DISCUSSION

Good and Evil in Recent Discussion
The Priority of Good and the Rationality of Evil

Jörg Noller

Abstract This paper develops a critical account of evil. By referring to Kant's moral philosophy, I argue that evil actions have reasons and cannot be explained in terms of a lack of reason. However, these reasons of evil are not obvious but rather forms of rational self-deception. I therefore argue that the phenomenon of evil is complex and involves three dimensions: (i) activity, (ii) reasons, and (iii) (self-)deception.

1 To what extent is the concept of evil (and good) philosophically adequate?

The concept of evil is a strongly evaluative concept. However, it seems to me that from a philosophical point of view we cannot avoid to use it if we want to understand the reasons for immoral actions. Like Luke Russell I think that the concept of evil is a philosophically useful term that pertains to real events in our world. I find Kant's conception of evil especially interesting for it allows us to conceive of maxims as evil. These evil maxims *ground* our evil actions and are therefore ontologically prior to them. Hence, the concept of evil concerns a radical basic tendency of our thinking, willing and acting, which can be expressed in various forms and degrees. Following Kant, I am convinced that evil actions have reasons, and against the privative account of evil that Jens Haas and Katja Vogt are discussing, I argue that evil is a *perversion* of the good but not a privation. This means that evil actions have certain reasons and cannot be explained in terms of a lack of reason. However, by referring to Kant's moral philosophy, I argue that the reasons for evil are structured in such a way that it is difficult to identify them as *evil* reasons. For the one who acts evilly acts only in rare cases *consciously* or *intentionally* evilly, that is evilly for the sake of

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evil. Rather, he or she will attempt to present his or her own actions as basically *justified* and therefore *good.* This confusion or inversion of good and evil in evil actions is what I call the perversion of evil. I understand Hannah Arendt's talk of the "banality of evil" in such a 'perversive' way: acting evilly is not banal but rather gives itself the *appearance of banality* in claiming to be justified. Philosophy can help to expose this mere appearance of goodness and thus at least indirectly help to improve our actions. Therefore, the phenomenon of evil is complex and involves three dimensions: (i) activity (evil is not a privation), (ii) reasons (evil is not *simply* irrational), and (iii) (self-)deception (evil is not simply *irrational*) (I have argued for this in my books *Theorien des Bösen* (2017) and *Gründe des Bösen* (2019)).

I think that we cannot philosophically dispense with the concept of evil as long as we wish to understand ourselves as free and self-determined individuals. Evil, like good, is a form of human freedom. The phenomenon of evil shows how precarious our freedom is, for it is here that our imputability becomes particularly tangible in the case of guilt. Nevertheless, I think that we should not use the concept of evil carelessly. We need a critical concept of evil, which consists in the insight that attributions of evil can always happen abusively. Those who use the concept of evil to describe and criticize others must always consider that his or her actions may themselves be evil. By this I mean that the concept of evil should be conceived as a *reflexive* concept: its attribution is an act that is not itself independent of the concept. We may well act evilly in unjustifiably stigmatizing others as evil and in elevating ourselves above them. For this reason, I am inclined to argue that there are no evil persons, opposed to Luke Russell's view. Seen in this light, the concept of the morally good is also problematic. For it has the tendency to normatively fix what it denotes, as if we were completely on the safe side. The concept of the good should therefore also be used reflexively and critically – not so much as a fixed description of a state, but as a perspective or tendency towards which we can develop, but from which we are also always inclined to turn away.

2   Doesn't the concept of evil threaten to discriminate against people or whole parts of the world?

In fact, the concept of evil is often misused to assert power interests against the other. The term "axis of evil" is just one example of this. In my opinion, however, we should not draw the conclusion from this that we should dispense with the concept of evil altogether. Rather, when using the term "evil," we should always bear in mind that we ourselves – and not only the other – can fall under the term, i.e. act evilly. As soon as the concept of evil is no longer directed exclusively at the other, but is used reflexively, I still consider it a suitable, indeed necessary, instrument of moral diagnosis. In addition, it is important to emphasize that a critical concept of evil does not grasp persons or societies essentialistically, but only structures that can in principle be changed for the good. This is precisely what a critical concept of evil should contribute to by never naming and exposing moral grievances in an exclusively discriminatory and defamatory manner, but in a constructive way.

3 What actually is – if the concept of evil is meaningful and adequate – evil? (actions, people, maxims, ...)

I consider it problematic if we ontologize evil by speaking of 'evil' as a general principle or power. I therefore argue for a 'semantic descent' that leads from 'the evil' to an 'evil' action, maxim, attitude, and the like. As such, 'evil' always remains in the realm of human freedom and imputability – and thus also the mutability to 'good', understood as a tendency or direction, which likewise – at least with regard to us humans – should not be ontologized to a principle.

4 How do virtue ethics, consequentialism, and deontology deal with evil actions or the fact of moral evil?

For virtue ethics, evil manifests itself in 'vices'; for consequentialism, evil is an empirically tangible evil or grievance. It seems to me that deontology in particular struggles with an explication of evil. After all, if our actions are to be aligned with duty or the good, how can we more accurately explain a deviation from the ought without thereby introducing a normative counter-principle and without making our evil actions any less real? Kant's moral philosophy here offers various answers to understanding evil in such a way that it need not be understood as either a counter-principle to the good or as a mere deficiency of the good. Kant speaks of a "propensity to evil," of our "self-conceit." But his concept of rationalizing (*Vernünfteln*) seems to me to be particularly central. Through this concept, Kant succeeds in defining evil in such a way that it is neither a normative counter-principle to the moral ought, nor does it become a character or empirical externality, as in the case of virtue ethics and consequentialism. Those who rationalize, according to Kant, attempt to justify their actions with a view to an apparent good, and in this false but sometimes very intelligent justification lies the imputable reason for our immoral actions. It is a reason that affects each and every one of us, insofar as we are finite rational beings (I defend this view in my paper "Rationalizing: Kant on Moral Self-Deception" (2021)). According to Kant, evil is not a mere defect or privation that should and can be remedied, but a fundamental tendency of our individual existence that springs from our individual freedom. At the end of a privative conception of evil, to which virtue ethics and consequentialism tend, would be the perfect human being. I think that the perfect human being cannot exist. But what is desirable and possible is that we are always aware of our own principled freedom to evil in our actions.

5 How do good and evil relate to each other? Are they adversarial opposites?

In my opinion, good and evil are not contradictory opposites, because good is pre-ordered to evil. This pre-ordering is not to be understood in such a way that evil would be less existent, because evil actions are just as real as good ones – indeed

they seem to receive even more meaning and attention than good actions. Rather, it seems to me that the good provides the formal orientation and justification that must also be claimed by the one who acts evilly. The one who acts evilly abuses the good, for instance by seemingly justifying her actions, and thereby always implicitly presupposes the good.

6 Rounding off question: Is the argumentative use of the dichotomy of good and evil still helpful in contemporary (moral) philosophy?

I think that the dichotomy of good and evil helps us to identify and criticize individual or collective moral actions and behavior. The dichotomy between good and evil grounds, so to speak, the very concept of morality – its normativity and epistemology. However, we need to carefully use this dichotomy in order to avoid discrimination against other persons, collectives or even nations. Therefore, we need to use this dichotomy in a reflexive way that always involves ourselves in our moral judgment. In judging morally, we are not outside this dichotomy, but rather subject to good and evil as well, for judging and attributing moral predicates is itself a moral action.