How to Counter Moral Evil: *Paideia* and *Nomos*

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Humanity has always wondered about good and evil. And especially about evil, seen as made up of suffering, fear, disappointment, humiliation, sorrow, offence, abuse, injustice, violence, atrocity, and anything else negative that life has in store for us. Evil plays a leading role in all cultures and civilisations, from the first cuneiform tablets, which speak of unpaid debts, to the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Odyssey. There is no Dante, Shakespeare, or Goethe without evil as a great actor in human affairs. Evil is a constant in history. It is also the object of study of ethics, which investigates its nature and causes, why it exists, and how it can be countered.

Philosophers agree on the nature of evil insofar as they distinguish two kinds: the nature-based and the human-made, called *moral* (Neiman, 2002). An example can clarify the difference. In December 2021, many tornadoes caused deaths and injuries in various states of the United States, especially Kentucky. Pain, suffering, fear, losses of all kinds ... these were all aspects of *natural evil*, something that even the legal system calls “an act of God”, for which nobody can be held responsible. Still in December, still in the United States, a student killed four people and injured seven others at a Michigan school. Equally devastating effects, but a very different cause, which in this case is entirely and exclusively *moral* because it is made up of human choices and responsibilities. It was an (evil) act of Humanity.

If you rely on similar examples, or consult an ethics textbook, the distinction between natural and moral evil seems clear and uncontroversial. But things quickly get complicated. Natural evil has always been a major headache for many religions, especially Christianity, which sees God as omnipotent, omniscient, and infinitely benevolent. If God can do anything, knows everything, and always wants the good, how do we square that with the sufferings in Kentucky? God’s will? Did people deserve it? Or could God do nothing about it? Whichever way you turn it around, it is a thorny problem that goes by the name, made famous by Leibniz, of *theodicy* (Leibniz, 1951): how to reconcile the existence of God (as described above) with the existence of natural evil.

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Leibniz thought that the theodicy problem could be solved by arguing that our world, as a whole, is the best of all possible worlds, despite all its limitations. A little bit like saying that things may not be great, but they cannot get any better than this. Think of a kind of ontological Pareto equilibrium. Voltaire thought Leibniz's suggestion was a bad joke, and he famously mocked Leibniz and his philosophy in his classic satire *Candide, or Optimism* (Voltaire, 2013). The novella was published in 1759. In it, we find references to historical events, such as the Lisbon earthquake (1755), a natural evil that killed between 12,000 and 50,000 people, one of the worst outcomes in earthquake history, and the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), a moral evil that caused between 900,000 and 1,400,000 deaths and is often considered the first global conflict in history. As Voltaire might have said: just imagine if this were *not* the best of all possible worlds.

The story seems to end here, but in reality, over time, another factor takes over. Could the suffering and losses in Kentucky have been prevented? Tornadoes today are unpredictable. Too sudden and chaotic, they generate too much data, and there is too little time to do the necessary calculations. Nevertheless, we can already do simulations, assign probabilities, and play the precautionary card. Most importantly, one day, we may have the data, the models, and the computing power necessary to predict them with sufficient accuracy and reliability. And then there are the buildings. We should build them tornado-proof, as we do with anti-seismic measures in earthquake-prone areas. In other words, as science and technology advance, natural evil does not remain fixed, but is translated more and more into moral evil. That is, if things end badly, it is no longer God's fault, but Humanity's alone. For example, Hegel died of malaria, like Dante. It was a natural evil at the time, but today dying of malaria is an entirely human responsibility. It has morphed into a moral evil. In 2020, there were 241 million cases of malaria worldwide and an estimated 627,000 deaths.¹ Like them, the deaths caused by the Lisbon earthquake today would be a human crime, not something for which to doubt the existence of the God of Christianity. So, Leibniz's idea could be updated in the following version: this is not yet the best of possible worlds, but we are getting there, and in the future, natural evil could be a memory, leaving only human intelligence, freedom, and responsibility to prevent, avoid, minimise, or eradicate evils in the world. In the presence of moral evil, the theological solution is to excuse God and charge humanity with the mistaken use of its freedom. Evil would be an utterly immanent problem, a human problem. Perhaps this is the best of all possible worlds, after all, because it offers humanity the opportunity of removing any natural evil.

Over time, on the ethical scale, the plate of natural evil is becoming lighter and that of moral evil heavier. Human responsibilities are increasing, not only for the many wrongs we cause — just think of climate change — but also because of the natural evils we can but do not prevent, minimise, or eliminate. Here too, science, technology, and, more generally, human intelligence make a huge difference, for better or for worse. If the student in Michigan had not had a gun, he would not have been able to kill and injure so many people in an instant. Mass shootings (defined

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/malaria>

as at least four people shot, plus the shooter) are so common in the United States that there is an entry for each year on Wikipedia. That of 2020 lists 703 people dead and 2,842 injured, for a total of 3,545 total victims. Proof that human stupidity and responsibility are immense because good legislation would be enough to eradicate an evil that is entirely and only moral. Everyone seems to understand this, except some Americans.

This path of translating natural evil into moral evil seems like bad news, but it is not. Because as far as natural evil is concerned — think of the pandemic — there is little to do except transform it into a subsequent human responsibility, for example, in the production and distribution of vaccines to everyone. But as far as moral evil is concerned, one can work to eradicate it, for instance, by getting vaccinated. So, the first step is to transform natural evil into a moral one, from acts of God to human shortcomings. The next is to fight moral evil itself. To do so, one must understand it. Hence, the crucial question: why are we evil? Or, as some ethicists would rather put it: why do we behave evilly? Ethics has done much work on this too, but in the end, there seem to be two prevalent interpretations of human nature that explain moral evil. Neither does us credit, but I believe that each usefully captures part of the story, as often is the case.

The first dates to Socrates (see, for example (Plato, 1996)), but we also find it in the Stoics (Aurelius, 1998), Rousseau (Rousseau, 2019), or Arendt (Arendt, 1994). We do evil not because we are immoral by nature, but because we do not understand what good is for ourselves and others. Vices, wickedness, and horrors of all kinds are the result of human stupidity, moral ignorance, or some other *epistemic shortfalls*. Then, there is another tradition, attributable to Hobbes as its best-known supporter (Hobbes, 2017), but which also includes Kant (Kant, 2009), for example. According to it, moral evil is the fruit of human intelligence at the service of human intrinsic immorality. Each of us pursues our selfish interests and goals as much as possible, and if we stop, it is only because the outcome no longer suits us. The *shortfalls are moral*, not epistemic. Famously, Kant made this point by saying that “out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made”. This echoes *Ecclesiastes* 1:15 “what is crooked cannot be made straight”, but is more pessimistic than *Luke* 3:5 “[...] and the crooked shall be made straight”.

In summary, and simplifying, moral evil is due to the fact that humanity is either good but stupid — let us call this the Socratic anthropology — or intelligent but evil — let us call this the Hobbesian anthropology. From these two philosophical anthropologies derive different ethical and political theories and practices, but above all, different answers to how moral evil can be at least limited if not eliminated. If we are good but stupid, then we must invest in our education: to make people understand more and better what is authentically good for themselves and others, for society and the environment. In this case, the Socratic solution to moral evil is called *Paideia*. Using a trivial example, warning messages on the packaging of cigarettes and other tobacco products concerning their harmful health effects are a typical case of a Socratic approach: more information should lead to better behaviour. These messages have been implemented since 1969. In 2011, a systematic report concluded that “prominent health warnings on the face of packages serve as a prominent source of health information for smokers and non-smokers, can increase health knowledge

and perceptions of risk and can promote smoking cessation. The evidence also indicates that comprehensive warnings are effective among youth and may help to prevent smoking initiation. Pictorial health warnings that elicit strong emotional reactions are significantly more effective” (Hammond, 2011). It seems that the Socratic approach may have some merits.

However, if we are intelligent but evil, then one must motivate through incentives and disincentives, which rational and selfish agents will find more or less compelling. Even devils incarnated can be coaxed into doing the right thing if properly nudged. In this case, the solution to moral evil is called *Nomos*, the body of laws and rules that make things work as they should. From a Hobbesian perspective, that is where society must invest in terms of designing its preferred forms of civil cohabitation. Using the previous, trivial example, increasing the price of tobacco is a Hobbesian solution to motivate a rational choice and more virtuous behaviour. According to a recent study, it does have an impact, especially when you do not have much money and you can still give up smoking: “taxation is an effective means of socially-enacted preventative medicine in deterring youth smoking” (Ding, 2003).

The history of civilisations oscillates between *Paideia* and *Nomos*, preferring one or the other depending on the contexts. But these are not two incompatible visions. Except for a few cases of pure holiness and utter wickedness, we are almost all a little bit good but stupid and a little bit evil but intelligent. For this reason, innovation and development must support both *Paideia* and *Nomos* to make us Socratically intelligent and Hobbesianly good. The tricky bit is to reach an equilibrium that is also *tolerant* of individual preferences and choices (Floridi, 2015, 2016). Which is a somewhat philosophical way of saying that society can hope to improve only if it invests in science and technology, to eliminate natural evil or translate it into a moral one, and in education and rules, to reduce moral evil, and perhaps even eliminate it one day, to make any negative impact of an act of God a thing of the past.

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