



Good and Evil in Recent Discussion – Introductory Comments

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The two *opposing values* “good and evil” have fought a dreadful, thousand-year fight in the world, and though indubitably the second value has been for a long time in the preponderance, there are not wanting places where the fortune of the fight is still undecided. It can almost be said that in the meanwhile the fight reaches a higher and higher level, and that in the meanwhile it has become more and more intense, and always more and more psychological.
(Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*)

In our everyday language, the use of the dichotomy of good and evil is very common. Some might say that “Vladimir Putin is an evil guy” or that “showing solidarity with Ukraine is a good thing”. But if we look at philosophical discussions of this pair of concepts, we notice that clear distinctions and specifications are anything but simple. This issue of ZEMO is therefore dedicated to the difficult and sometimes unwieldy relationship of these two probably “most general terms of evaluation”¹.

The following texts by Luke Russell, Katja Vogt, Jens Haas and Jörg Noller look at the complex relationship between good and evil from different perspectives, whereby it becomes clear in all contributions that evil does not have epistemological and ontological priority over good, but that its role in moral philosophy has not been adequately appreciated so far.

The starting point of the discussion is Luke Russell’s contribution, in which he begins with an analysis of the concept of evil. In doing so, Russell rejects error

¹ Christine Korsgaard, *The Relational Nature of Good*, 5 [01_Shafer-Landau_Ch01.indd (harvard.edu)].



theoretic approaches that claim that evil does not exist and is thus morally irrelevant. For Russell, however, evil is morally relevant insofar as he defines evil actions as extreme moral wrongs that a) have no reference to something supernatural, b) that are necessarily “not performed out of a particular set of motives” and c) that are not promoting a Manichaeic worldview according to which all humans can be divided into the wholly good and the wholly evil. Like Jörg Noller, Russell thus orients himself towards Hannah Arendt’s famous understanding of evil.

Katja Vogt and Jens Haas look at the relationship between good and evil from a virtue-ethical perspective. Although they endorse Anscombe’s view that secular theoretical ethics should dispense with the concept of morality, they do not want to “dismiss the study of evil within secular ethics”. After discussing evil a) with regard to the Guise of the Good, b) compared to perfect injustice, c) as exploitation of weakness, d) as selfishness and e) as complete privation, Vogt and Haas defend “a tripartite distinction between good, non-evil badness, and evil.” More strongly than Russell, these two authors assume that evil is fundamentally agent-relative and at least partly qualitative, rather than quantitatively extreme bad.

The third contribution by Jörg Noller argues strictly from a Kantian perspective, conceiving of evil neither as a real entity, nor as a privation of evil, but as a perversion of the good will “that springs from our individual freedom”.

Certainly, this discussion cannot cover all aspects of the relationship between good and evil. However, it does raise new questions that are more comparative in nature, e.g. is there - analogous to the question of an intrinsic or absolute goodness - also intrinsic or absolute evil and thus also absolutely evil (= diabolical) action? Can only evil persons perform diabolical actions? Can evil, which can result from both good and evil actions, be aggregated? And if we have so far only scratched the surface in determining the relationship between good and evil, should we not, as Nietzsche suggests, look for a new standpoint regarding the consideration of this relationship? These questions require further investigation. Nevertheless, the editors of ZEMO would like to thank all those involved in this discussion for their valuable and very stimulating contributions.

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