DISCUSSION

Good and Evil in Recent Discussion
Defending the Concept of Evil

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Abstract This paper addresses the question of whether the concept of evil is philosophically adequate. It sets out a secular conception of evil that is sufficiently clear to be used in philosophical theorising. Evil, so conceived, is not merely a fiction or an illusion, but is a moral property possessed by some actions and some persons in the real world. While several philosophers have claimed that it is inescapably dangerous to use the concept of evil, the reality is that the concept of evil, when used carefully, is not prohibitively dangerous. Evil actions are not merely the opposite of good actions. Rather evil actions are are a small subset of extreme moral wrongs.

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

The concept of evil has been criticised by many people. Some critics are sceptical of morality as a whole, and attack both the concept of good and the concept of evil. But there are others who endorse and happily use the moral concepts of good, bad, right, and wrong but who remain sceptical about evil. These critics claim that the concept evil is outdated, misleading, and dangerous. Evil, they say, is nothing more than a fiction.

There are two main kinds of argument that need to be considered here: error theoretic arguments and pragmatic arguments. Let us focus on the error theoretic arguments first. These are arguments for the conclusion that evil does not exist, and they resemble those that are used by error theorists in other domains. We are all familiar with arguments for the conclusion that ghosts do not exist, or that God does not exist. The first phase of such an argument specifies the content of

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the concept in question. Before we can figure out whether God exists, we need to know what the word "God" means, or what God is supposed to be. Once we have a definition or description in hand, we can then move on to the second phase of the argument, in which we consider whether there is anything that meets that description. For example, theists and atheists might agree that God is supposed to be the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent creator of the universe, and then disagree as to whether there is good evidence that such a being really exists. Philosophers who argue that evil does or does not exist are required to complete these two phases. But in this case there is deep disagreement in relation to the first phase of the argument. Philosophers have offered a broad array of definitions of evil, and it is very difficult to figure out which of these definitions, if any, captures the real essence of evil. The result of this is that philosophical disagreements over the existence of evil often rest on deeper disagreements over what the word "evil" means. People who are engaged in these debates routinely talk past one another, decrying their naïve or morally corrupt opponents while failing to realise that the two parties to the disagreement are using the word "evil" to mean very different things.

For example, philosophers such as Phillip Cole who are sceptical of the existence of evil assume that evil is by definition a supernatural force, or that "evil" is the name of a malevolent supernatural being, or that evildoers are supposed to be literal monsters who are radically distinct from the rest of humanity. These sceptics say that in reality there are no monsters and no supernatural forces, and thus conclude that there is no evil. However, there are plenty of people who think that these conceptions of evil are wildly off-target. Evil is *not* by definition a supernatural force; an evildoer is *not* by definition a literally inhuman monster. Instead, we might claim that evil actions should be defined as extreme moral wrongs that are performed by ordinary human beings. This usage of the word "evil" is common in response to atrocities including the Holocaust or the Rwandan genocide. If this is what "evil" means, then it is comparatively uncontentious to claim that evil exists, even if there are no supernatural beings and no literal monsters. I favour this way of thinking about evil, and this can also be found in the work of Hannah Arendt and Claudia Card. There are other philosophers who agree that evil does exist, but who think that evil actions are more than just extreme wrongs. They say instead that evils are the subclass of extremely wrong actions that are performed out of a particular set of motives. Perhaps evil actions are extreme wrongs that are also motivated by malice, or that are performed with sadistic pleasure, or that are performed in knowing defiance of morality. According to this way of thinking, evil is not metaphysically strange, but is psychologically distinctive. I think that there are several defensible conceptions of evil according to which the real world contains plenty of evil actions, so I reject the error theoretic arguments. I defend the conclusion that evil is real.

Philosophers who agree that evil, so defined, is real might still claim that the concept of evil is not philosophically adequate. Perhaps the concept of evil is so unclear and so obviously in need of refinement and clarification that it is not a suitable tool for use in our moral thinking. Yet this would be an implausibly high bar for philosophical adequacy. Plenty of other important and legitimate moral concepts – freedom, responsibility, and forgiveness, for example – also require a great deal

of disambiguation and clarification before they can be used in careful and clear philosophical discussion. The concept of evil is in no worse a position than other moral concepts in the same domain.

As I pointed out earlier, some critics of the concept of evil do not focus on whether there is anything in the real world that fits the description of evil. Rather, they claim that people who use the concept of evil fall into certain patterns of thought that have dangerous effects. According to this kind of pragmatic argument we ought to drop the concept of evil because people who think in terms of evil are thereby led to mistreat others and to make the world a worse place. Some critics claim that if we use the concept of evil then we will adopt a Manichean worldview according to which each person is mistakenly seen as being either wholly good or wholly evil. Others suggest that if we use the concept of evil then we will demonise our opponents, or that we will write off wrongdoers who are actually capable of moral reform and reintegration into society.

How should we respond to these claims that the concept of evil is not practically adequate? I agree that there are plenty of cases in which people mistakenly judge that their opponents are wholly evil, and mistakenly write off perpetrators who are in fact good candidates for reform. But these are cases in which the concept of evil has been misapplied. Every moral concept is frequently misapplied to bad effect. Famously, Himmler and Eichmann both mistakenly applied the concept of duty to their horrendous misdeeds during the Holocaust. Does this imply that we ought to eliminate the concept of duty? Of course not. Instead, we should encourage the careful and accurate application of the concept of duty. We should reject the claim that carrying out mass executions is the duty of a soldier, but not reject the idea that there are some genuine moral duties. Similarly, we should reject the claim that all humans can be divided into the wholly good and the wholly evil, but not reject the idea that there are some evil actions.

2 - What actually is—if the concept of evil is meaningful and adequate—evil? (actions, people, maxims, ...)

It is commonplace for various things to be called evil, including actions, persons, motives, institutions, and practices. We might hear someone say that an act of torture carried out by the military is evil, or that the serial killer Ted Bundy is an evil person, or that the desire to see your rival writhing in pain is an evil motive, or that the KGB is an evil institution, or that slavery is an evil practice. This fits the pattern for many of our moral concepts. An action can be courageous, but so can a person, and so can an institution. An action can be harmful, but so can a person, and so can a practice. When a single moral label is applied to many different kinds of thing it is an open question as to whether each one of those things also bears one and the same moral property, or whether the single label refers to a different property depending on the specific kind of bearer. For instance, both a person and an action can be courageous, but virtue theorists will tell you that the property of courageousness possessed by a person is not identical to the property of courageousness possessed by action. Being a courageous person requires you to have a stable character trait

that disposes you to act in certain ways for certain reasons, but clearly a courageous action does not itself have a stable character trait. In this case we need to identify the nature of courageous action, and the nature of a courageous person, and explain how these two properties are related.

I think that the same is true of evil. The primary concept in relation to evil, I contend, is that of evil action. An evil action is an action that is an extreme culpable wrong. (The requisite kind of extremity is outlined in my 2014 book *Evil: A Philosophical Investigation*.) I then try to explain what it is to be an evil person with reference to this prior concept of evil action. Roughly speaking, someone is an evil person if and only if he or she is strongly disposed to perform evil actions when given the opportunity, and if we cannot expect that person to undergo moral reform. The category of evil personhood is more extreme than the category of evil action. This distinction makes sense of the common claim that not every evildoer is an evil person, precisely because many people who perform evil actions are not strongly disposed to do so, or perform evil actions only when under pressure, or are amenable to moral reform.

Some philosophers including Daniel Haybron have claimed instead that the primary category in relation to evil is that of the evil person, and that we can explain evil actions via reference to evil persons. For example, they might claim that an evil action is the kind of action that only an evil person would perform, or the kind of action that is characteristic of an evil person. I think that these purported explanations do not work. An evil person is disposed to perform all kinds of actions, including walking to the shops and eating dinner, and the vast majority of these actions are not evil. Furthermore, it is not true that only an evil person would perform an evil action. Sometimes non-evil people do horrendously wrong things, but then see the error of their ways and manage to transform their lives. It is far more plausible that we can explain the nature of evil personhood via reference to evil actions rather than *vice versa*. I am open to the idea that some other things might count as evil as well, including evil feelings and evil institutions, but I think that the primary focus for a theory of evil should be on evil actions and evil persons.

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

There is an old use of the word "evil" according to which it simply means "bad". According to this sense of the word, evil is the opposite of good. This old sense of the word "evil" is preserved in the so-called Problem of Evil that is debated by philosophers and theologians. Theists believe in an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God. They face a very difficult challenge in explaining why such a God would have created bad things – toothaches, cancer, deadly natural disasters, and so on – rather than simply created a world filled with good things. I am not a theist myself, so I can set aside the Problem of Evil. But it is also important to note that the old usage of the word "evil" to mean "bad" is not the conception of evil that is in play in the contemporary debate about the concept of evil. We are not arguing about toothaches! The contemporary debate about evil assumes that the concept of evil

picks out some kind of morally extreme or morally distinctive category, and then addresses the question of whether anything in the real world falls into that category.

The concept of good does not denote an extremity, nor does it apply exclusively to the morally good. An amateur portrait or an adequately cooked meal both count as fairly good, but neither is extremely good, and neither is morally good. In contrast, I think that if something is evil then in must be extremely bad or wrong, and it must be morally bad or wrong. For these reasons I think that it is misleading to say that evil is the opposite of good, even though it is true that all things which are evil are also bad or wrong. Evil is a specific kind of wrongness or badness.

Some philosophers have claimed that an evil person is the mirror image of a virtuous person. This is superficially appealing, but it strikes me as being an unhelpful metaphor for several reasons. A person's character is not a three-dimensional object that can be reflected or inverted, and there are many divergent ways in which someone can fall short of the moral ideal of virtue. Evil persons have a range of very different psychological profiles. Some evil persons are resolute in their pursuit of their immoral goals, acting in accordance with strict but deeply corrupt principles, whereas other evil persons are impulsive, chaotic, and thoughtless. Which one of these is the mirror image of a principled good person? The one who has bad principles, or the one who has no principles? (I explore the mirror thesis in more detail in my 2020 book *Being Evil*.)

4 - Likewise for good: is there a good independent of instrumental considerations?

The category of the morally good is in some sense distinct from instrumental considerations. Of course, we also say that lots of instrumentally useful things are thereby good. Money is good in so far as it allows us to buy other good things. Medicine is good in so far as it allows us to secure the independent good of health. Some things which are morally good count as morally good because they are instrumentally useful in promoting morally good ends. Giving to a charitable organisation might be morally good because this gift helps to alleviate the suffering of people who are in poverty. Some people might suggest that there is no more to goodness than usefulness, but even these sceptics must agree that some goals are pursued not merely for instrumental purposes but for their own sake. Happiness, many of us agree, is good whether it is useful or not. And it also seems that there are some morally good things that are good regardless of whether they are a useful means of producing other good things. Respect for other human beings is good even when it does not produce some other benefit.

There are two aspects to the independence of moral goodness: some things are morally good regardless of whether they produce other good things (i.e. they have non-instrumental goodness), and some things are objectively morally good (i.e. they are good regardless of whether any particular person thinks that they are good). There is an entire branch of philosophy – metaethics – that is focused on the issue of moral objectivity, and this is not the time to launch into it. Perhaps it is worth noting that a philosophical account of moral goodness and of evil is compatible

with several distinct metaethical views. Someone who believes that morality just an illusion might nonetheless be interested in the difference between the (false) judgment that an action is wrong and the (also false) judgment that an action is evil. Someone who is a non-cognitivist might wonder about the different expressive functions that characterise talk about wrongdoing and talk about evil. But those of us who are inclined towards some kind of moral realism are likely to claim that the category of morally good and the category of evil both pick out objective properties. In other words, an individual person can be correct or incorrect in judging that a given action was good or was evil. Indeed, a whole society can get things right or get things wrong on any given moral issue. The fact that an action is approved of by the people around here does not make it right, and the fact that an action is strongly disapproved of by the people around here does not make it evil.

5 Is the argumentative use of the dichotomy of good and evil still helpful in contemporary (moral) philosophy?

Whether it is helpful or not, it is very common for people to use this language of good and evil, so we as philosophers are required to make sense of it. I think that we ought to take great care to disambiguate the word "evil". Some people might take "evil" to mean simply that which is morally bad or morally wrong. On this definition, good and evil seems to be a dichotomy that covers all of the available territory. Everything will be either morally good, or morally neutral, or evil. However, many philosophers, myself included, disagree with this definition of evil. Instead, we take "evil" to refer to a small subset of that which is morally bad or morally wrong. I think that evil actions are extreme culpable wrongs, and hence that there are many actions that are morally wrong but that fall short of being evil because they are not sufficiently extreme. If you share my conception of evil, then it is a mistake to suppose that all of the moral territory is covered by the category of good and the category of evil. The spectrum of options will be something more like this: the morally good, then the morally neutral, then the morally bad, and the most extreme part of the bad will also be categorized as evil. Lots of things are morally bad or wrong but not evil, precisely because they are not extreme.