EXPUNGING EVIL

Thomas Simon

Has the time come finally to abandon the concept of evil?

Let us rid the world of that dreaded concept *evil*. If the idea of evil has no place in philosophy, its days in politics should likewise be numbered.

Religion and theology seem to have a monopoly on the concept of evil. The concept of evil, typically, comes tightly packaged as a theological problem. The problem of evil finds its classical expression in the *Book of Job*, which poses the question "Why do the righteous suffer?" Through its early history, Hebrew thought increasingly saw the world as a battlefield between good and evil. Satan later came to represent all of the different forces of evil combined.

From time immemorial, philosophers have had something to say about evil. Philosophers dealt with the concept of evil before and after Christians established a monopoly over the subject of evil. The relatively secular ancient Greeks had difficulties similar to those that the Hebrews had in explaining human suffering and misfortunes. However, the Greeks had views of evil that differed significantly from those held by Christians. For the Greek philosopher Plato, evil represented the demiurge's limitations in trying to create the actual from the ideal. Christianity moved the locus of the problem of evil from issues of divine creation (the area where Plato's demiurge operated) to concerns about human sinfulness. Within the dominant version of Christian theology, God could not possibly have any attributes of evil. Evil, for Christians, had an 'all too human face.' Augustine saw evil as the absence of good that manifested itself as a human and not as a divine limitation.

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The concept of evil often enters into discussions of genocide and other grave injustices. I propose a drastic solution to projects that rely on the concept of evil. Philosophers should discard the notion of evil since it seldom advances and often hinders an understanding of genocide. Typically, as we have seen, evil comes packaged as a theological problem, so much so that theology and religion seem to have a monopoly on the concept. However, some scholars have launched a campaign to (as the manifesto in a recent anthology *Rethinking Evil* states) "recover the concept of evil for contemporary thought." I shall treat those contemporary theorists (including Amelie Rorty, *The Many Faces of Evil*; Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm*; and, most recently and most notably, Susan Nieman in *Evil in Modern Thought*) who have focused on the concept of evil as part of an intellectual movement that I shall dub 'Reconstructionism.' Yet, Reconstructionists are not the primary targets. The real villain is the commonplace appeal to the idea of evil when discussing genocide and other injustices.

The so-called 'Reconstructionists' who try to offset the religious monopoly of the concept of evil begin their project with Kant, the first philosopher to secularize the concept of evil. Kant saw evil as a human failing, a deviation from the acceptance of universal moral maxims. Evil arose when self-love snatched control over moral sensibilities. The Holocaust, however, radically altered the background conditions that Kant had assumed. Kant's sense of evil as a type of immoral maxim failed to capture the depths of depravity that went under the heading of evil in the twentieth century. As Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* observed, "The men of the eighteenth century did not understand that there exists goodness beyond virtue and evil beyond vice." Arguably, more than any other twentieth-century philosopher, Arendt boldly confronted the daunting task of reconceptualizing Kant's sense of evil to make it applicable to the magnitude of contemporary horrors. At first, she saw evil as a demonic, systematic dehumanization. Perhaps at the urging of her mentor Karl Jaspers, she changed her original demonic

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definition of evil to a more pedestrian one (the 'banality of evil'). Reconstructionists carry on this Kant-to-Arendt lineage.

Ideally, philosophical analysis should clarify the meanings of terms such as *evil* and produce helpful distinctions. Until relatively recently, theorists placed a wide array of harms – from natural catastrophes (such as the 1775 Lisbon earthquake) to moral failings (Auschwitz) – under the category of *evil*. The Lisbon earthquake of 1 November 1775 killed about 15,000 people. As the center of the Inquisition, the event stirred considerable controversy among Catholics, Protestants, and philosophers (including Voltaire, Rousseau, and Kant). According to the late Judith Shklar in her analysis of *The Faces of Injustice*, "It was the last time that the ways of God to man were the subject of general public debate and discussed by the finest minds of the day." Now, instead of one sense of evil to cover all horrors, philosophers have developed a typology of natural (the 2004 tsunami) and moral (Darfur?) evils. Arendt has added a further distinction by suggesting that these historical senses of evil differed from an altogether new and modern sense of *radical evil*. For Arendt, 'radical evil' meant the systematic dehumanization of human beings first carried out under the Nazi regime. However, Arendt and the Reconstructionists placed a telling condition on their analyses of evil.

Accordingly, a philosophical analysis of evil should not only produce clear distinctions among types of evil but also it must preserve a strong sense of moral outrage about evil. Raimond Gaita, in a recent insightful philosophical study of evil (*A Common Humanity*), claims that "the moral dimensions are sometimes only adequately represented by a distinctive concept of evil." This additional moral requirement places the secular theorists in a dilemma: It lands them in the same religious domain that they set out to escape, for moral outrage, historically, typically finds its expression in religious language. Arendt fell back into this religious domain when she tried to clarify the meaning of 'radical evil.' In her study of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she conjectured that radical evil implied "something beyond the pale of human

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sinfulness." So, to make sense of radical evil, she found herself resorting to religious language by comparing it to sin. Secular theorists of evil, in general, have great difficulty in discarding entirely the historically entrenched religious framework that supports the concept of evil.

Philosophers of evil, at a minimum, should distance themselves from religion and especially from Christianity for three important reasons. First, given its primary theological roots, use of the concept of evil lends itself to totalizing and determinative judgments. Condemnation of something as evil precludes making nuanced distinctions about it. Judgments becomes absolute; condemnation, inescapable. Saint Augustine's (354-386) transformation of the Greco-Roman just war traditions offers an illuminating example of how religious thinking totalizes secular thought. According to commentator Paul Christopher in *The Ethics of War*, the medieval period marked a critical juncture in the history of rules of war. Augustine made a crucial break from Cicero's just war doctrine. 'Defense and safety' no longer served as the primary justifications for war. A war ordained by God, according to Augustine, was a just one. As Christopher suggests: "Beginning with Augustine, war . . . became more than just a legal remedy for injustice; it became a moral imperative . . ." After Augustine, the rules of Christian morality began to take precedence over legal rules. Augustine justified war as a way not only to avenge the commission of crimes but also to punish the commission of sins. The concepts of good and evil began to taint and to supplant the concepts of the lawful and the unlawful. According to Frederick Russell in his study of *The Just War in the Middle Ages*, "[Augustine's] just war was thus total and unlimited in its licit use of violence, for it not only avenged the violation of existing legal rights but also avenged the moral order injured by the sins of the guilty party regardless of injuries done to the just party acting as a defender of that order." In other words, Augustine's religious justification for war seemed to open the door to greater harms and injuries than prior secular justifications. Religious senses of evil, in general, lend themselves to sweeping judgments and

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wholesale condemnations. As long as secular attempts to understand evil remain tied to religious ones, secular versions cannot escape the totalizing approach associated with religious concepts and create a more refined sense of evil.

Second, when philosophers use the concept of evil, they often follow unwittingly and unfortunately, a path first carved out by theology. Although the enormity of the Holocaust made a few theologians question God's existence, most of them dealt with Auschwitz within the framework of the age-old problem of evil. Theologians faced the task of reconciling the evil of Auschwitz with divine creation and providence. While theologians could fit Auschwitz into their religious paradigms, philosophers tried to describe and explain it without having the comfort of a traditional framework that theologians had. Philosophers did not have a powerful secular vocabulary to describe and analyze Auschwitz. Concepts such as 'vice,' 'wickedness,' and 'cruelty' seemed wholly inadequate. The concept of evil gave philosophers a way to deal with Auschwitz, for the term *evil* seemed to capture the extreme moral outrage needed to describe Auschwitz.

Most importantly, the application of the concept of evil seemed to make the incomprehensible comprehensible. To admit that evil in the form of the Holocaust is incomprehensible is, as Kenneth Seeskin conjectures, to deny that we have a general theory to answer to the most important questions: "How could people with outward signs of rationality drive the trains or drop the crystals into the gas chambers? How could millions of other people look on as they did?" In essence, the concept of evil allows us to make the categorical judgment that the Nazis world is "a universe without redeeming value." So, we have come full circle, back to a label that seemingly captures our utmost moral indignation.

Calling Auschwitz incomprehensible trades on an ambiguity. Auschwitz and other incidences of grave injustices are not incomprehensible if we mean that they defy any rational explanation. Certainly, Auschwitz calls for a continuing investigation into the causes and conditions that led to

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it, and that task falls easily within the gambit of reason. If by 'incomprehensible' we mean that Auschwitz defies justification, then that shows the power of ethical reasoning, not its limitations. No plausible ethical system could justify Ted Bundy killing scores of women. So, in that sense his actions remain in a certain sense incomprehensible. Yet, we have no trouble trying to comprehend Bundy's deeds in the sense of trying to understand their etiology.

Further, finding a grave injustice incomprehensible potentially undercuts investigations into its causes. Although they both use the concept of evil, philosophers and theologians approach the issue differently. While the recognition of the horror as an evil signals the start of the analytic process for theologians, it marks, in a sense, the end of it for philosophers. The acceptance of the label of 'evil' for Auschwitz established an end-point for philosophers. This ready incorporation of the concept of evil into philosophy stops conceptual analysis and stifles political action at just the places where they should begin. Category words such as 'evil' often substitute for analysis by fostering the pretense that to label a phenomenon is to explain it.

Philosophers could choose to break free completely from the theological stranglehold. A rejection of the old, theologically laden vocabulary opens a door for creating a new way of talking about global horrors. Yet, this would be a Pyrrhic victory since it would be tantamount to accepting the cosmic and totalizing dimensions of the concept of evil without using the word 'evil' itself. The philosophical analysis would be a theological one in philosophical clothing. Arendt tried to blaze a middle path between relying on the old religious language and creating a new one. She refused either to accept the traditional way of talking or to create neologisms. Instead, she encouraged new ways of thinking about evil by associating it with contorted versions of ordinary words like 'banality.' Arendt's work stirred up a great deal of controversy. However, these debates focused more on her use of the word 'banality' and less on her analysis of the evil. Despite Arendt's inventiveness, the

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concept of evil serves the same function in her analysis as it does in other theological and philosophical ones. The concept of evil, under the guise of making the incomprehensible comprehensible, stops the analysis at just the point where it should begin. By itself, this refurbished concept of evil still leaves us with important unanswered questions about the nature of the horror and its relationship to other horrors, the nature and responsibility of the perpetrator, and the designation of the victims.

Overall, theological and philosophical theories of evil represent noble efforts to make the incomprehensible comprehensible, to tame a beast – a creature so horrific that its existence challenges the bounds of human understanding. Theology has approached this challenge burdened by a sanitized, divine conception of the good that makes worldly occurrences of the bad inherently problematic. Philosophers who attempt to secularize the concept of evil follow the trail blazed by theologians, but they repeatedly hit roadblocks when they try to deviate from the theological roadways and try to build their own paths. These difficulties highlight the need for a new paradigm to grapple with the problem of how to deal with Auschwitzes, past and future.

A third reason that philosophers should avoid using the religious idea of evil is so that they can escape the tangles of theological conundrums and formulate new goals. The religious paradigm contextualizes evil in the form of a puzzle embedded, quite naturally, in religion. Within Christian doctrine, evil presents a phenomenon that needs to be explained away. How can a world created by a benevolent God contain so much evil? The philosophical Reconstructionists also think of evil in the context of a puzzle. How can some humans be so deplorably cruel to other humans? Reconstructionists set out to establish a (non religious) moral and political philosophical foundation for judging evil acts and evildoers. Reconstructionists extrapolate from individual psychology to social psychology and from individual ethics to political philosophy. Only after Reconstructionists have delved into social psychology and

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political philosophy do they entertain any legal questions. In *Rethinking Evil*, Maria Pia Lara expresses the task, order, and hope of the project: "If we can construct moral and political concepts that best comprehend the meaning of evil deeds, and the agency and responsibility of cruelty, then legal institutions must proceed to translate these meanings into the realm of positive law . . ."

Often philosophers uncritically accept a conceptual hierarchy within their discipline. In value theory, political philosophers build on a prior foundation of ethics. Only after these philosophers have laid a foundation of moral theory and then constructed a first floor of political philosophy do they issue permits to build a second floor of legal philosophy. I want to use a somewhat reversed 'natural' disciplinary order of importance by placing legal philosophy at the center of a philosophical approach to the study of genocide and other injustices.

If a critical component of any approach to evil is to establish grounds for judging evil acts and evildoers, then legal philosophy should play the central role in the analysis. A much more nuanced analysis should result when we situate the problem within the context of legal institutions. Legal codification has produced refined distinctions, such as that between genocide and crimes against humanity. In effect, a different puzzle requires a different paradigm than the ones provided by theologians and Reconstructionists. If the challenge is not to explain evil theologically or philosophically but to ascribe legal responsibility, then we need an entirely different paradigm. To position themselves to make contributions to international justice and global ethics, philosophers not only should distance themselves from religious senses of evil but also they should abandon the idea of evil entirely and focus on injustices.

Politicians should heed the advice as well for the concept of evil makes them see dangers when there are none and to ignore injustices where they are rampant. Further, politicians should turn to the complexities of

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international legal codes rather than to the oversimplifications of theological pronouncements.

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