on evil can lead one to return to searching for theodicies and ethical absolutes, to a premodern ethics and philosophy, to other ways of opposing or

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<sup>18</sup> Susan Neiman, "What's the Problem of Evil?," in *Rethinking Evil*, p. 41-42

<sup>19</sup> See Levinas's important essay "Useless Suffering" in *Entre Nous* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1998), for his claims about the "end of theodicy."

rationalizing evil. But confronting evil can also lead one to radically question all major moral and religious viewpoints and to doubt whether there are any moral absolutes -- to question what meaning morality can have after the failure of morality, as Levinas puts it. This should remind us that whatever the problem of evil really is, it certainly is a problem.

### **TOWARDS A CONCEPTION OF RADICAL EVIL**

So what is "the problem of evil?" In a very helpful overview of discussions of evil in modern philosophy, Susan Neiman begins by asserting that the problem of evil involves three related questions concerning: 1) the nature of evil 2) why human beings are capable of committing horrific, evil acts against each other, and 3) the theological problem of evil.<sup>20</sup> My discussion in this paper will for the most part be restricted to the first part of the problem of evil, to discussing the concept of evil. As I hope to make clear, trying to clarify the concept of evil is a separate endeavor from explaining why human beings do evil and how an all-good and all-powerful God might allow evil to exist. That being said, I will from time to time offer a brief discussion on how the conception of evil laid out here might bare on how we might begin to answer the questions of why people commit evil deeds and how we might approach the theological problem of evil.

This paper thus aims to make progress towards a contemporary conception of radical evil. I will attempt to defend a conception of radical evil as the most viable account of understanding what we mean by evil today. When we claim that something is evil, we are saying that there is a quality of extreme wrongdoing that goes all the way down in it, a quality that thoroughly stains and constitutes the character of an agent, act, or state of affairs, a state of the worst kind of wrongdoing that really does pick out its essential (moral) character. Radical evil can take many forms, but at its most basic level, radical evil involves the subordination of the moral law, the reasonable, humane, and decent, the many, to the particular, to the few, the ideologically committed, to the great

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<sup>20</sup> See Neiman, "What's the Problem of Evil?"

and powerful -- domination and subordination -- a positive, active form of evil in the will. We will look to Kant's account in seeking to understand this essential aspect of evil and will then move beyond some of the limitations of his account to move towards a more viable contemporary understanding of radical evil.

The account of radical evil to be filled out in the rest of this paper can be summarized as follows: radical evil is a category of wrongdoings that 1) are knowingly committed by human agents 2) cause horrific undeserved suffering/harm 3) are unjustifiable and unpunishable 4) cannot be judged or explained in terms of ordinary moral failings like thoughtlessness, selfishness, envy, conformity, etc. 5) are at their root and their core morally horrific and unjustifiable -- this is their distinguishing, overriding moral quality.<sup>21</sup>

The rest of the paper will be structured to first address questions about the usefulness of the concept of evil and then will move to discussing an account of radical evil that can serve as the most viable understanding of evil today. We will begin with an overview of the recent return to discussing evil after a turn away from evil among moral philosophers (mainly because of the metaphysical/theological undertones of "evil" which many are eager to leave behind in favor of concepts like the right, justice and injustice, etc., the concept's elusiveness and fundamental difficulties with defining the nature of evil, the concept's common usage to judge those actions we cannot really understand according to normal human motives and intentions). After giving voice to these

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<sup>21</sup> Though I depart in some ways from the definitions of evil offered by Kuehn and Card, it will become clear that my account owes much to their very helpful discussions of evil and their attempts to state fairly precisely the conditions for classifying something as evil.

objections, we will then begin to argue for the need for philosophers to think about evil and the concept of evil, mainly because the phenomenon of evil is not going away, and also because we still speak in terms of evil without much hesitance. In short, because the concept of evil and its use in ordinary language really isn't going anywhere, philosophical reflection is warranted in trying to clarify what we reasonably mean when we judge or call an agent or action evil.

Moving to a discussion of the idea of radical evil, we will begin with a close reading and interpretation of Kant's account of radical evil, pausing to discuss what he gets right (e.g. that evil has to do with an inversion of moral and non-moral, that it points to an underlying moral disposition or character and speaks to the maxim or purpose that led to an evil action) and where he errs (in particular in his denial of diabolical evil, his so-called "morally excluded middle" and his account's absence of discussion of the harms evil causes).

We will then move to recent discussions of evil in contemporary philosophy, much of which can be understood as revolving around Kant's account of radical evil. In these contemporary accounts, evil is no longer used in an inclusive, wide sense (as Kant and others had), but almost exclusively as referring to the kinds of extreme, unforgivable evils we might classify under the notion of radical evil, which Hannah Arendt was probably the first to see. On these recent accounts, there is an attempt to distinguish degrees of wrongness and of evil, between the "normal" or "ordinary" evils of serious wrongdoing that we nevertheless can understand, punish, and cope with, versus the



"radical" or extreme evils that we cannot really understand, punish, or fit into our intellectual and moral frameworks.

A close look at the recent literature reveals a growing consensus at least on what the concept of evil at the most basic level consists of. As Claudia Card observes, "the secular sense of evil in which it refers to the most heinous wrongs [is] now shared by a growing number of philosophers writing about evil."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Susan Neiman asserts in her overview of evil in modern thought, "'Auschwitz' . . . stands for all we mean when we use the word 'evil' today: absolute wrongdoing which leaves room for no account and no expiation."<sup>23</sup>

After discussing these recent accounts and appreciating the progress they make, we will nevertheless ask whether they can really help us grasp the kinds of horrendous evil they were developed in response to. In particular, we will argue that these recent accounts still fail to appreciate the notion of radical evil to its full extent, preferring to focus on the harm caused rather than the motives of the evildoer, on notions like the banality of evil and non-monstrous evildoers, tendencies which may end up distorting the nature of evil. Looking to some recent reflections on radical evil, we will argue that the Kantian notion of a perversion of the will and an evil heart help us to understand that radical evil is something that is never banal but is a fundamental breach of our normal standards of wrongness and that this quality of excess is what lies at the core of the acts and agents we deem evil. We will conclude by looking at the necessary limits of any

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<sup>22</sup> Claudia Card, *Confronting Evils* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 3

<sup>23</sup> "What's the Problem of Evil?," p. 29

abstract discussion of evil in general and how particular evils such as those experienced at Auschwitz do not even begin to be explained by such accounts, arguing that our discomfort and horror in the face of evil nevertheless remains but that such attempts at reflection and understanding evil remain necessary and urgent.

### THE CONTEMPORARY “WAR ON EVIL”

Despite its many embarrassing spokespersons and its many formidable opponents, evil has continued to be a resilient and rewarding subject for philosophical reflection. The recent “war on evil,” if one can call it that, has attracted many supporters, thanks in no small part because of the dominant associations of “evil” with two figures quite unfashionable today: the Devil and George W. Bush. Many people have rightly pointed to the ideological and destructive use that can be made of the word “evil” when it is used to dehumanize one’s enemies or to demonize them. The first route, taken to reduce one’s enemies to “evil” personified, to a kind of agency or force that cannot be reckoned with according to the laws and norms of modern society, has been attacked so widely and gained such currency that in a recent interview with Charlie Rose, the actress Tilda Swinton, in a discussion of her recent film *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, made a quite indignant and forceful argument for removing the word evil from our vocabulary.<sup>24</sup>

The current climate makes anyone thinking of using the term evil, let alone trying to reflect on it and say what it might be or mean, a little hesitant and slightly uncomfortable about keeping this word in one’s moral vocabulary. When the word evil is used in conversation (except casually or in jest), the faces of one’s listeners tend to soften up a little, foreheads may wrinkle, and a number of underhanded jokes using the term evil in either of the senses discussed above, as a demonic force or George Bush’s axis of evil, may follow. It is a testament to the amount of misuse and abuse the term has

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<sup>24</sup> Charlie Rose’s interview with Swinton is available to view online at <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/12127>.

been subject to that this is the response one frequently meets when employing the term. No such skeptical or sardonic response is encountered when evil's frequent counterpart, "good," is used (or other terms like right or just or best), despite the vulnerability of so many other terms that are also ill-understood and misused in any number of ways.

This partially justified skepticism should teach us that the term evil should not be used carelessly, and that if one is to continue to use it in one's moral judgments one must think seriously about the terms we are using when we speak about "evil." Evil is, as Marcus Singer observes, "the worst possible term of opprobrium imaginable,"<sup>25</sup> a term we reserve for the worst sorts of wrongs, a judgment that makes the action or agent who is the subject of opprobrium inexcusable and unforgivable. This is no small part of the reason the term has been recently met with skepticism, since the degree of judgment employed can often seem totally out of proportion and unreasonably harsh and cold.

On one side, then, are those who think we should drop the notion of evil from our moral vocabulary altogether, mainly because it seems to preclude human understanding and reasonable moral judgment. On the other side, there are those who continue to employ the concept of evil but insist that we can never understand evil or why people commit horrific evils. On this view, to try to explain or understand evil is to excuse evil, to make the evildoer's actions no longer judged as evil, to rationalize them or make these actions seem perfectly intelligible. In a perceptive essay on Kant's account of radical evil, Allen Wood describes this response to the attempt to understand evil as follows:

"The basic problem about the intelligibility of evil can be stated in the form of a simple

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<sup>25</sup> Marcus Singer, "The Concept of Evil," *Philosophy* 79 (2004), p. 185

dilemma: There are apparently only two things we might mean by ‘explaining’ evil or ‘making evil intelligible.’ One would be an explanation of it as an action that is done for reasons. The other would be a causal explanation of it as arising from antecedent conditions. Either explanation, however, if fully successful, would abolish what is evil about the action or display it as something that is not evil after all.”<sup>26</sup> While this objection to all explanations of evil has its dangerous implications, including undermining a serious historical and moral examination of horrendous evils,<sup>27</sup> at least some forms of this view might be ones that Kant (and we) might find compelling, views which insist that we must try to understand but will never be able to make intelligible or comprehensible why people could perform such horrific and cruel actions, what the experiences of the victims might have been like, and how a benevolent and all-powerful God could allow such evils to be so pervasive.<sup>28</sup>

While speaking about evil may cause respectable people to blush, what is more perplexing is the widespread neglect of the topic of evil by the most prominent moral philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If we imagine ourselves reading the most influential works in Anglo-American moral philosophy over the last 75 years or so without

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<sup>26</sup> Allen Wood, "The Intelligibility of Evil," in *Kant's Anatomy of Evil*. Eds. Sharon Anderson-Gold and Pablo Muchnik (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 148

<sup>27</sup> See the historian Yehuda Bauer's essay "Against Mystification" in his book *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982) for a strong case against the tendency to mystify and place behind an impenetrable wall the actions of the perpetrators, the responses of the bystanders, and the experience of the victims of the Holocaust.

<sup>28</sup> Elie Wiesel's argument, found in many of his works, that we must always question and try to understand but be suspicious of "answers" and "explanations" and easy intellectual or theological comforts is a powerful case for this kind of response to evil, in particular because of his own life-long struggle to understand evil and God's failure to prevent the murder of millions during the Holocaust.

knowledge of what actually took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we might think that the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a rather peaceful, non-violent, stable, and blissful period where all that philosophers needed to reflect on was how we can get that much closer to being fully good, virtuous, rational, moral persons, rather than how we are to make sense of the prevalence of evil, injustice, and widespread suffering caused by human beings against other human beings. Despite Hannah Arendt's prediction,<sup>29</sup> the most important and widely discussed problem in 20<sup>th</sup> century moral philosophy was certainly not the problem of evil.

But there have been a number of significant figures over the last few decades who have been preoccupied with the problem of evil -- a list that would include many prominent figures in philosophy on both sides of the Atlantic, many political theorists working on human rights and recent atrocities, and also many of those working as historians, perhaps in particular those working on Nazi Germany. I will join here with this line of thinkers, historians, and writers in being very concerned with evils, not just by morality generically. As Levinas testified to, what may be of the utmost importance then is whether we have the philosophical and ethical resources to deal with evil during dark times (e.g. as even Germany, "the land of Kant and Goethe," did not), and to stand on a

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<sup>29</sup> Immediately after the war, Arendt declared, "The problem of evil will be the fundamental question of post-war intellectual life in Europe." See Arendt, "Nightmare and Flight," reprinted in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*. Ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt, 1994), p. 134. As Richard Bernstein observes, the problem of evil did not become a fundamental question in post-war Europe (nor did it elsewhere), but it did become fundamental for Arendt. See Bernstein, "Did Hannah Arendt Change Her Mind? From Radical Evil to the Banality of Evil," in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*. Eds. Larry May and Jerome Kohn (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 127.

firm ethical foundation in making moral judgments, identifying evil and condemning it and fighting it. As Levinas's philosophical project also demonstrates, reflection on evil, on inter-subjective violence, is vital if we are to understand ourselves as ethical beings and not ignore our most recent history and retreat into abstractions as though history has no hold on our understanding of human existence. If for no other reason, we should perhaps draw our attention to clarifying the notion of evil because the phenomenon of evil-doing will undoubtedly continue to exist and trouble us, and because the notion continues to be employed to justify or disguise much serious wrongdoing.

### **EVIL AS A MORAL – NOT AN EXPLANATORY – CONCEPT**

Kuehn offers an insightful historical discussion on the reasons the idea of evil has declined in stature in the recent history of philosophy, leading to the almost total disregard of evil by contemporary Anglo-American philosophers. Of utmost importance for Western philosophy's thinking about evil is the way that the idea of evil was initially shaped as a primarily negative concept, as the absence of something - usually the good or some goods such as knowledge or virtue. For Plato's Socrates and the Augustine of the early church, evil is defined quite firmly as something lacking any reality, not as a real force or motive in the will but as something having "no being" and merely the absence of good or of knowledge. While this understanding of evil was meant to combat dualism, gnosticism, and other views which gave evil a mythical or larger than life standing and often led to a very untidy view of God and the world, the conception of evil as privation has its problems too, ones that have become obvious for 20th century philosophers who have found little in this tradition to help us understand recent evils and evildoers. As Kuehn writes, "When Plato, Augustine, Leibniz and Arendt maintain that evil has 'no being,' and that, as something purely negative, it cannot be clearly defined, they point towards this difficulty [presented by metaphysical, positive conceptions of evil], but it seems to me, that they go too far."<sup>30</sup> As Kuehn suggests, by making evil something non-essential and only an absence, these philosophers have in effect denied the existence of real, active moral evil of the kind we can no longer deny, and in doing so have made evil into something unworthy of serious philosophical investigation.

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<sup>30</sup> "How Banal is Evil?," p. 145



Continuing his brief history of the reasons evil has been largely neglected by contemporary philosophers, Kuehn writes,

"The majority of thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were unified in thinking that the problem of human existence turns on the relationship between good and bad, not good and evil, and that the latter terms are something we have inherited from a bad sort of metaphysics, something which has continuously led us into error, and something which must be overcome. It has therefore been historically irrelevant whether one was a socialist, Marxist, or liberal when it came to rejecting the pairing of good and evil: once 'evil' is considered to be something antiquated and outdated, it becomes useless if one is intent on improving the human condition. This is the real reason that the problem of evil 'has gotten lost' in philosophy. Evil has lost its place in the philosophical discussion as a result of deliberation, not thoughtlessness. Indeed, neither Marx nor Rawls could do much with such a concept, and we find 'evil' only mentioned, if at all, as a peripheral problem in their works."<sup>31</sup>

Most recently, then, evil has been considered mainly as a derivative notion, taking a back seat to theories of justice, the good, right action, and so on.

To discover if the notion of evil can indeed prove useful (contra Rawls, Marx, and others) in improving our understanding of the human condition, the first task confronting any philosophical account of evil is then to try to determine if there is something that the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 141

predicate evil can really pick out. The question that then arises is whether there is some class of phenomena that the term evil captures more precisely than the other terms of our moral vocabulary like good and bad, wrong, and unjust. This question should not be confused for or get too tied down in the broader debate over moral realism, i.e. whether there are moral properties or moral facts out there in the world that can be objectively described and employed in moral judgments. The various positions taken in regard to objectivist and subjectivist views of the nature of moral reasons and judgments, the various considerations that have led some to adopt emotivism, anti-realism, various formulations of realism (substantive, procedural, quasi), and so on, are all issues rightly taken seriously by many doing Anglo-American ethics today. However, in this paper I will try to offer an account that does not take a stance or beg the question on the issues involved in these current debates (whose relevance to my account of evil is, on my view, quite secondary or is at least partially diffused by offering a plausible account of evil).

Returning to the question of the use of “evil” in our moral judgments, what sorts of subjects (individuals, political entities, states of affairs) might be picked out or accurately described by the term "evil?" Is such a predicate a plausible and logically coherent and informative notion or property to apply to objects, one that picks out a quality distinct from other moral properties/concepts? Now we need a little help to begin our search for what the predicate “evil” might pick out. Looking back at the history of the concept of evil, without too much difficulty one notices that evil has typically been used as the worst form of moral opprobrium and has always been used to refer the worst sorts of wrongdoing, vices, and persons, regardless of what specific content the term was

given in a given case. This is an important observation, one which allows us to perhaps find what lies at the bottom of the concept of evil and can be seen as its fairly consistent, unified meaning across the various more substantive (second-order) historical conceptions of exactly what evil is. Thus, preliminary observation might be seen as grounding the rough, intuitive meaning of evil, a meaning which still has currency with us today and may very well be what we commonly mean by evil: evil is the worst sort of wrong or vice that an action, agent, institutions, and so on, can possess.

But what kinds of things can rightly said to be evil? At this point we must first pause to acknowledge that the term evil is supposed to refer to something quite distinct – the worst sorts of wrongdoing and harm that stand out from lesser wrongdoing. The class of things that evil accurately describes is thus a real, distinct set of phenomena, widely acknowledged and observed, phenomena which leaves us often without words except for “evil,” the only term that comes close to describing these horrific wrongs. In sum, it appears that the predicate “evil” can pick out a certain class of phenomena probably as clearly and coherently as other concepts or predicates in ordinary moral judgment. We can be saying something meaningful, informative, and illuminating by describing an action, person, institution, or society as evil. Most importantly, there is a fairly obvious position in our intellectual and moral framework that the concept of evil helps to fill, as it enables us to describe and explain the worst sorts of wrongdoing which are not captured by other terms in our moral vocabulary.

In addition to these more metaethical considerations which give us good reason to think that the concept of evil really does pick out some important phenomena, there are

several further justifications for not discarding the term from our moral vocabulary. Indeed, there is much to be said about in favor of keeping the term “evil” in our vocabularies if we are to have any hope of understanding, assessing, and responding with clarity and intelligence to the sorts of phenomena appropriately described as evil.

We can begin with a consideration of our philosophical and intellectual tradition, a tradition or history which we need of course feel no obligation to but that we must nevertheless recognize as enduring and resilient in many instances. In the case of the history of the concept of evil, as briefly described above, evil has enjoyed an enduring and somewhat consistent use across western philosophy to refer to the really bad things and actions in the world which cannot be excused. Earlier accounts of evil like Saint Augustine’s might have conceived of evil in much more inclusive terms, encompassing more than just the worst sorts of wrongs we now typically think of as evil. In addition, while there is no question that there are important differences between traditions and schools and civilizations in regards to their conceptions of evil, what almost universally underlies these various conceptions is the use the term evil is given in picking out the wrongs that are cause for most serious concern and condemnation.

Being hesitant therefore to dismiss the serious reflections on evil so important to many figures in the history of western philosophy is justified by this shared basic conception of evil. It also helps prevent us from losing much of the ethical and moral theory in the history of philosophy, dismissed in part because of the primacy of an account of evil in their ethics. Perhaps we will be able to recover resources and inspirations that often receive little attention in contemporary attempts to come up with a

viable moral theory, efforts that often seem quite bloodless and inadequate in accounting for the full range of right and wrong actions, motives, institutions, persons, etc., which needless to say will require reflection on the kind of evils which many philosophers have rightly reflected on.

Another important reason to not discard evil from our moral vocabulary is the inability of other terms to capture this distinct class of serious wrongs. Now this might at first seem like yet another attempt to give license to the philosopher's tendency to distort the phenomena so that he can have his neat, coherent theory and convince himself that he understands and grasps something which he really does not in the least understand. Following this line of thought, perhaps we would be better off only using more untainted and specific terms for the kinds of phenomena we may think "evil" accurately describes: terms such as wickedness, barbarity, sadism, cruelty, monstrous, horrific, inexplicable, unjustifiable, and so on. But pick whichever of these terms you'd like; they will likely be found to either used to pick out a too narrow class of wrongs, or they will end up (defectively) functioning as a notion intended to describe a large class of things through a similarly broad meaning or analysis. While the wish to use a more untainted term is understandable, there is not much point in simply verbally substituting one term for another when both terms are intended to pick out more or less the same things and have a similar conceptual structure. Perhaps these terms are less tainted or controversial, but it is not clear that they are able to pick out the very same kinds of things that we have been arguing that judgments of evil do, serious harms caused by inexcusable wrongdoing. The terms may move to a greater level of precision or concreteness in specifying the kind of

harm caused or the psychological motives of the wrongdoer, but the rough class of things remains the same or ends up being much too narrow. In other words, these alternative terms play a distant second best to evil in bringing together various kinds of actions under a helpful, illuminating, unified account, which evil might be able to do. Lastly, the terms in question are equally vulnerable to distorting the phenomena in question, as is evidenced by our all too flippant or careless use of these terms as well. We need an account of evil to therefore be nuanced enough to at least broadly distinguished from these other terms (e.g. cruelty, oppression, malevolence, wickedness, grave injustice, barbarity, inhumanity), while not being a reductive or exhaustive catch-all so easy to abuse.

Third, discarding evil from our moral vocabulary may also lead us to be blind or less responsive to great suffering often described as evil. At an extreme, skepticism and cynicism towards the idea of evil can lead one to think that the phenomena in question do not really transgress all moral boundaries in the ways some may judge, which when taken too far can lead to a stance that is complacent and indifferent in the face of extreme wrongdoing. In particular, when we become too hesitant to use the term evil, preferring to call the horrific wrongs before our eyes “unjust” or “inexplicable” or “deeply disturbing,” there is a danger that we flatten out, rob, or take the sting out of our moral judgments and a key way of seeing, condemning, and responding to such kinds of wrongdoing. At an extreme, imposing too much restraint on one's moral vocabulary may seriously hamper us as we try to understand and respond to the evil in the world. And unfortunately, because some wrongs are worse than others, we often must make choices

about which wrongs to prioritize in our actions and reflections. As Claudia Card writes, “The temptation is often to address lesser wrongs first, deferring indefinitely attention to lesser evils. Lesser wrongs can be easier to repair. Evils are urgent. Life and basic quality of life are at stake.”<sup>32</sup>

A further defense for continuing to employ the concept of evil is related to not being apologetic that evil is a historical, culturally-shaped concept like many other concepts. Viewed from this perspective, one which could be further explored through the lens of hermeneutics, evil is a concept that we employ to make sense of things, it is a meaning-making concept, a concept which we should investigate for its function and meaning to us rather than some sort of analytic or conceptual power to explain “facts.” This may seem a large admission, but only if one thinks of evil as some sort of force or principle or entity, something that is not to be reduced to some pitiable thing like a concept which we have constructed and employ in our all-too human judgments. With the account offered here, we are not denying that evil is a historically-shaped and determined concept, with many different meanings and components that are in conflict with one another, with one component rising to the foreground at one time and place and another in another time and place. Nietzsche, who offered one of the greatest critiques of the use of the term “evil” was right about at least this much.<sup>33</sup> The account offered here may in fact have the comparatively modest goal, following Nietzsche, of simply trying to determine what the contemporary intuitive understanding of evil is, then going on to

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<sup>32</sup> Claudia Card, *Confronting Evils*, p. 7

<sup>33</sup> See, in particular, Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, the First Essay, “Good and Evil”, ‘Good and Bad.’”

make some necessary clarifications and modifications to it, before considering whether this conception is useful and healthy, intellectually and psychologically, in helping us interpret and live in our world.

Finally, it is simply very difficult and counterintuitive to abolish a term that has had such traction and importance across time and across many intellectual paradigms, across so many cultures and religions and worldviews, and which continues to be used so frequently today. Of course "evil" has been understood in many incompatible ways across these various traditions, and there have been many undeniably false and deeply misleading conceptions of evil, but these mistaken accounts should not sway us from trying to come up with a better, more plausible and coherent account of evil that can stand reflection and make sense of our intuitions and moral judgements about evil.



## **KANT'S ACCOUNT OF RADICAL EVIL: EVIL AS A SECULAR, MORAL PROBLEM**

As discussed already, concentrated philosophical work on evil has become rarer and rarer since the late 18th century. Rather than devote attention to evil and the problems it raises for ethics, theology, and philosophy, most philosophers have preferred to change the subject to other topics. But as Susan Neiman's book *Evil in Modern Thought* demonstrates, evil and the vastness of undeserved human suffering has continued to preoccupy philosophers searching for a way to make the world around them seem intelligible. In an important and ambitious project, Neiman attempts to retrace a continuing line of thought devoted to struggling with evil, a continuing problem which can be seen in the work of Rousseau, Kant and Hegel and Marx, Nietzsche, and Arendt, and in recent philosophy. While many of these reflections on evil remain largely untapped, as Neiman, whose first book was on Kant, well understands, there is no contribution more important than the the one made by Kant. For Kant, the existence of moral evil posed an array of theoretical and practical dilemmas that he recognized were in dire need of addressing if his ambitious philosophical project was to succeed.

Recognizing the debts owed to Kant's account for opening up new understandings of evil, in this section of the paper I will devote some space to reconstructing and sympathetically interpreting Kant's theory of evil. I will offer this interpretation of the Kantian theory of radical evil by arguing that Kant raised most of the important questions that moral evil confronts us with. I will then argue that the solutions he gave to these problems, though insufficient, provide the foundations of a nuanced, far-reaching

understanding of evil, one which acknowledges the need to address the phenomenon of evil if one is to have anything meaningful to contribute to moral and political philosophy. I will attempt to show that among other strengths, Kant's theory of evil convincingly addresses many of the pressing questions raised by the reality of evil in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including questions related to the nature of evil actions and evil persons, the roots of evil in human nature and the maxims of evildoers, the social and political conditions that make the sort of large-scale collective evils of the 20<sup>th</sup> century possible, and how far evil can be made intelligible but never fully understood. In reconstructing and defending Kant's account of evil, I hope to show just how relevant Kant's theory of evil remains for us today, and how although we may now understand evil differently than Kant did, it is the notion of radical evil that remains most valuable in our search for a contemporary conception of evil.

For many of those inclined to defend Kant's project, the account of "radical evil" given in the first chapter of *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* confronts them with a difficult and somewhat embarrassing task: the task of explaining how Kant's account of "radical evil" lines up with the rest of Kant's fairly tidy, secular, humanistic, and groundbreaking Enlightenment moral philosophy.<sup>34</sup> In an effort to avoid confronting this somewhat embarrassing task, many Kantians simply leave out Kant's account of

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Gordon E. Michalson's admission in the preface to his book on Kant's theory of radical evil, *Fallen Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), that he felt a tinge of embarrassment for many years when trying to answer questions by students who were trying to make sense of what Kant says about evil in the Religion.

radical evil in their defenses and reconstructions of a Kantian ethics.<sup>35</sup> It may be true that Kant does some damage by amending the rigorous and systematic ethical system we find in the *Groundwork* and the *Critiques* by offering his late account of radical evil. But by confronting the reality and apparent unintelligibility of evil, Kant comes close to completing the task he and other moral philosophers have set out to do: to present a full account of the ethical life, a life which undeniably includes a great amount of evil, vice, injustice, serious wrongdoing, and the related feelings of shame, remorse, and guilt.

As Kant points out in the opening paragraph of his chapter on radical evil in the *Religion*, all ages have recognized the reality of evil, “that the world lieth in evil,”<sup>36</sup> and have in their myths, narratives, poetry, and religious practices made evil a reality to be reflected on, wrestled with, and somehow understood.<sup>37</sup> Although Kant takes the nearly universal concern with evil across literatures and times as grounds for taking evil seriously, it is not merely the prevalence of evil in the world or in world literature that led Kant to his reflections on radical evil. Rather, to Kant's credit, he realized that there were gaps in his account of morality, practical reason, and freedom brought out most clearly by the existence of the free choice of immoral actions and evildoing.

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<sup>35</sup> Exceptions to this tendency, however, include many of the most important recent contributors to Kant scholarship, including John Silber, Henry Allison, Allen Wood, Manfred Kuehn, and Robert Louden, among others.

<sup>36</sup> Cite passage

<sup>37</sup> See Jeffrey Burton Russell's multi-volume history of the figure of Satan in which he shows how going all the way back to earliest remains from antiquity, evil has been personified in the figure of the devil or in another fearsome entity, and has formed an important part of the worldview for nearly all religions and peoples: *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1977); *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1981); *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, Cornell, 1984); *Mephistopheles: the Devil in the Modern World* (Ithaca, Cornell, 1986).

Perhaps the biggest problem that Kant had failed to fully address prior to the *Religion* is how it could be that people freely choose evil or immoral actions and maxims, since for Kant "freedom" consists in following the moral law. Revisiting a problem that reaches all the way back to Plato, Kant's account raised questions about whether we can freely act wrongly (or in violation of the moral law) and therefore be held morally responsible. To remedy these defects of his account, in the *Religion* Kant introduces the distinction between "freedom" and "free choice," *Wille* and *Willkur*, and discusses what he calls "the human propensity to evil" and "the radical evil lying in human nature." Freedom, or *Wille*, on Kant's account, is the capacity to act in accordance with law, more importantly a law one recognizes as valid for oneself as an autonomous human agent. Free choice, or *Willkur*, on the other hand, is the faculty of free choice, a basic faculty which we employ in almost all of our up coerced actions. This distinction is crucial for Kant, as it points to how an evil action, or one in conscious violation of the moral law, is in one sense free but in another sense lacks the kind of freedom or autonomy distinctive in a Kantian ethics.

The late Kant scholar John Silber was among the first of Kant's readers to fully appreciate the problems Kant tackles only in the *Religion* and drew attention to the nuanced account of *Wille* and *Willkur* offered there.<sup>38</sup> As Silber pointed out, among other contributions to a Kantian ethics, we look to the *Religion* to find resources for a Kantian moral psychology, for an understanding of the inclination of self-love which plays such a

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<sup>38</sup> See Silber's essay "The Ethical Significance of Kant's *Religion*," in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Edited by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (Harper: New York: 1960).

large role in Kant's account of acting morally or for the sake of duty, and for an understanding of what prevents us from acting according to the moral law. Unlike many moral philosophers, Kant dwells on the problems immorality presents to his account of the moral life (although as we will see he mainly forces his account of evil to conform to the confines of the account of duty and freedom that he has already defended in his earlier most famous works in moral theory).

In looking to Kant's account of radical evil, we should first remind ourselves that an adequate philosophical account of evil will (at the very least) do the following: first, it will offer an analysis of the concept of evil, what we currently mean when we use the term in moral judgments (and also how our current understanding of the concept of evil differs from previous conceptions); second, it will offer an account of why evil is so prevalent and the conditions under which evil actions are possible. Wood describes this two-part approach to the problem of moral evil in relation to how Kant systematically sets up his account of evil: “When I speak about our questions concerning evil, what I mean is such questions as these: What, at bottom, does such conduct consist in? And how, if at all, can we make sense of it? How can people do such things? How should we understand the power and prevalence of evil? And how should this understanding influence our struggle against evil?”<sup>39</sup> Kant’s account of evil is divided quite plausibly along these lines into two parts and two sorts of questions: first, regarding the concept of evil, i.e. a definition or analysis of the concept of evil, a set of conditions for an act or person to be evil, and then secondly, into an account of the propensity to evil, why people

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<sup>39</sup> "Kant and the Intelligibility of Evil," p. 145

perform evil deeds. Wood calls Kant's division of his account and the solutions he gives to these questions "the maxim problem" and "the propensity problem."

Unlike many accounts of evil which define evil primarily in terms of evil actions or evils suffered, for Kant evil is primarily a matter of what he calls an agent's general underlying moral disposition, or *Gesinnung*. Kant argues that "we call a man evil, however, not because he performs actions that are evil (contrary to law) but because these actions are of such a nature that we may infer from them the presence in him of evil maxims."<sup>40</sup> In other words, evil persons commit evil actions, and it is by observing the performance of these evil actions that we can come to reasonable conclusions that a person is evil.<sup>41</sup> As Kant writes, "In order, then, to call a man evil, it would have to be possible a priori to infer from several evil acts done with consciousness of their evil, of from one such act, an underlying evil maxim; and further, from this maxim to infer the presence in the agent of an underlying common ground, itself a maxim, of all particular morally-evil maxims."<sup>42</sup> Evil therefore is something that lies only within the will of a free moral agent, within the intentions and motives, the volitions or "maxims"<sup>43</sup> as Kant

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<sup>40</sup> Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (Harper: New York: 1960), p. 16

<sup>41</sup> While he does not say a whole lot about Kant's account of evil, Marcus Singer gives a similar account of evil persons in his essay "The Concept of Evil."

<sup>42</sup> *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, p. 16

<sup>43</sup> Barbara Herman gives a helpful definition of a maxim in *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993): "Maxims are those underlying principles or intentions by which we guide and control our more specific intentions" (84).

calls them, of an agent: “Hence the source of evil...can lie only in a rule made by the will for the use of its freedom, that is, in a maxim.”<sup>44</sup>

A person is evil, therefore, insofar as he or she has adopted an underlying evil maxim, a disposition in which the roles of the moral law and inclination have been inverted -- where the moral law is as a rule subordinated to inclination, the non-moral. Kant defines a disposition as “the ultimate subjective ground of the adoption of maxims.”<sup>45</sup> This disposition, or the subjective ground from which a person acts, is either good or evil; there is no middle ground for Kant, either the moral law is overriding and supreme or non-moral inclination is made overriding or supreme in a maxim. As Kant writes of the evil disposition, “This can only happen when a man adopts this incentive (and thereby the deviation from the moral law) into his maxim (in which case he is an evil man) it follows that his disposition in respect to the moral law is never indifferent, never neither good nor evil.”<sup>46</sup> While such a subordination of the moral to the non-moral is of course quite common, it is nevertheless in an important sense unreasonable. For Kant, evil is something we always have decisive reason not to do. The moral law always give us decisive reason to act in a certain way, to act according to duty; and therefore to perform evil deeds or deeds which are based on a maxim reversing the proper relationship of the moral and non-moral are in an important sense unreasonable – defective acts of rational, autonomous moral agents. Kant does not, however, deny that

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<sup>44</sup> *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, p. 17

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 20

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

much of the evil that human beings perform is rationally motivated, or done according to some sort of (non-moral) reasons.

Having laid out this analysis of the concept of evil, of what evil consists in, Kant must now address questions regarding what precisely lies at the bottom of an evil person's maxims and choices. Kant is in a good position to pursue these sorts of questions by virtue of his ability to frame the problem in terms of the maxims on which people act and their underlying motives and dispositions. In particular, Kant has many of the conceptual tools to examine what happens at the level of the underlying motive or character of an evildoer. This overall moral disposition or state of character, while sometimes not the only thing we mean by "evil," is certainly one of the main things we mean by the term "evil" and what we try to understand how people could perform such horrific actions. Wood calls Kant's formulation of this problem "the maxim problem."<sup>47</sup>

For Kant, the evil maxim is one which subordinates the moral law to inclination, to the non-moral: "Man is evil only in that he reverses the moral order of the incentives when he adopts them into his maxim. He adopts, indeed, the moral law along with the law of self-love; yet when he becomes aware that they cannot remain on a par with each other but that one must be subordinated to the other as its supreme condition, he makes the incentive of self-love and its inclinations the conditions of obedience to the moral law; whereas, on the contrary, the latter, as the supreme condition of the satisfaction of the former, ought to have been adopted into the universal maxim of the will as the sole

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<sup>47</sup> "Kant and the Intelligibility of Evil," p. 150



incentive.”<sup>48</sup> Examining this definition of the evil maxim and of the evil person, we might wonder if such a maxim is really "evil" in the sense we reserve for the term. The maxim and the acts following from it that Kant describes might seem merely non-moral or of no moral worth on Kant's rigorous account, perhaps bad or wrong in many cases but still not on the level of what we normally view as the truly evil. Thus Kant seems to go too far in identifying as evil almost any subordination of the moral to the non-moral.

Given these fairly easily detected difficulties facing Kant's definition of the evil maxim, why would he have chosen to define the evil maxim in this fairly broad, all-encompassing sense? There are at least three important advantages to conceiving of evil in this broad way. First, this broad definition of the evil maxim should help us to reach an analysis of the concept of evil that captures what evil consists in at the most fundamental level, and therefore to establish what it is that holds all evil actions together. Second, such a broad definition of evil will be able to account for a diverse range of motives and incentives as being the maxim upon which people perform evil deeds. Evil deeds and evil persons may be motivated by sheer malevolence, sadism, or cruelty, but it is much more often the all-too-human motives of envy, resentment, desire, cowardice, greed, etc. which lie beneath evil actions. Kant's account appreciates this important fact about evildoers and makes room for understanding how ordinary people can perform such horrible acts out of simple weakness, conformity to authority, collective hysteria, etc. It is an undeniable fact that the kind of large-scale, collectively-perpetrated evils of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, p. 31-32

century depended on the willing participation ordinary people and not just the most evil of villains.<sup>49</sup>

On the other end of things, we might think that Kant's definition of evil does not go far enough in allowing for the possibility of a phenomenon we can no longer deny (as many philosophers following Plato had done), that some people do evil for evil's sake or because of the harm the action causes without any comprehensible benefit to the evildoer. But when we read Kant carefully we can see that he does acknowledge the possibility of what we ordinarily mean by "doing evil for evil's sake" in this sense. The problem for Kant with the notion of absolutely diabolical evil, understood in his terms as the adoption of a maxim in which evil is more or less the only principle or maxim which exists for an agent, is that such an agent is not capable of acting morally and therefore cannot be called evil in the moral, evaluative sense. Because the moral law has somehow been eliminated from his or her set of inclinations or considerations, such a person is hard to conceive as being capable of distinguishing good from evil, of being held morally accountable, and therefore of being evil in the important, evaluative moral sense. As Wood further explains: "Kant's argument is that it would be incoherent to suppose a being could be responsible for obeying the moral law and yet lack any rational incentive to obey the law, possessing originally only a rational incentive to disobey it....These impossibilities are what Kant rejects under the heading of a 'diabolical will' – not because it represents something 'too evil' for human nature, but because it would be incoherent to condemn as

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<sup>49</sup> For an important and groundbreaking case study of the kinds of "ordinary men" who did much of the most brutal and horrendous face-to-face killing of the Nazi genocide, see Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

evil the choices of a being that could recognize no decisive reason to choose in favor of morality. Whatever harm to human or other beings might be caused by the actions of such a being, they could not be considered evil.”<sup>50</sup> But Kant can explain the undeniable occurrence of “evil for evil’s sake,” those actions which are done from a (purely) wicked intention. As Wood argues, “Kant does not deny, however, that these inclinations can attract us to conduct that is directly contrary to what morality requires (that they might be empirical desires for ‘evil as evil’). For example, the moral law requires us to make the happiness of others our end and so forbids us to take their unhappiness as an end for its own sake. What Kant calls the ‘vices of hatred’ or ‘diabolical vices’ – envy, ingratitude, and malice – are vices because they involve making the unhappiness of another directly an end. This looks like ‘evil for evil’s sake’ if anything could be.”<sup>51</sup>

Putting aside many interpretive issues mainly of interest to Kant scholars, we might still worry that Kant does not adequately distinguish the “truly evil” from the “merely bad.” While Kant does not always do a very good job of distinguishing what we might see as evil from the merely bad, he does distinguish between “degrees of evil” and his account of the three degrees of evil might help us to define the merely bad as distinct from the “truly evil.” Kant argues that “in this capacity for evil there can be distinguished three distinct degrees” – “frailty,” “impurity,” and “wickedness.” Frailty is “the weakness of the human heart in the general observance of adopted maxims”; it is manifested when the moral incentive is weaker than the incentive from inclination (e.g.

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<sup>50</sup> “Kant and the Intelligibility of Evil,” p. 153

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 154

when the sensual overpowers the moral). Impurity is “the propensity for mixing unmoral with moral motivating causes (even when it is done with good intent and under maxims of the good)”; it is manifested when the moral incentive is present but is not sufficient to move us, when we need additional non-moral incentives to do the right thing, or more generally when we act as Kant puts it “according to duty but not from duty.” Wickedness is “the propensity to adopt evil maxims”; it is the “corruption of the human heart” or “the propensity of the will to maxims which neglect the incentives springing from the moral law in favor of others which are not moral.” Wickedness reverses what ought to be the order of the will and is in this sense the perversity of the will; in neglecting or subordinating the moral, the will of the wicked person is corrupted at its root.<sup>52</sup>

Wood argues that Kant’s distinction between degrees of evil lines up pretty well with our common sense notions of “the truly evil” and “the merely bad:” “Kant of course recognizes that some cases of evil are worse than others....The ‘diabolical vices’ of hatred, which take the unhappiness of another as an end for its own sake, are clearly worse in his view than minor transgressions resulting from the indulgence of an inclination, not discreditable in itself, that prevents us from doing something we should have done. But when it comes to the concept of evil itself, his aim is to bring all cases of it – whatever their degree – under a single concept, a single maxim of evil, a maxim that applies in the same way to minor evils as it does to the worst evils.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 24-25

<sup>53</sup> “Kant and the Intelligibility of Evil,” p. 156

Wood also points out that while Kant's distinguishes degrees of evil he also brings them all together under the category of evil, an important feature of Kant's account which makes us look into ourselves for the sources of evil and not merely in others or at the most notorious of evildoers:

"I think it is both significant and commendable that Kant refuses to cater to our prurient craving for a special account that applies especially to the most extreme cases of evil. While recognizing that there can be both 'diabolical' vices and 'angelic' virtues, Kant discourages us from looking at people as exemplifications of them. He fears that occupying our imaginations with extreme cases of evil may be merely a way of indulging some of our nastier human traits – rationalizing our resentment and vindictiveness by supplying it with an object that would seem to justify it. Further, to think that extreme cases of evil represent something morally, psychologically, or even metaphysically special may be merely a way of rationalizing our own transgressions. We want to think that the true monster of evil (Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Hussein, Hannibal Lecter, Dick Cheney) has little in common with our petty failings and vices. The image of such monsters also helps us to divide all human beings into 'good people' and 'evil people,' providing our worldview with the 'moral clarity' conspicuously exhibited by some of these monsters themselves. Kant wants us to be mercilessly clear about right and wrong when it comes to our own actions, but he encourages an attitude of charitable moral ambiguity when it comes to judging others. Thus Kant's treatment of evil

is designed to make us aware of the continuity between different cases of evil, what cases of evil have in common (however they may differ in degree), and therefore aware of our kinship with other evildoers rather than our distance from them. The Kantian view is that to 'look evil straight in the face' is not to gaze in voluptuous horror at the visage of Hitler, but instead simply to look in the mirror, asking yourself honestly and soberly what you might do to improve what is there."<sup>54</sup>

Having offered this account of what the concept of evil consists in, Kant next confronts the prevalence of evil in the world through his discussion of "the propensity to evil," or what Wood calls "the propensity problem." For Kant, a "propensity" (*Hang*) is a subjective ground or predisposition one has just by virtue of being a human being.<sup>55</sup> The propensity to evil, then, is the propensity of human beings to invert the order of incentives and to subordinate moral duty to self-love or inclination. While this propensity will be strongly present in nearly everyone, one need not actually act on this propensity, and it seems that because of this ability to resist evil one is still responsible for acting according to these propensities. Kant famously calls the propensity to evil a "natural propensity:" "If, then, this propensity can be considered as belonging universally to mankind (and hence as part of the character of the race), it may be called a

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 157

<sup>55</sup> *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, p. 24

natural propensity in man to evil.”<sup>56</sup> From this notion of a natural propensity to evil, Kant declares that there is a “radical evil” in human nature: Because this propensity to evil is rooted in human nature, “we can call this natural propensity to evil...a radical innate evil in human nature (yet none the less brought upon us by ourselves).”<sup>57</sup> Since it is universal and rooted in human nature, evil is radical. This definition of radical evil should not be confused as being identical with the notions of diabolical evil, wickedness, or the most extreme forms of evil (though it is easy to mistake Kant’s famous formulation of evil as radical to mean this).<sup>58</sup>

The notion of a propensity to evil is filled out at least in part by Kant in what Wood calls the notion of “unsociable sociability,” the idea that because of what Kant calls our “predisposition to humanity” -- our social needs of relating to and living with others -- we end up deriving much of our self-worth by comparing ourselves to others, a social condition by which vices such as envy, malevolence, greed, etc. inevitably arise. Of this disposition to humanity and to comparison and competition, Kant writes, “The predisposition to humanity can be brought under the general title of a self-love which is physical and yet compares; that is to say, we judge ourselves happy or unhappy only by making comparisons with others....This is originally a desire merely for equality, to allow no one superiority above oneself....but from this arises gradually the unjustifiable

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>58</sup> Hannah Arendt seems to have either misread Kant’s discussion of “radical evil” in this way, or have a different but plausible understanding of “radical evil” as designating the worst and most extreme forms of evils, those of the concentration camps that she analyzes in detail in the last part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1994).

craving to win it for oneself over others. Upon this twin stem of jealousy and rivalry may be grafted the very great vices of secret and open animosity against all whom we look upon as not belonging to us...Hence the vices which are grafted upon this inclination might be termed vices of culture; in highest degree of malignancy, as, for example in envy, ingratitude, spitefulness...they can be called the diabolical vices.”<sup>59</sup> It is the predisposition to humanity, Kant argues, which makes possible the propensity to commit evil acts against others; it is because of this propensity that human beings are naturally disposed to evil (just by virtue of human nature) and that evil is therefore radical.

Later in the *Religion*, Kant argues in the starkest of terms that it is this condition of relationship and competition with others that brings about the worst wrongs: “When he looks around for the causes and circumstances which expose him to this danger and keep him in it, he can easily convince himself that he is subject to these not because of his own gross nature, so far as he is here a separate individual, but because of mankind to whom he is related and bound...Envy, the lust for power, greed, and the malignant inclinations bound up with these, besiege his nature, content within itself, as soon as he is among men. And it is not even necessary to assume that these are men sunk in evil and examples to lead him astray; it suffices that they are at hand, that they surround him, and that they are men, for them mutually to corrupt each other’s predispositions and make one another evil.”<sup>60</sup> For Kant, therefore, it is because of this social condition that the worst evils are made possible: the sorts of evils that can only occur through collective

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<sup>59</sup> *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, p. 22

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185



moral collapse, through social pressure and the pressure to conform, through excusing oneself because of the evil deeds others are committing around you, and through resentment, fear, and hatred of “the other.”

Kant’s reflections on the social conditions which make evil possible and indeed so prevalent may be able to help us understand the kind of evildoers that the 20<sup>th</sup> century has produced, those like Adolf Eichmann who led Hannah Arendt to her famous declaration that what is so striking about evil is its “banality.”<sup>61</sup> With a clear picture of Kant’s account of radical evil set out, we can see that what at times is so radical about evil is precisely the banality of evildoers. The nature of radical evil and banal, ordinary evildoers were tied together quite closely by Kant, as illustrated by his view of “radical evil” as rooted in human nature and ordinary human weakness. Kant also appears to be well-positioned to explain how ordinary, non-malevolent people can be motivated by quite banal reasons to perform the most evil of tasks (indeed, Kant’s account leaves one wondering if there is anyone who is not evil or at least capable of committing truly evil deeds).

Although we will have more to say about Eichmann later, Eichmann’s evil can be understood much as Arendt did if we apply Kant’s account. Along these lines, we can say that Eichmann was evil in that he as a matter of course subordinated the moral law to self-interest, to being promoted in the Nazi hierarchy and being esteemed by his colleagues and others. He was “thoughtless” in his neglecting the moral law and allowing it to be subordinated to his banal desires and ambitions. He was evil, therefore,

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<sup>61</sup> See Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Viking, 1963).

in the sense that he knew (as he confessed at the trial in Jerusalem) what the moral law required of him, but he adopted a corrupt maxim as the foundation of all his actions. This maxim was to do the Fuhrer's will, to do his "duty" as a Nazi official; in his maxim the moral law and Nazi ideology were inverted, and in this sense his heart was wicked and his moral disposition fundamentally corrupted. Because of this inversion in his character, one which no one forced upon him and one he was fully responsible for, Eichmann was an evil man and was able to perform the most evil of tasks calmly day after day despite not being the sort of "devil" we might have thought would be required of one of the most notorious evildoers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

While Kant's account of radical evil continues to be influential, it is by no means without its detractors. Perhaps the most powerful and frequently invoked criticism of Kant's account is its apparent failure to face the kind of evil perpetrated by Kant's own country during the 20th century. According to this frequent objection, Kant's account of evil fails to be radical enough. Despite her admiration for Kant, Hannah Arendt first voiced this criticism in a compelling discussion of the failure of our philosophical resources and traditions to make sense of Nazi evil. As Arendt persuasively writes,

"It is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a 'radical evil,' and this is true both for Christian theology, which conceded even to the Devil himself a celestial origin, as well as for Kant, the only philosopher who, in the word he coined for it, at least must have suspected the existence of this evil even though he immediately rationalized it in the concept of a 'perverted

ill will' that could be explained by comprehensible motives. Therefore, we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know. There is only one thing that seems to be discernible: we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous."<sup>62</sup>

In other words, Kant sensed the existence of something like absolute or radical evil but could not conceive of it in the terms of his moral-intellectual project. He was therefore forced to stay within the confines laid down by the philosophical tradition which downplayed the positive reality of evil, and therefore in the end he sticks to the relative comforts of the rest of his moral theory, restricting the motives of evil actions to the familiar inclinations of self-love and general moral weakness.<sup>63</sup>

More recently, John Silber has argued that Kant's account surely fails when confronted by the evil of those like Hitler, Himmler, and other figures from history and fiction. While Kant may be in a good position to illuminate the actions of an Eichmann and other major evildoers who may not have been devils, he has very few resources to offer us in understanding evildoers like Hitler, who seemed to pursue evil (i.e. the

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<sup>62</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 459

<sup>63</sup> In the Eichmann book and later work, Arendt appears to abandon the notion of radical evil. Indeed, in her famous exchange of letters with Gershom Scholem, Arendt goes so far to explicitly say that she has given up on the notion of radical evil and believes that evil in fact exists only on the surface, has no roots, and therefore should not be described as radical. For more on the various meanings evil might have for Arendt, which remained a constant preoccupation throughout her life, see the discussion of Arendt in Bernstein, *Radical Evil: a Philosophical Interrogation* (Polity: Cambridge, MA, 2002).

gratuitous destruction of an entire people) for its own sake, who saw his own greatness in terms of the evil that he made his overriding aim.<sup>64</sup>

While Kant may have been insufficiently clear on what he means by diabolical evil, offering not much more than a caricature in speaking about devilish beings, it is worth taking his argument here seriously. What Kant seems to mean, and which is easy to miss in reading his brief discussion of diabolical evil in the *Religion*, is that for someone to go so far as to no longer recognize the validity of the moral law at all, such a being would lack the kind of personality and agency required to be held morally accountable for their actions and thus to be said to be evil. We are left to assume that such a being would be incapable or sick or beyond normal human capacities.

In addition, in other discussions of Kant's account and diabolical evil, commentators have pointed out that most evildoers, even the worst like Hitler, do not see their deeds as simply evil or evil for evil's sake, but see them as means toward some "good," however sick or incoherent this "good" may be. Along these lines, we should acknowledge an important point about evildoers, rectitude, and self-deception, and how common it is for evildoers to state that what they are doing (or did in the past) is not unjustified and often serves some greater good. We need only recall that even mass murderers like Hitler, Osama bin Laden, the Norwegian Anders Breivik, and many mass shooters seem to believe in their own rectitude in a twisted, sick way, usually motivated by extreme ideology.

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<sup>64</sup> Silber, "Kant at Auschwitz," Proceedings of the Sixth International Kant Congress (1991)

Even with these reservations set out, we can still appreciate how Kant's account of evil allows him to reach areas he wouldn't have otherwise, furthering his moral theory into reaches largely unmatched before and since. By addressing radical evil, Kant develops his account of our moral psychology, the nature of free choice, the will, and the origins of evil deeds. Most importantly, according to Ricoeur, Kant's account of radical evil reveals why morality takes the shape that it does, in the form of moral duties we must bind ourselves to and a moral law/ categorical imperative (against evil) we must follow if we are to avoid evil and the ever-present temptation to misuse our freedom. As Ricoeur points out in one of his last books, *Oneself as Another*:

"The second important idea is that, in radicalizing evil, in introducing the difficult idea of a bad maxim of all maxims, Kant also radicalized the very idea of (free) choice by the sole fact of having made it the seat of a real opposition at the very source of the formation of maxims. In this, evil reveals something about the ultimate nature of (free) choice. Human (free) choice appears to carry with it an original wound that affects its capacity for determining itself for or against the law; the enigma of the origin of evil is reflected in the enigma that affects the actual exercise of freedom. The fact that this penchant is always already present in every opportunity to choose but that it is at the same time a maxim of (free) choice is no less inscrutable than the origin of evil.

From the union of these two ideas there results the supposition that will henceforth govern the entire series of moments of the deontological conception of morality: does it not follow from evil and from the inscrutable constitution of (free) will that there is, consequently, a necessity for ethics to assume the features of morality? Because there is evil, the aim of the 'good life' has to be submitted to the test of moral obligation, which might be described in the following terms: "Act solely in accordance with the maxim by which you can wish at the same time that what ought not to be, namely evil, will indeed not exist."<sup>65</sup>

Ricoeur may very well be right that rejecting or avoiding evil may have played a major part in shaping the form of the categorical imperative, but here we can only stress that evil did indeed play a crucial role for Kant in filling out his views of morality, human freedom, and the will.

In sum, this discussion should show that among Kant's greatest insights remains his observation that evil represents the basically systematic inversion of the moral and non-moral, which we see this as the case in paradigm cases of evil actions and persons. From Kant's account we can better see that evil points to an underlying, central quality of an extreme form of wrongdoing. To call something evil is therefore to be describing the moral quality or essence of the thing being judged; in other words, what is evil cannot be described accurately unless a reference to the evil lying at its core is understood.

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<sup>65</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 218

As the discussions by Arendt, Silber, Cooke, and others demonstrate, there is of course plenty of room for improving and building on Kant's theory. And in recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the subject of evil among philosophers. Many of these accounts and reflections begin with Kant's account and the way he framed the problem.<sup>66</sup> But above and beyond Kant's substantive formulation of the problems and the solutions he offered, what should not be underappreciated is Kant's willingness to confront evil in a serious manner, to draw on all the intellectual resources at his disposal to make sense of the problems that evil presented for his ethics, his critical philosophy, and for himself and the world we share.

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<sup>66</sup> I have in mind here, in particular, Richard Bernstein's *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*, Claudia Card's *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and *Confronting Evils* (cited above), and Susan Neiman's *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton, Princeton University Press: 2004). Work by Kant scholars like Silber, Allison, Wood, Kuehn, and many others should obviously be seen as also developing Kant's account of radical evil.

## **GIVING EVIL ITS DUE: A RESURGENCE OF INTEREST IN EVIL IN RECENT PHILOSOPHY**

Recent discussions of the concept of radical evil (and more generally in dealing with moral evil) have often turned to Kant's account, finding much to criticize and to appreciate. In common with Kant, for these recent philosophers evil is indeed something radical, but radical in a sense much different from the one Kant initially intended. This is clear in the way Arendt returned attention to the idea of radical evil in her using the term to refer to the absolute evil of the death camps, an evil she claims Kant could not have fully comprehended under his notion of radical evil. In the recent literature, there has formed a large consensus around referring to evil as the worst sort of wrongdoing, as beyond our normal categories of wrong, and so in this sense only a category for describing these sorts of absolute or horrific wrongs. Kant, of course, included a much broader range of wrongs under the notion of radical evil, including many of the "ordinary evils" we are familiar with. But for contemporary speakers, evil is primarily about those radical or extraordinary evils, the mass killings, genocides, systematic oppression, and other large-scale suffering inflicted by human beings for no good reason. On these accounts, evil is a term reserved for the worst sorts of wrongs, things that cannot be described or judged under the usual categories of wrong and which exceed our moral comprehension, are unforgivable and unjustifiable, and retain a sort of inexplicability.



As Marcus Singer observes, evil is “the worst possible term of opprobrium imaginable,”<sup>67</sup> a term we reserve for the worst sorts of wrongs. Finally, these wrongs are rightly called evil because at their root or center they are evil -- we cannot speak of them or judge them without reference to this inner evil nature or overriding character, their destructive and absolutely unjustifiable moral character. In sum, what has emerged from these recent accounts is the viability of a conception of radical evil as what we now mean when we judge something to be evil.

Along with Richard Bernstein, the American philosopher Claudia Card has probably written in greatest detail and depth about evil in recent philosophy. In two book-length treatments of evil and in a handful of articles, Card has articulated a complex and plausible definition of evil. Card has worked to refine her account of evil in each of these works, settling on the definition of evil as “reasonably foreseeable intolerable harms produced by inexcusable wrongdoing.”<sup>68</sup> While this is her own distinct definition, she acknowledges how it has been shaped by others currently writing and thinking about evil. Card explicitly acknowledges John Kekes along these lines. Much like Card, Kekes defines evils as that which “cause serious harm and lack excuse.”<sup>69</sup>

The largely semantic modification that I would make to the Card/Kekes definition is to offer an analysis of evil as a property or predicate rather than as a subject or event or noun. Though this is strictly speaking a minor revision, one which I believe Card and Kekes would not oppose, it has important consequences for recognizing what makes an

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<sup>67</sup> Singer, “The Concept of Evil,” p. 185

<sup>68</sup> *Confronting Evils*, 16

<sup>69</sup> John Kekes, *The Roots of Evil*, (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2005), 1

agent, action, or state of affairs a case of radical evil. In my view, Card prefers “evils” to “evil” because of her focus on the harms done, the consequences and suffering experienced rather than the “evil” of the perpetrator. Card claims to focus on both, although at times she still seems to give much more weight to the serious harm caused rather than the wrongdoing which causes it or the motives and lack of excuses on the part of the perpetrators. In the account offered here, I try to retain a steadier balance between the harm caused and the inexcusable wrongdoing which brings about the harm. This is important for understanding radical evil as a moral concept to be employed in moral judgments, not a psychological description or explanation of an agent or state of affairs.

To return to the details of Card's account, both conditions, the intolerable harm condition and the inexcusability condition, must apply for an action to be evil. Along with Card and others, I agree that for us today it is the intolerable harm caused (or intended) which first and foremost distinguishes evils. We do not speak of an act or state of affairs being evil unless it brings about or intends to bring about serious and underserved harm (to human beings, animals, and perhaps to things like works of art or natural beauty). As Card writes, “Evils have two irreducibly distinct components: a harm component and an agency component. What distinguishes evils from less wrongs is the harm component. In contrast to less wrongs, evils do intolerable harm. Ordinarily these harms, rather than the motives of the perpetrators, are what distinguish evils from lesser wrongs.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Confronting Evils*, p. 5

Let us begin by looking at the intolerable harm condition of Card's account. On Card's definition, "intolerable harm deprives victims of basics ordinarily needed to make a life decent. 'Intolerable,' here, is a normative concept. It refers not to what individuals cannot in fact tolerate but to what a decent life cannot include."<sup>71</sup> It should not be hard to imagine the kinds of harms Card has in mind here without going into detail, the kinds of harms that make one question whether one's life is worth living or is of value to oneself. A definition of these kinds of evils at least similar in spirit to Card's is the theologian Marilyn McCord Adams's definition of "horrendous evils." Adams defines horrendous evils as "evils the participation in which constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could be a great good to him/her on the whole."<sup>72</sup> Adams's concern with these sorts of horrendous evils, in addition to agreeing in an important respect with the definition of evil offered here, indicates the connection between the more secular/moral problem of evil focused on by Card, Kekes, and others, with the theological problem of evil. In particular, this connection indicates that it is the wrongs which cause horrendous and intolerable harm that lie at the heart of the problem of evil (wrongs which may in fact cause the sorts of harm that we think God is inexcusable for allowing). And as Neiman also observes in a similar vein, evils of a heinous, large-scale sort, such as the Lisbon earthquake or the death camps, can lead us to fundamentally question the intelligibility of the world and our understandings of it. Thus, as Neiman observes, the problem of evil, raised by the sorts of large-scale, intolerable harms discussed here,

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 8

<sup>72</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 26

threatens us with a problem of whether we can make sense of a world with these kinds of evil, a problem which can lead to new waves of moral, secular, political, and theological reflections.<sup>73</sup>

One question worth exploring further, however, is whether Card is right to single out "intolerable" harm or suffering, which only human beings seem vulnerable to, as what distinguishes evil. We may think that some actions, including those which cause serious harm to animals, the environment, human works of art, etc. are also evil in the sense that they cause gratuitous destruction or harm. Perhaps then what distinguishes evil actions most is their gratuitous or useless nature, their causing harm for no reasonable or excusable purpose. Gratuitous or useless suffering, as Levinas and Neiman each point out, presents us with serious doubts about the goodness or purposiveness of the world and may arouse efforts in theodicy in the hope of recovering certain moral and theological views of the world. Nevertheless, Card's argument that the harms caused are what most distinguish evils in the majority of cases does serve as a very useful piece of guidance in helping us identify and understand evil.

Card's account of inexcusable wrongdoing, on the other hand, is related to the idea of gratuitousness and begins with the idea of possessing no reason or justification to excuse or diffuse one's wrongdoing. As Card writes, the evildoer has "no morally defensible reason....No good reasons mitigate their choices....That you can [cause serious] harm with impunity is not a good reason [to do so]. It is not that these reasons are insufficient. They do not count morally in favor of the deed. They carry no moral

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<sup>73</sup> See Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*.

weight.”<sup>74</sup> Card describes two major classes of attempted excuses. First, one might plead that one is not responsible for the harm caused (due to compulsion, ignorance, and the like). Second, one might attempt to reduce the culpability of the wrong done by pointing to considerations which carry some moral weight even though they do not carry enough weight to make the deed morally permissible. In cases of evildoing, neither of these excuses are present: one cannot appeal to one’s ignorance or compulsion, nor can one point to any moral considerations which were relevant to committing the harmful act.

Card rightly prefers the requirement of inexcusability over culpability, which may at first seem the more plausible condition of evildoing, but which is often very hard to establish firmly and is sometimes not of primary relevance to the evil in question.<sup>75</sup>

Regarding culpability, sometimes there is no attempt whatsoever to justify the wrongdoing, for instance when it is done knowingly out of hatred, cruelty, to gain or maintain power over others, etc. But in many other cases there are potentially mitigating factors that may seem to excuse the wrongdoer from being judged as evil. However, the fact that there may be some possible explanation or even understandable, “rational” motives underlying the action in question does not make the evildoing justifiable or excusable in any way, Card argues. Neither does it make the evildoing forgivable, or at least deserving of forgiveness. Forgiveness lies in the hands of the victims of evildoing, and in many if not all cases of radical evil, forgiveness of the deeds committed by the evildoer seems impossible because of the gravity of the harm suffered. Forgiveness may

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<sup>74</sup> *Confronting Evils*, p. 13

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17

always remain a possibility in principle, but in cases of radical evil it becomes hard to conceive of, evidenced by the fact that we do not really speak of forgiveness in cases of mass murder or atrocity.

While evil remains inexcusable and unforgivable, Card adds, there are cases where looking at what might have motivated the agent to act wrongly, we may occasionally change our assessment and no longer see the wrong as evil or judge the agent as culpable or perhaps even as seriously blameworthy. But in most cases, looking at the possible motives and the circumstances of a situation will not alter our judgment that an agent has brought about serious harm through his own wrongdoing, wrongdoing which cannot be excused or justified by the apparently mitigating factors. This is important, for it illustrates why it is valid and legitimate to judge ordinary people's actions, for example, as evil. Looking at ordinary evildoers, we are able to distinguish the actions of ordinary people along a range of degrees of evil and evildoers. As Kekes observes, "a morally inexcusable action may fall anywhere on a continuum from culpable ignorance or weakness to deliberately and knowingly doing evil for its own sake."<sup>76</sup> And while ordinary evildoers are in a much different place in the continuum than sadistic monsters, they nevertheless count as evildoers because of the harm they caused and because of the lack of any justification or excuse for their actions or inaction. In other words, because evil is something we always have decisive reason against doing, regardless of whether one is an "ordinary" evildoer or an "absolutely evil" monster, the

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<sup>76</sup> *The Roots of Evil*, p. 2

intolerable harms caused by such wrongdoing are inexcusable and therefore rightly judged as evil.

As Card, Kekes, and others also acknowledge, secular accounts of evil like the one offered here are at least partially inspired by theory of evil laid out by Kant in his account of “radical evil.” On Kant’s view, evil is fundamentally a property of agents and their maxims, while for Card and others evil is not understood is more than just a matter of maxims or dispositions. The accounts offered by Card and others in recent philosophy are a departure from Kant in many ways, but they nevertheless share in common with Kant the central argument that evil is never justifiable or excusable -- each of these philosophical accounts of evil remind us that there are decisive reasons to reject evil actions and this is what distinguishes evils from other wrongs. On Kant’s view, the moral law always give us decisive reason to act in a certain way, to act according to duty, and therefore to perform evil deeds or deeds which are based on a maxim reversing the proper relationship of the moral and non-moral are in an important sense irrational – defective acts of rational moral agents. Kant does not, however, deny that much of the evil that human beings perform is rationally motivated, or done according to some sort of (non-moral) reasons. Therefore, drawing on Kant’s account, Card acknowledges that agents may have reasons for the wrongs they commit which cause serious harm, but these reasons in no sense provide them moral excuses or justifications for the actions they perform.

As Card rightly points out, there are many issues that can be raised about Kant's account, and there are necessary departures from Kant's account which a more adequate

contemporary account of evil might take.<sup>77</sup> For instance, Kant's "morally excluded middle," in which agents and actions are seen as either good or evil with nothing in between, may go too far in clouding what exactly we are trying to pick out when we judge something to be evil. Just as importantly, Kant's account almost totally passes over the harm caused by evil actions in its exclusive focus on the evil of the agent's maxim. Kant's denial of diabolical evil is also somewhat puzzling and dissatisfying, as is the way many passages in his account (perhaps simply to accommodate to his largely Christian audience) suggest that evil is some sort of inexplicable force or disease akin to original sin or a Satanic force that cannot be defeated by human powers alone. And yet, as Card, Bernstein, and other careful readers of Kant admit, it is quite striking how much Kant gets right and the room he created for developing an adequate account of moral evil.

The account offered by Card also offers a way of reconceiving the idea of diabolical evil or evil for evil's sake, a familiar paradigm of evil but one that many following Kant argue is unintelligible or too medieval. But on the account of evil defended by Card, diabolical evil refers to those evils done for the very purpose of causing the kind of radical evil that they bring about – unlike much evil-doing, done for the sake of greed, ambition, envy, and other motives, diabolical evil is done purely for the sake of the evil that will be caused. These sorts of evil-doing are performed (almost totally) in order to bring someone down or destroy or humiliate them, rather than in order to serve some more straightforward self-interested aim. The discussion offered here

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<sup>77</sup> See *Confronting Evils*, p. 40-46, for a good overview of some of the problems a Kantian theory of evil must face.



therefore opens up us a way of acknowledging that diabolical evil, or evil for evil's sake, is possible, and while it is on a different level of wrongdoing than even many other kinds of evildoing, it is not the sort of thing that only devils can perform.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> See Card's discussion of diabolical evil in *Confronting Evils*, p. 57-61.

## THE POLITICAL/INSTITUTIONAL ROOTS OF EVIL

The large-scale evils of the 20th century have driven those thinking about evil to focus on the social and political conditions of evildoing and how institutions and ideologies can have tremendous power in driving people to perform great evil. As Card stresses in her account, social, political, and economic institutions (and those who carry out its workings) can rightly be seen as evil. Even at first glance, it is obvious that economic, social, and political institutions can and do cause large-scale, intolerable harm. Such harms are usually against members of social groups or classes, through the wrongdoing and grave injustice of some set of arrangements, structures, or practices. Examples from history and from the daily newspapers of institution-based evildoing are overwhelming in number and proportion. What is at least a little more difficult to determine is exactly where the evils of the institution lie, which mechanisms or institutional practices cause these serious harms, and whether any individual or set of individuals is responsible or culpable. Thus, institutional evil requires a more complex account of wrongdoing than non-institutional evil. The most obvious puzzle is identifying who the set of responsible wrongdoers are: all citizens? just the planners, leaders, demagogues? the whole machinery of destruction or oppression? We are thus led to closely examine institutions and those who participate in them, benefit from them, and support them, in order to pinpoint where the so-called action is that makes the institution or set of institutions evil (e.g. is it market society, the coercive state, class and gender inequalities, outright racist and antiegalitarian attitudes?).

According to Card's account of institutional evils, at least three kinds of things can be evil about an institution: the rules or norms which define or structure it; the way in which the rules are administered; and the unanticipated ways that rules and norms can work together to produce intolerable harms (often a result of piecemeal developments or changes for the worse).<sup>79</sup> Often enough, however, regardless of whether we have an airtight case against the perpetrators of institutional evil, it is the large-scale harm that is caused by the institution or set of agents that is the thing we should apply the judgment concerning institutional evil against. The harm caused is often no less obvious than the inexcusable nature of the harm. Many cases of institutional evil appear simply senseless, totally without excuse, done with impunity by the perpetrators who have enough power to do what they wish and not fear any serious consequences, precisely because of their position in relation to the institutions and basic structure of society. Possible candidates for such kinds of institutional evil are organized state violence; the clearly exploitative and destructive components of capitalist economic structures and mechanisms; the various institutional forms of slavery; political and economic corruption at the cost of the vast majority of citizens' well-being; the injustices of the criminal justice system; the overall basic structure of society and how benefits and burdens are distributed unfairly or according to some deeply unjust arrangement; and the various forms of privilege and oppression that spring from unjust institutional arrangements that keep some in positions of power and others in inescapable positions of subservience and vulnerability. Iris Young's account of the five faces of oppression (exploitation, marginalization,

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<sup>79</sup> Confronting Evils, p. 18

powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence) and the ways oppression is caused and mutually reinforced by various social institutions provides a good starting point for a more developed account of these kinds of institutional or structural evils.<sup>80</sup>

Card's account also attempts to bring attention to the importance of complicity in evil and to conceptualize why it so harmful (while not necessarily evil in itself). Complicity in evil is an admittedly vague and easy to misuse notion, the sort of notion that in making everyone guilty ends up making no one guilty. An act of complicity with evil may not be evil itself, but it very often is a necessary condition for the kinds of evil-doing, and especially the institutional or large-scale evil-doing, that cause the most harm. The motives which lead one to complicity with evil are usually quite ordinary and understandable, but acknowledging this does not mean that one is given an excuse to overlook or turn away as though one can simply wash one's hands clean of someone else's problem.

In an interesting discussion of the near total absence of resistance to the Nazi regime by German intellectuals like himself, Karl Jaspers looks to Kant to make sense of the complicity with evil fallen into by Germany's intellectual leadership. The evil revealed in this moment of ethical decision points to "Not evil as devilry ... but as the self-deceiving inversion of the conditional relationship between the will to happiness and moral claim: this was the basic appearance of the co-operation on the part of so many otherwise quite decent human beings. They wanted to be a part of it, justify it, because

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<sup>80</sup> See Iris Marion Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), chapter 2.

they received and increased their happiness, as they understood it, from participation in the regime, under the self-deceiving proviso of opposition in special cases. It was in this that I saw Kant's radical evil and explained my own conduct."<sup>81</sup> Jaspers here explains his failure to fully resist the evils of Nazi Germany as a paradigm example of Kantian radical evil. Jaspers was far from acting like the devilish being some of his countrymen clearly transformed into, but his actions nevertheless expose a fundamental moral weakness in his character, one which all too easily subordinated "moral claims" (i.e. to resist evil) to his own immediate happiness and self-interest (and avoid Nazi persecution).

Reflecting on the ways social and political factors can lead some to complicity with evil and others to perform evil deeds, we are led to the observation that most of the evil in the world today has its origins in social-political conflict. Serial killers, child molesters, and psychopaths still exist, but the evil we have to fear most is that performed by political and institutional actors -- those with the means to cause widespread violence and suffering. The forms of widespread political violence and oppression in our world should be confronted as the evil that they are. While not as shocking to us as major atrocities, the suffering and misery of millions and millions of people due to oppressive and unjust social arrangements willingly sustained by global leaders is an evil radical in its depth and reach. Similarly, we must also acknowledge evil's external conditions, the ideologies and histories and feuds which lead to evils so unnecessary and inexcusable and senseless. If nothing else, the 20<sup>th</sup> century should have taught us this lesson concerning

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<sup>81</sup> Karl Jaspers, "Reply," in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, Edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp (Tudor Publishing Company: New York, 1957), p. 864-865

political evil, and as we continue to live a world in which the lives of millions can be erased by the orders of a single political figure, we must confront the realities and dangers of political evil, evil caused by political actors, enabled by political institutions and the scope of political life and the fact that a political leader or regime can suddenly come to possess overwhelming power over the lives of millions.<sup>82</sup> This should not lead us to fear or turn away from these problems, but it should cause us to focus our philosophical and political efforts towards addressing the situation in which we live, in a world where power can all too easily be used for evil.

The accounts offered by Card, Kekes, Neiman, and others capture much that is important about talking about evil. They rightly attempt to return evil to an important place in our moral vocabularies and in response to the horrific wrongs in need of philosophical reflection. However, they may nevertheless fail to capture important aspects of evil that Kant recognized before them when speaking about radical evil lying at the root and that those like Levinas have pointed to by speaking of the excesses and disruptiveness of evil. In particular, Card and others do not address what is an equally important condition of evil-doing which distinguishes it from other wrongs, that of the radical, or fundamental moral inversion that lies at the center of evil and which leads us to characterize something as evil. This Kant rightly described as the underlying disposition of the will which serves as the ground of moral and immoral actions. When speaking of "evil," it is to this underlying yet essential moral character that we are

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<sup>82</sup> For a recent discussion of political evil and its role as the paradigm of contemporary evil, see Alan Wolfe, *Political Evil* (New York: Knopf, 2011).

pointing to when decrying evildoing. We reserve the language of evil for those things that cannot be described in any other terms, where our normal categories of wrongdoing are inadequate, and where the more familiar motives of envy, rage, jealousy, greed, and so on do not fully explain what could have motivated someone to perform such serious wrongdoing. We distinguish evil and degrees of evil according to the harm caused and by the motive of the perpetrator, reserving the harshest judgments for those deeds committed out of malice, hatred, racism, or sadism. That is why we speak of evil as radical, as something corrupted at the fundamental moral level, in the essence or nature (at least morally speaking) of the thing in question. For something to be rightly considered evil, this quality of violating the moral law lies at the very heart of that which we call evil. In such horrific cases, no other term will capture our sense of moral horror, incredulity, and categorical rejection in response to the wrong committed.

With this brief overview of recent discussions of evil behind us, it is worth pausing for a moment to appreciate how durable the notion of radical evil has remained among philosophers working to make sense of evil. First introduced by Kant, then given a key place in later works by Schelling, Hegel, Kierkegaard and others, the notion of radical evil has retained a significant status for many 20th century thinkers, including Jaspers, Arendt, Derrida, and in recent work on evil in philosophy. Its basic intuition that evil is a concept which points to the inverted fundamental moral character of an action or agent has remained essential in intellectual discussions of evil and in everyday conversation. The resilience of the notion of radical evil, which we've only begun to hint

at here, suggests the idea of radical evil best captures what we mean when we employ the notion of evil in our moral judgments today.



## CONCLUSION: EVIL AND THE LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHY

A final set of points needs to be addressed before concluding. What we have claimed in this paper about the concept of evil has been at times rather broad and sweeping. It may leave the impression that there is little left for us to worry about or be conflicted about when employing the notion of evil in our moral judgments. Furthermore, it may leave the impression that with the account of evil defended here we can now speak with ease and with confidence about particular instances of radical evil in our world. Nothing could be further from the truth. Any plausible account of evil -- including the ones discussed in this paper -- to remain honest and not to be lying to itself, must admit that we cannot and perhaps never will be able to understand the particular evils that have been committed -- from the perspective of the perpetrators or that of the victims. Historians and others writing about recent atrocities have gone to extraordinary lengths to get their hands on as many documents, diaries and letters, and have interviewed many survivors and many evildoers and participants in atrocity. While claiming to have learned much about the events and evildoers in question, these chroniclers remain reluctant to say that they now understand or can explain the evil they have attempted to studying describe. Even less have they put forward an abstract conception or theory of evil that should offer an systematic explanation of the kind that no leaves no unsettling questions or intellectual discomfort. Because evil is something radical, it will always allude our familiar intellectual categories and our moral frameworks -- these are what distinguish radical evil from other wrongs. And because evils has this quality of exceeding or disrupting our

normal categories, any attempt to confine evil to a fixed and definite definition seems misguided at best.

Because there is no single essence to evil, no single entity or underlying drive that lies behind all evildoing, no social ill that lies at the root of all evil, evil will always exceed simple intellectual explanation. Therefore, no category of "evil in general" can respond to and fully address a particular evil or evildoer in all its gory details. The Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim draws attention to this point when he discusses the failure of all previous accounts of "evil in general" to face the Holocaust and the evils of Hitler and the Nazi perpetrators. Fackenheim makes an important point in a letter to his former student Kenneth Hart Green: "Now if you have to say—which is what I'm driven to say—that an unprecedented evil has occurred, then one cannot but immerse oneself in it, if one is to cope with it. You can't ignore it, and you can't classify it under 'evil-in-general,' or even 'demonic-evil-in-general.' Then of course it's not clear whether after you've emerged from that encounter, the world to which you get is the same."<sup>83</sup>

As Fackenheim argues elsewhere, the accounts of radical evil offered by Kant and contemporary philosophers remain attempts at coming up with a timeless, universal, non-temporal or historical account of evil in general. Fackenheim finds much to appreciate in Kant's account of radical evil and frequently employs the notion of radical evil in referring to the Holocaust. But like many others concerned with responding to the evil of the Holocaust, Fackenheim finds Kant's denial of diabolical evil to be out of touch with

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<sup>83</sup> See the letter by Fackenheim to Kenneth Hart Green reprinted in "Leo Strauss, the 'New Thinking,' and To Mend the World," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* Vol. 21, Issue 2, 2013

the reality of Nazi evil and sees other weaknesses that Kant's account shares with previous philosophical (and theological) accounts of evil, all of which are found wanting in light of the horrors of the Holocaust. These accounts very likely fail to account for or adequately respond to the particular evils of the death camps and other horrors, in particular to the address what Fackenheim sees as Hitler's "near ultimate evil,"<sup>84</sup> the unprecedented nature of the genocidal intentions of the Third Reich, and the degradation and total dehumanization which reigned in the death camps. As Fackenheim argues against Leo Strauss, previous "high" or universal, abstract notions such as evil in general fail to explain the "low," particular evils of the Nazi genocide, making a post-Holocaust philosophy and account of radical evil absolutely necessary.<sup>85</sup>

Bearing witness to the gravity of the evil of the Holocaust, in his two-volume work *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, the historian Saul Friedlander attempts to write a thorough narrative history of the Holocaust without eliminating or domesticating our sense of disbelief.<sup>86</sup> Friedlander's book stands as perhaps the greatest historical reconstruction of the Holocaust we have, unsurpassable perhaps in its scope and knowledge of original documents, witness testimonies, and work by other historians, but Friedlander insists that there remains much that he cannot make sense of, that refuses to

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<sup>84</sup> For Fackenheim's remarks about Hitler's "near ultimate evil," and attempts by other philosophers, historians, and writers to figure out what could have possibly driven Hitler to wage a genocidal war against the Jews, see Ron Rosenbaum's book *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil* (Random House: New York, 1998).

<sup>85</sup> For Fackenheim's discussions of each of these issues, see Fackenheim's far-reaching work in post-Holocaust thought, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Schocken: New York, 1982).

<sup>86</sup> See Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution* (Harper Collins: New York, 1997) and *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Extermination* (Harper Collins: New York, 2007).

be brought under our powers of historical understanding. Following Friedlander, perhaps any sincere, viable account of evil should also admit that there will always remain much about evil that we cannot explain or reduce to terms we can deal with.

In Friedlander's work and in the memoirs of Holocaust survivors like Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, no abstract accounts of evil are offered. Instead we find first-person accounts of radical, extreme evil, images (and narratives) of evil which to a great degree have come to represent for later generations the evils of the Nazi atrocities: e.g. for Levi, the image of the *Muselmanner*, for Wiesel the child hanging in the gallows.<sup>87</sup> As Levi writes of the *Muselmanner*, "Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmanner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand. They crowd my memory with their faceless presences, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in our image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen."<sup>88</sup>

As painful as it is to admit, we can only assume that new forms of evil will catch us off guard and bring in more waves of destruction, much like evil erupted in the 20th century and uprooted a whole continent. No perpetrator, no matter how monstrous and

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<sup>87</sup> See Elie Wiesel, *Night*, Transl. Marion Wiesel (Hill and Wang: New York, 2006).

<sup>88</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, Trans. Stuart Woolf (Simon and Schuster: New York, 1996), p. 60

full of self-knowledge, could ever explain to us all that went into the evils committed and settle once and for all what evil is. To understand evil and the evildoing around us thus needs to be a constant preoccupation of those seeking to understand the human condition. Acknowledging these limitations on our abilities to confront evil should not lead us to mystify evil or to romanticize it or make it larger than life. To recognize that evil alludes total comprehension is to confront evil for what it is, something that when we are honest with ourselves we must painfully admit is to some extent beyond our power to understand, to forgive, and to prevent via human institutions. Survivors like Levi, who more than Wiesel does try to theorize some aspects of life in the camps and the perpetrators motives and psyche, nevertheless acknowledges that this is the attitude in which we must confront evil, as something which will never be fully understood. As Fackenheim, Amery, Levi, and others remind us, evil is always something concrete and real in causing horrendous, useless suffering. It cannot be reduced from its concrete nature to something abstract or easily explicable or excusable that we can then subsume into our broader intellectual frameworks -- that is why evil is a continuing challenge.

This is just one crucial lesson which academic philosophy could learn by listening to these unfamiliar voices. While philosophy, by its very nature, will very likely continue to cherish the search for knowledge and for theories with the status of deep, sweeping explanatory power and clarity, philosophy may also be able to recognize its own powers to contribute to our understanding in these areas which matter as much to us as human beings as any problem of mind, language, or metaphysics. It may also find that, as Fackenheim puts it, "thought going to school with life," is extremely important for

philosophy to have any grasp on the human condition which has always been its major preoccupation.<sup>89</sup> Philosophy may even find that it may be well positioned to deal with the problem of evil, a problem many may think is not worthy of more philosophical debate but which remains a perennial and fundamental problem for philosophy -- for those doing working in metaphysics, ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of religion, and the history of philosophy

Even more, philosophers (along with everyone else) should not underestimate the power we have to prevent certain evils and address the kinds of conditions and motivations that commonly give rise to evildoing. We have only to imagine what may have been different if the intellectual, theological, and political leadership of a highly educated and civilized society had been better prepared to deal with a radical evil that grew and somehow seized power. Confronting evil is unfortunately a task that will continue to preoccupy us as long as human beings retain some freedom to act, a freedom which involves the ready possibility of seriously harming other human beings. Despite the challenges that evil continues to bring against us, those who take responsibility for addressing evil must remain vigilant, must refuse to be duped by evil or its deniers, and must keep asking questions even as we continue to struggle to find answers.

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<sup>89</sup> For a discussion of what "thought going to school with life" might mean for post-Holocaust thought, see Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*.

**AFTERWORD: WHAT'S SO RADICAL ABOUT EVIL -- ARENDT, THE  
EICHMANN TRIAL, AND THE NATURE OF EVIL**

Talking about evil in terms of banality and ordinary evildoers runs the risk of masking many of the other ways evil should rightly be described -- often as much more than something banal. As Kuehn rightly argues, "Evil is a moral category and it applies to horrific acts that are by that very fact not banal."<sup>90</sup> Perhaps some, even most, evildoers are motivated by the kinds of ordinary, prosaic motives Arendt ascribes to Eichmann. But as Kuehn notes, noticing the banality of some evil is only zeroing in on one angle of the evil-doing in question -- some evildoers are indeed banal, thoughtless, etc., like Arendt's Eichmann, but just as many evildoers are anything but banal, and neither is the horrific suffering that they inflict. Even the most banal evildoers, supposed desk murderers like Eichmann, knowingly bring about suffering and death that is horrendous for its victims. While Arendt seemed to have not been much disturbed by Eichmann's "thoughtlessness," there is something extremely frightening about Arendt's Eichmann, a man whose lack of apparent spiritual conflict or guilt while sending millions of men, women, and children to their death. Despite falling short of a devilish being, Eichmann is certainly not someone we should see as ordinary, as though anyone would have performed his deeds with bureaucratic zeal day after day delighting in the numbers of innocent he'd delivered to their deaths as though he was just delivering goods to be distributed.

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<sup>90</sup> "How Banal is Evil?," p. 145

Furthermore, as Arendt herself openly confesses, "the banality of evil" is not meant to be a theory of evil, as though evil could be fully described under the notion of banality. Jennifer Geddes stresses this feature of Arendt's book on Eichmann: "Arendt's thesis points to an understanding of evil as particular, evolving, and nonessentialist. In fact, that she arrived at her thesis about evil by attending an historical event and focusing on a particular perpetrator suggests that Arendt herself resisted essentialist understandings of evil. Her method reveals the importance of attending to the particular and of continually attending to the possibility of new forms of evil."<sup>91</sup> What popped out to Arendt at Eichmann's trial was that he was not the monster or diabolical villain that many had expected, a discovery that led her to her thoughts about the apparent banality of his motives (and the gap between the horror of his crimes and the bland personality of Eichmann). Eichmann therefore seemed to represent a new kind of perpetrator, perhaps a paradigm of many of those who brought about the Nazi genocide -- a new crime with a distinctive kind of perpetrator and which confronts us with a particular form of evil.

But the banal aspects of Eichmann and his motives are much different from the radical evil designed to reign in the death camps and the sadism and torture that lie at the heart of the Nazi system of domination. As Arendt well realized and wrote about at length in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the death camps brought into existence by the Nazi leadership was motivated by much more than banal motives -- in fact, on Arendt's account, one she never changed throughout several new editions of the book, there

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<sup>91</sup> Jennifer L. Geddes, "Banal Evil and Useless Knowledge: Hannah Arendt and Charlotte Delbo on Evil after the Holocaust," *Hypatia*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Winter 2003), p. 109



remains something radical, absolutely evil and even demonic about the camps and the total domination and torture that lie at the heart of the Nazi regime and its imagination. As Bernstein concludes in his perceptive discussion of Arendt, "Arendt never repudiated the thought-trains that went into her original discussion of radical evil, especially the claim that radical evil involves making human beings as human beings superfluous, as well as systematic attempt to eliminate human spontaneity, individuality, and plurality. On the contrary, the phenomenon that she identified as the banality of evil presupposes this understanding of radical evil."<sup>92</sup> In other words, while Eichmann may have appeared a rather ordinary, banal man, certainly nothing resembling Satanic greatness, the deeds he willingly performed had the distinctive, radical aim of exterminating a whole people. Later historical work has shown that Eichmann seemed to delight in the act of playing God and acting as The Lord of Death in overseeing the deportation of European Jews to the death camps, something he reportedly bragged about until the end of his life. There should not be, then, any forgetting the radical evil that Eichmann knowingly carried out in a rather spirited and determined manner.<sup>93</sup>

The greatest flaw in Arendt's account, however, is that by referring to Eichmann as banal and merely thoughtless, Arendt's account tends to slip into a hopeful mode much like a theodicy, reducing evil to something more easily domesticated to our broader views (or in Arendt's case, her conflicted identification with German culture, philosophy, and

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<sup>92</sup> Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, p. 218

<sup>93</sup> For more evidence of a less banal Eichmann, see the important recent biography by David Cesarani, *Becoming Eichmann* (Da Capo: Cambridge, MA, 2004) and also the recent book by Deborah Lipstadt, *The Eichmann Trial* (Schocken: New York, 2011).

her mentor Martin Heidegger) and therefore presenting no serious problem for us. In common with many other attempts at theodicy, Arendt is forced to distort and underestimate the reality of evil in order to make it fit into her broader aim in reconciling evil with the rest of her views. On Arendt's account, Eichmann comes to represent the largely banal and non-monstrous nature of contemporary evildoers, whose main flaw is being "thoughtless" rather than sadistic, malevolent, or diabolical. This reduces evil to something which we can perhaps grasp intellectually and maybe even defeat politically and morally. As Susan Neiman probably first noticed, Arendt's Eichmann book therefore stands as a kind of secular theodicy, an explaining away of the problem of Nazi evil that had disturbed Arendt for so long.<sup>94</sup> That is why, as Arendt admitted in a letter to her close friend Mary McCarthy, she wrote her report on the Eichmann trial in a "curious state of euphoria" and felt a huge weight be lifted off her shoulders by going to the trial in Jerusalem and confronting a representative of Nazi evil in the flesh, before then collecting her thoughts and writing the reports for *The New Yorker*.<sup>95</sup>

It is telling that Arendt would draw these specific conclusions rather than others from the Eichmann trial, a trial which also served as an unprecedented venue for testimony by victims of the horrors of the Holocaust. Arendt briefly mentions these first-hand accounts of the horrific suffering brought about by the system Eichmann and other Germans maintained, but complains that such testimony had little to do with the guilt or

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<sup>94</sup> See Neiman, "Theodicy in Jerusalem," in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, Edited by Steven E. Ascheim (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2001).

<sup>95</sup> Letter by Arendt to Mary McCarthy, included in a collection of their correspondence, *Between Friends*, edited by Carol Brightman (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), p. 168

innocence of the man on trial. Arendt may have been right from a juridical point of view, and yet making this judgment about what is appropriate for a legal proceeding does not seem like a good reason to basically ignore all the survivor testimonies which spoke to a very much non-banal evil and then claim that what one came away with at the trial was the undeniable lesson about the banality of evil. In a well-known rebuff to Arendt, Jean Amery writes, "For there is no 'banality of evil,' and Hannah Arendt, who wrote about it in her Eichmann book, knew the enemy of humankind only from hearsay, saw him only through the glass cage. When an event places the most extreme demands on us, one ought not to speak of banality."<sup>96</sup> Amery, in his wrenching account of the torture he experienced at the hands of the SS, demonstrates beyond any doubt that there was nothing banal about the torture he suffered at the hands of Nazi henchmen. It is unfortunate that Arendt chose to largely leave out the testimonies given during the trial of survivors like Amery who left no doubt that the evils of the Nazis were anything but banal. Perhaps if her book had better reflected what took place at the trial in Jerusalem, a much different account of evil would have emerged.

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<sup>96</sup> Jean Amery, *At the Mind's Limits* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 25

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