WHEN IS EVIL?: SECULAR THEORIES OF EVIL

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When is Evil?: Secular Theories of Evil

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The term evil in a moral sense in Western culture is an intellectual non-sequitur, an archaic term, a term best left to antiquity and religion. The traditional problem of evil is concerned with the Judeo-Christian attempts to reconcile the Omni-God and evil (human suffering). Yet, the traditional problem sheds little light on how we can understand evil. Since Plato, Western moral thought views evil as another term for immorality, but this is insufficient for a concept of evil. What is needed is a secular postmetaphysical approach. The discussion of evil often begins with the question What is evil? This framing of the question is metaphysical and suggests that we can determine whether evil exists or does not; however, this approach is itself part of the problem. According to analytic philosopher Nelson Goodman, asking for What is, is the wrong question. A possible way to look at evil is not What is evil? but When is evil? as a way to explore the ideas, experiences, and events that breach our comprehension. The goal is to have a greater understanding of what the term evil does for the discourse by examining possible secular concepts of evil. To look at When is evil? is an open-ended inquiry into philosophically significant concepts that constitute evil. By examining secular postmetaphysical thinkers, I argue that Morton’s distinctions between the weak and strong readings of evil must be collapsed into only a strong reading – evil is when there is atrocity. I believe we come up with a better understanding of evil by approaching the concept using when is evil that is not linked to the traditional ideas of religion and theodicies. I conclude that evil is when there is atrocity or the worst possible opprobrium one can commit. It is neither by accident, nor simple moral failure that constitutes evil, but something that is beyond bad or immoral, it is the breaking point of comprehension where we simultaneously learn the limitlessness of action and become blindly ignorant to the responsibility we have to others.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘evil’ in a moral context in Western culture is viewed as an archaic term, a term best left to antiquity, “a relic, a hangover from a worldview which even many people who – still today – think of themselves as religious would regard as an embarrassment.”¹ The invocation of evil is often the “loose” talk of religious zealots and politicians attempting to manipulate ad populum support against a rival faction or the vision of a supernatural battle between the forces of good and evil for which human beings choose a side in the fight. This “vulgar Manichaeism”² that divides the world into good and evil forces (as Nietzsche suggests) that continues to strongly resonate for some, like former president George W. Bush in a State of the Union Address when he stated, “evil is real,” when referring to militant Islamic groups but more so to dark forces that seek to destroy our way of life. This invocation of evil, this vulgar Manichaeism, is dangerous because as political scientist Farid Abdel-Nour states, “the vocabulary of evil eliminates the problem of justification.”³ Using the term evil simplifies the complexity of morality. Even though the term evil is often used, the user does not understand the meaning very clearly, and many people do not believe there is such a thing as evil. It is merely the rhetorical word for immorality. Thus, ‘evil’ is synonymous with wrongdoing and invoked as a rhetorical device because the idea of evil threatens the modern, liberal, enlightened ideal that the future will be peaceful and morally progressive. If this is so, why does talk of evil still resonate and divide? Philosopher Peter Dews suggests that “part of the attraction of the concept of evil […] is that it offers an experience of moral depth which otherwise so often seems lacking in our lives.”⁴ He avers

² Richard J. Bernstein, Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002). Richard Bernstein avers that contemporary Western culture, to some extent, is steeped in what he characterized as “vulgar Manichaeism,” the dangerous division of good and evil forces in the world.
that the interconnection between our habituated relativism and “the confrontation with moral phenomena that strain our powers of comprehension” brings us to a “breaking point” and makes us question our belief in a morally pluralistic world.\(^5\) We are confronted with the unjustifiable, with something that absolutely should not have happened and shows a gap between human actions and moral intuitions, or as Dews suggests “we are torn between a commitment to freedom and autonomy and a due recognition of the intractability of moral evil.”\(^6\) The problem of evil is complex and has a long history.

The traditional problem of evil in philosophy centers on the divide between the theological/metaphysical and the secular. Christian theology tries to reconcile evil (the suffering of human kind) with a singular, all-loving, all-powerful God. How could an omni-benevolent God allow his children to suffer? Is evil a force like the devil in Judeo-Christian thought, with its many assumptions, or is the evil we speak of, or observe, merely some sort of privation? Or is human suffering God’s way of teaching us what John Hick called soul-making?\(^7\) Some Christian theodicies attempt to reconcile the problem by denying evil exists. St. Augustine argued that the source of evil is not God but rather the malevolent force of human ignorance produced by a will that is free. Many theodicies deny human suffering and suggest that what we think is suffering is all part of God’s plan - just trust in Him. This explanation is perplexing for it implies that the glory of God requires human suffering. Furthermore, theodicies like Augustine’s do not make sense of suffering and instead deny it as the turning away from God’s grace. Philosopher María Pía Lara makes a poignant assessment of religious theodicies when she states:

Paradoxically, these efforts failed to shed light on the very concept they are trying to define. Rather than solving the problem of how to define evil, these efforts struggled with metaphysical questions that seemed to have no possible answers. It seemed an impossible task to justify God’s role in and responsibility for the dark episodes in which undeserved suffering served as the best example of what was considered evil.\(^8\)


\(^6\) Ibid, 11.


\(^8\) María Pía Lara, “Claudia Card’s Atrocity Paradigm,” *Hypatia* 19, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 184-85.
Part of the problem for the problem of evil is the metaphysical/theological starting point that requires ontology of evil that seems to have no answers. Thus, the ontotheological approaches provide little understanding of a concept of evil. The starting point asks, What is evil? What is the source of evil? or Does evil exist? This pre-Kantian approach is controversial because it presupposes we can know the status of something in-itself.

Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant challenged the metaphysical and theological starting points and argued that we cannot know the thing-in-itself – the noumenon – speculating on the ultimate nature of reality or essences since we have minimal access to know the essences of objects. Thus, we are limited by our faculties to know about the objects, what we can know is only through our cognition – the phenomen.⁹

Post-Kantian thought has since shifted in the Western mind to language and definition, what we now call the analytical or postmetaphysical tradition. The language of the metaphysical – as what exists – has moved from what is ontologically present (which we may not be able to know) to the way we understand the meaning of the words; this is often referred to as the linguistic turn. Therefore, all phenomena are interpreted through the context of language and discourse. To the analytically minded, evil is a word that refers to what people call something they find horrible or someone that exhibits characteristics that are without merit, but we cannot speak of something that is evil. The traditional problem of evil dissolves into an analytical examination of language and the meaning of the word evil. Thus the task of philosophy, Richard Bernstein avers, is “to the extent that it is possible – to develop a conceptual understanding of what we mean by evil. This requires sorting out just what we take to be insightful, misleading, and even false in accounts of evil.”¹⁰

Bernstein professes skepticism as to whether a complete theory of evil is possible or that we can understand evil comprehensively. He sees it as “an open-ended hermeneutic circle – one that defies any closure or completion.”¹¹ I share his view and observe the discourse on evil as an open-ended question, which can be a source of severe frustration;

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¹⁰ Bernstein, Radical Evil, 7.

¹¹ Ibid.
such aggravation is demonstrated by contemporary writer Andrew Delbanco’s expressive statement:

A gulf has opened up in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources available for coping with it. Never before have images of horror been so widely disseminated and so appalling – from organized death camps to children starving in famines that might have been averted. […] The repertoire of evil has never been richer. Yet never have our responses been so weak. 12

His statement captures the despair at the growth of evil - extreme violence and human suffering – and our inability to respond it. In essence, instances of evil continue to gain strength, and humanity is without the intellectual resources to counter it. Many contemporary philosophers are moved by the sentiment of Delblanco’s claim. We are overcome by the immensity of our cruelty, by the stories of excruciating pain and suffering, and by events that stupefy. These are the breaking points of our moral relativism and the cry for understanding that shows there are experiences and conduct so vile that the term ‘evil’ is the only acceptable word. Samantha Power’s provocative and aptly titled book, *The Problem from Hell*, does exactly this by examining the century of genocide and the willingness of human beings to perpetrate and to spectate often without intervention the elimination of millions of people.13 Such life-destroying human activities like Auschwitz, Rwanda, The Balkans, Cambodia, Sudan, 9/11, and the Virginia Tech Massacre “threatens the foundation of human existence that we must call evil an immense problem.”14 Evil is a legitimate problem for philosophical reflection.15 Philosopher Richard Bernstein reflects on the Delblanco’s statement and the dissonance of evil in modern discourse. He states:

The problems concerning evil come back to haunt us. There is an increasing anxiety that we can neither prevent nor anticipate the bursting forth of ever-new evils. We need to gain some comprehension, some conceptual grasp of these


15 Delblanco, *Death of Satan*, 3
evils – what we even mean when we label something evil. We lack a discourse that is deep, rich, and subtle enough to capture what has been experienced.16

The question of evil requires more work that develops, enriches, and enhances our understanding beyond the previous theological approaches. Many argue a clear secular understanding of evil is required.17

The idea of evil is complex, and we must be able to approach it in a systematic way that assists us in understanding. The discussion of evil often begins with the question What is evil? This framing of the question is metaphysical, and it suggests that we can determine whether evil exists or does not; however, this approach is itself part of the problem. Nelson Goodman observes that attempts to answer the question What is art? “characteristically end in frustrations and confusion, perhaps – as so often in philosophy – the question is the wrong one.”18 He argues that the “real question” is not What objects (permanently) are works of art? – the real question is When is an object a work of art?19 This approach is not limited to exploring art. Goodman says, “the what in terms of when – is not confined to the arts but is quite general, and is the same for defining chairs as for objects of art.”20 Thus, the question What is evil? is the wrong question; instead, the question is When is something to be considered evil? or more briefly, When is evil? Using Goodman’s approach, I argue that by exploring the ideas, experiences, and the events, we can understand what the term evil does for the discourse. To say when is evil is the same as saying evil is when and envisages that we can intelligibly understand - to some extent - the nature of evil. When we refer to something, we reference conceptual representations, expressions, or exemplifications. What is important is to identify evil not by what evil is but when evil is for this enables us to examine, as Goodman says, “study of types and functions of symbols and symbol systems.”21 To look at When is evil? is the open-ended inquiry into the philosophically significant concepts that

16 Bernstein, Radical Evil, 3.
19 Ibid., 66.
20 Ibid., 70.
21 Ibid., 5.
constitute evil. This does not limit the exploration to simple moral theorizing or parsing over the ontology or metaphysics of what is or what is not evil. Yet as Goodman states, “We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described. Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than of a world or of worlds.”

The goal of this work is not to present a new theory but reconceptualize the topic without cumbersome metaphysics and to try a different angle to see if it is valuable. It goes against those who would argue the topic of evil is not a philosophical problem but one of religion. The modern discourse must rise to the challenge in this way and attempt to make sense of evil.

To reference evil, I begin with Adam Morton’s straightforward way to read evil that reflects the history of philosophy. We can read evil in two ways, the weak and the strong. The weak reading is evil as wrongdoing that “includes moral incompetence, lack of imagination, willingness to follow orders, overreactions, and a host of other reasons why people who do not have personalities that we would call evil do things that are wrong, often very wrong.” This weak reading is associated with Kant and the stoics. The strong reading of evil is evil as atrocity – what we think of as an evil person, a severely evil act, the evil within, and other such expressions. The strong reading views evil as the worst that humanity has to offer when it comes to conduct. Morton puts it like so: “If we do this, we focus on a particular class of actions, and the motives and people that produce them, that arouse a particular moral revulsion in us.” However, he quickly points out that there is a danger of collapse in either direction and asks, “Why make such a point of separating evil from other kinds of wrong?” We ask “is there some distinctive feature that such actions possess, or are we using the term ‘evil’ as a simple intensifier, to pick out cases of extreme wrongness (or badness), differing only in degree from other cases of wrongness?” If so, what are the features that distinguish evil from wrongdoing?

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22 Goodman, Worldmaking, 3.
24 Ibid.
The topic of this thesis is the problem of evil, but not the traditional problem as stated above; this work explores when is evil by looking primarily at analytic or secular/postmetaphysical approaches. Secular theories of evil “offers important insights into specific kinds of human actions, and the ways persons relate to one another.”27 Human action and the treatment of others are essential to understanding a concept of evil. I will also look at alternative perspectives to the secular approaches to evil as they give us interesting and important concerns raised by the postsecular, or the continental tradition, that increases the understanding and adds to the discourse on evil. In the second chapter, the secular historical roots of evil are examined using the stoics, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Modern secular postmetaphysical theories are the focus of the third chapter where we explore thinkers Hannah Arendt, Marcus Singer, Eva Garrard, Claudia Card, and María Pía Lara. And in the fourth chapter, we examine the challenge of the secular by postsecular continental thinkers Martin Beck Matuštík and Emmanuel Levinas. It is my view that Morton’s distinctions between the weak and strong readings of evil must be collapsed into a strong reading only – evil is when there is atrocity. I believe we come up with a better understanding of evil by approaching the concept using when in evil that is not linked to the traditional ideas of religion and theodicies.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL SECULAR BEGINNINGS

The method of approaching the topic of evil by asking not what is evil but when is evil explores what the term “evil” does. In recent years, contemporary philosophical literature has seen a renewed interest in the topic of evil. Some thinkers want to distinguish evil as more than mere wrongdoing or gross immorality; instead, they want to identify it as the unjustifiable. Yet, western philosophy reflects Plato’s view that “no one is willfully evil. A man becomes evil, rather, as a result of one or another corrupt condition of his body and an uneducated upbringing. No one who incurs these pernicious conditions would will to have them [emphasis added].”1 This ancient species of theodicy defends morality against the skeptic and suggests that evil is a term reserved for the flawed character of human kind.

The discussion of evil continued after Plato and Aristotle, of which more significant thinkers would be the stoics, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Nietzsche. They challenge traditional theodicies and theologies as they explore evil in their unique ways. Their significance holds explanatory power for contemporary theories of evil. For the purposes of this thesis, I focus on these three because they reflect important periods. The stoics reflect the ancient denial of evil and place error in human will; similarly, Kant reflects the Enlightenment optimism and denial of evil for evil’s sake, while Nietzsche denies evil as part of the slave/master morality. What is important is how they understand evil in the history of ideas and how they speak to our thoughts in the present discourse.

THE STOICS

The stoic philosophers represent the side of the spectrum that denies evil exists in nature, but they consider moral evil the result of errors in human judgment – similar to how present day thinkers conceive of evil as wrongdoing. The stoics focus on the human context of living – the attitude of the mind, the human capacity to live by reason and in accordance

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with nature.² The stoics argue that what moves human beings is the basic drive of self-preservation, as with any other organism, but humans differ in that they are rational beings. It is not simple self-interest that distinguishes humans from all other organisms but the preservation of the rational-self. The rational-self is the soul, and this is more important for the stoics. It seems rather paradoxical that we strive to preserve our soul possibly at the expense of physical existence; yet, the stoic Zeno explains this by dividing what we experience into three parts – the good, the bad, and the indifferent. The good is virtue, arête – the only genuine good or excellence in the soul that contributes to survival (preservation of the rational-self); the bad is vice, kakia – the actions/objects that detract from survival; and the indifferent, adiaphoron – things like health, reputation, wealth, or poverty.³

The definition of the highest good is virtue, and living in accordance with one’s nature as a rational being or right reason (orthos logos) is the goal. For the stoic, evil is living contrary to virtue right reason. Evil is “equated with enslavement.”⁴ Stoics deny that evil is within nature or providence; instead, evil is part of how humanity faces the reality of contingencies.⁵ Human suffering and the occurrence of severe events such as natural disasters or slavery, for example, result in physical pain, but evil lies in how we respond to pain and the psychic extensions (the movements of thought that occur from the experience) that the individual has little control over. The stoics argue that the natural events are beyond the individual; what we experience or possess in life can come and go and people are genuinely helpless to do anything about what is outside their control. What we do have control over is how we manage our psychology. Stoic psychology breaks down impressions we experience from sensation, the feelings we have from those impressions, and the emotions we have from what we feel. They argue that we can give “assent” to certain impressions and deny others; there are actions and instances that are “up to us” and “not up

³ John Sellars, Stoicism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
to us.” This is where we can assert our control. What is up to us is our goals and our attitudes, and in giving assent we allow those thoughts, experiences, and emotions to influence us. The stoics believe we can select the positive thoughts, experiences, and emotions, and deny, or not give assent to, the negative thoughts, experiences, and emotions. The goal is tranquility from virtue as opposed to happiness.

Stoics distinguish virtue from happiness and challenge the commonly held view that happiness is to receive or achieve what we want. They argue that to be happy requires virtue – an understanding of the healthy soul or disposition, “something choice-worthy for its own sake.”6 The proper recourse is to learn what is “up to us” and to master ourselves by understanding negative emotions and what is important for a good life, i.e., virtue. Therefore, evil is “errors in judgment” from our inability to understand and control ourselves.7 The error or mistake in judgment is “to place great value on contingencies, on what eludes or exceeds our control.”8 The stoic program argues that if we learn to control ourselves and cultivate our virtue, there would be much less suffering and little evil in the world. Suffering and painful experiences are genuine, but the emotions we accept are self-imposed even when someone is being harmed. When a ship on the high seas encounters large waves, the stoic is just as fearful as the rest of the passengers; the difference however, is the way the stoic then frames this fear that becomes important. To go from “there is a wave above my head” to “there is a wave above my head and this is a terrible thing” gives assent to the emotions of distress (kakia). It is these movements to negative emotions that are misjudgments from what we experience.9 According to the stoics, emotions are not automatic since there is a choice to make in the movements and if one understands one's rational-self, the movements of thought are part instinct and part choice. It may seem counter-intuitive not moving to negative emotions when they are warranted; for example, if there are soldiers at your front door and you know they mean possible harm, you will naturally be terrified that they will harm you or your family. The stoic advice is to know what is “up to you” and you will be fine. It is not

6 Sellars, Stoicism, 124.
9 Sellars, Stoicism.
that stoics are indifferent to loved ones, but it is “not up to you” if they are harmed or not, nor does it entail passivity to the situation; a stoic may fight because living in accordance with nature may require one to sacrifice oneself. However, the stoic must minimize the attachments to contingent things, like family, in order to preserve the rational-self.

According to Martha Nussbaum and Claudia Card, this is a troubling and vacant position to hold and one with a cost. The example above is frightening, but what the stoics seem to underplay is the immensity of such an event. They would insist there is a choice in how to deal with that event; yet, for Card and Nussbaum, there is a great cost to stoicism partly because “without such commitments and risks, without valuing highly much that eludes our control. […] emotions would have no proper place in our lives. Our lives would not be fully human.”

We are vulnerable to attachments because they create commitments to contingencies. Card argues that to be “apathetic” to events of the world is too high a price and the implication of stoicism’s idea of “not up to us” is indifference to evils like cruelty to others and fails to “perceive and appreciate the evils of cruelty and oppression.” In addition, stoicism fails to thematize cruelty and the focus on cultivating good character; it leaves little room for understanding interpersonal interactions and relations, which are important to understanding evil.

Considering when is evil, the stoics show that we can understand evil as wrongdoing – a moral failure. Evil is when human beings give assent to thoughts and experiences that disrupt tranquility and lead us to troublesome activities. Thus, the symptom is humanity’s vulnerability and failure to know how to control itself. Why we commit to terrible acts is because we allow negative thoughts to direct our will. However, this description fails to distinguish evil from wrongdoing. It conflates all wrong action as the definition of evil. In addition, as Card correctly points out, the stoic turns away from the unpleasent and horrors of life whether perpetrator or victim. The tranquility the stoics suggests leaves us paradoxially without attachments or moral investment, which many argue is equally essential to a good life. Nevertheless, stoicism follows the ancient view of dening evil as an ontology (natural

11 Card, Atrocity Paradigm, 69.
12 Lara, “Claudia Card.”
force) and places it firmly in human actions and values that carry on for centuries to the Enlightenment and today.

**Immanuel Kant**

From the ancient stoics, we move to the Enlightenment and Immanuel Kant. Kant’s famed critical philosophy argues a transcendental idealist position; our knowledge of objects, what exists, can only be accessed through our cognition. Thus, our knowledge of the “what is” is limited, and the implications play an important role in his moral philosophy. Kant’s duty ethics posits the categorical imperative, which states that a person should act from maxims (the subjective rules one follows) that are universalizable. For an action to be moral, it should be done not because the action brings about a certain outcome, what he calls hypothetical imperatives, nor are we to act merely on inclination, but act based on our good will (the unqualified good). A moral action is done because it is a good-in-itself, *good for its own sake*, from one’s will or volition that is purely good. According to Kant, this is what makes morality possible.

It is in his lesser-known work, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, he discussed the topic of evil and made some startling claims that left his contemporaries scrambling to makes sense. Still today, one finds an enigmatic and complex theory. Like the stoics before him, Kant places evil squarely on human agency; yet unlike the stoics, he distinguishes between evils and suggests what he called radical evil – corrupted moral orientation. One commenter suggests Kant’s view of evil as “evil as dehumanization.” The core issue for Kant is our inclinations and our reason; he argues that freedom must be constructed as autonomy as opposed to heteronomy. Autonomy is defined as self-rule and heteronomy as ruled by others. It is what one wills through one’s maxims that are the

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13 Kant, *Critique*. Kant critiques knowledge of the metaphysical as problematic since, according to him, we cannot know the thing-in-itself, what he called the *noumenon*; thus, we are limited by our faculties in knowing about the metaphysical. What we can know is only through our cognition, the *phenomena*. We cannot know if there is evil intrinsic to humans or objects.


difference between good and evil. This sounds like a rather benign and uninteresting thesis if “this view simply reduces the difference between evil and immoral acts to mere quantitative analysis”\textsuperscript{17}; however, Kant’s agency-based theory is distinct in that he constructs the theory based on “the structure of the agent’s will itself [emphasis added].”\textsuperscript{18} Kant argues that the faculty of volition is composed of two distinct but unified parts—the will and the power of choice. The will (\textit{Wille}) basically regulates norms through practical reason and demonstrates our autonomy. The power of choice (\textit{Willkür}) makes the executive decision whether to adopt a particular maxim.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, in Kant’s view, we are autonomous free agents and are accountable for our thinking and our actions.

Kant’s radical evil thesis contains two parts: “an evil disposition derivation” and the “universality claim.” The first is that the will of the agent is responsible for the maxims selected. If the agent determines and freely devises or wills a maxim premised on inclination alone, then “a single evil maxim infers an evil disposition.”\textsuperscript{20} Second, Kant claims that \textit{all humans} have a tendency to have an evil disposition or a “propensity for evil.”\textsuperscript{21} Both claims can be easily misunderstood because of Kant’s use of the words “disposition” and “propensity”; a person is not evil for simply following an inclination; it is more subtle as we will see. According to Kant, human beings are not innately evil, but they do seem predisposed to follow incorrect maxims. Peter Dews believes there is insight to Kant’s understanding; he says “that all human beings are trammelled by an innate ‘propensity to evil’ (\textit{Hang zum Bösen}) – an inclination to ignore the claims of moral law, at least when our cravings are sufficiently strong, or when the going gets rough.”\textsuperscript{22} Nonetheless, human beings are not off the hook, nor is a person moral by simply overcoming desires. For it is a mistake to think “thwarting our natural inclinations is not a condition of acting morally – all that is required is that it should be the universalizable form of the maxim, not the private motive

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{17} Dews, \textit{Idea of Evil}, 194.
\item\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{19} Garcia, “Kantian Theory.”
\item\textsuperscript{20} Formosa, “Kant,” 221.
\item\textsuperscript{21} Dews, \textit{Idea of Evil}, 20.
\item\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 25.
\end{footnotes}
that may converge with it, which is decisive." Kant states the nature of evil is humanity’s willingness to act in ways other than moral law:

Hence the distinction between a good man and one who is evil cannot lie in the difference between the incentives which they adopt into their maxim (not in the content of the maxim), but rather must depend upon the subordination (the form of the maxim), i.e., which of the two incentives he makes the condition of the other. Consequently man (even the best) is evil only in that he reverses the moral order of the incentives when he adopts them into his maxim.24

For Kant, it is allowing moral law to be subordinate to our inclinations that facilitates evil, or as stated earlier, it is the “dehumanization” or treatment of persons as objects, not subjects or ends. To place the moral law as secondary is radical evil – a perversion of will. Even though we do not choose our desires and inclinations, we do choose the importance.25 It is a mystery to Kant why humanity has such a propensity in its failure to follow the good will. Nevertheless, for humanity to be moral “a kingdom of ends,” the fundamental project of the species is to act according to moral law and subdue our propensity to evil.26 If Kant is right, it is a difficult transformation for humanity but one that we are capable of achieving.27 From this brief sketch, we can understand that for Kant, evil is not the opposite of good but a propensity to subordinate moral law. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of his thesis is Kant’s rejection that there can be evil for evil’s sake. This diabolical evil, as Kant refers to it, is not possible as humans are not diabolical and only do evil out of inclinations (or subordinating moral law).

In thinking about Kant’s view, it strikes me as interesting and anti-climatic that radical evil should be the subordination of moral law. How are we to understand this as radical evil? What is radical about it? For Kant, the subordination of moral law allows people to feel justified in doing things they know to be wrong. In addition, Kant’s notion of agency is not well developed, and Card believes it is inconsistent that humans can be radically evil

25 Card, Atrocity Paradigm.
27 Ibid.
but not diabolically evil. She believes the possibility of people’s acting cruelly for cruelty’s sake to be true since “human beings have proved themselves all too capable.” Not unlike the stoics before him, Kant cannot accept that people act for the sake of evil, that evil is a mistake, or that people are misguided. For Kant, our propensity to deny the moral law is paramount to evil. Evil is our weakness of will. Kant chalks it up to a mystery; nevertheless, he is on to something that has fascinated thinkers to this day, a method for understanding evil that is neither ontological nor theological.

When is evil, in a Kantian sense, is the not listening or allowing oneself to deny the dictates of morality. To describe evil only in reference to agency is not enough to explain why such a failure is evil. However, Fredrick Nietzsche challenges Kant’s approach and perhaps all who wish to understand evil.

**FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE**

The stoics and Kant identify perverted or distorted agency as the source of evil, and each fails, to some degree, to take into account harm as a component of evil. For them, it is what we think and how we think that determines how we act. Their insight into evil is that it is our judgments that make evil possible. A significant departure from these thinkers, Friedrich Nietzsche attacks morality itself and in doing so, the nature of evil. The works *Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil* are fascinating contributions to the discourse on evil in that he does not discuss the why but instead denies the idea of evil.

Nietzsche’s denial of evil is a complex, polemical attack on traditional ideas of good/evil using genealogy and a dialectical approach. Yet, his challenge is perhaps more a “rumination” on the meaning of “Beyond Good and Evil” that unravels the psycho-social origins of good and evil by examining the historical discourse. Nietzsche’s strategy of examining morality comes in two-stages. The first stage questions the traditional philosophical endeavor to ground knowledge in solid, rational foundations; he wishes to

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31 Bernstein, *Radical Evil*. 
expose “the self-deceptive prejudice about the rational foundations that lies at the heart of philosophy.”32 The second stage is a direct challenge to the “implicit either/or” view that permeates philosophy.33 Nietzsche asserts that metaphysicians see only two alternatives in moral thought: rational grounding or self-defeating relativism. This distinction, Nietzsche believes, is a most dangerous prejudice.34

The work in history and philosophy is doing genealogy or “genuine history,” and according to Richard Bernstein, Nietzsche “is deliberately using ‘historical’ material for a specific polemical purpose – to expose what he takes to be the ‘dishonest lie’ that stands at the heart of this morality, our morality.”35 Nietzsche envisages genealogy as the art of the genuine historian who reshapes the discourse, and his form of genealogy is dialectical. The dialectical is about change, and it looks at the conflicts in humanity, the phenomenon of conflict. Nietzsche confronts philosophers who argue a metaphysical understanding of morality, which as we already learned is a severely prejudicial view.

From the outset of the Genealogy, Nietzsche rebels against the orthodoxy of his time, English psychologists attempting to understand the origins of morality. He believes they are mistaken in their appeal to utility, as are the philosophers who argue that morality is transcendental (a priori). According to Nietzsche, the origins of good are established by the high-stationed – the nobles – and the origins of evil come from the lower-ranks – the plebian.36 He describes the master/slave morality, created out of bad conscience (deformed social relations), as terribly damaging for humanity, particularly judgments of evil, which, for Nietzsche, are “basically slavish and ultimately perverse.”37 For example, the wealthy (masters) in a capitalist country wield a great deal of power and influence; they dictate the positive values of the culture. The workers (slaves) worship those positive values but are extremely envious of the wealthy. Their diminished power dictates the negative values, such

32 Bernstein, Radical Evil, 116.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 111.
36 Ibid.
37 Card, Atrocity Paradigm, 30.
as apathy toward poor people or those people who voice dissent against the wealthy. The resulting slave morality is what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment* – the belief in a hostile external world that negates the value of living, usually among those of lower status who hate the powerful. *Ressentiment* is both destructive and creative. According to Nietzsche, judgments about evil are dishonest, born out of the failure of diseased traditions that assume *opposites* and deny that evil is determined by *perspective*. It is through perspectives that humanity interacts with the world, and it would seem humanity has the problem of wanting to make its perspective an institution. I interpret Nietzsche as challenging moral discourse of which he views as harmful, oppressive, and degrading to humanity. His denial of evil is an attack on morality driven by a power dynamic, not a universal moral concept. Morality driven by power is double-edged; it has both destructive and creative power. It is this destructive aspect that he views as being on the precipice of suicidal (and/or homicidal) nihilism; where *ressentiment* festers, humanity suffers. Bernstein captures this complex point, and he shows what Nietzsche hopes for:

His critique of the morality of good and evil seeks to expose both its *dangers* and its *creative* possibilities. [...] Nietzsche artfully brings his readers to the point where they glimpse the possibility of a higher, more creative, life-affirming ethic that may *yet* still arise (at least for a few superior individuals) out of the ashes of its opposite – the slave morality that up to now has triumphed and prevailed.38

To go beyond is to overcome enslavement (judgments of morality) to a creative, life-affirming understanding of the conflicts all humanity shares. Nietzsche directly attacks transcendental views that invoke evil to condemn and punish. These are mere tools of the diseased slave morality. Nietzsche’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” seeks to unmask the dishonesty of traditional morality for greater understanding.39

Nietzsche’s view causes a sort of dissonance as one reflects upon the ideas he envisages. His rejection of the slave morality and his hope for overcoming does speak to how we can understand *when is evil*. I do not read him as a relativist, nor do I see him denying that understanding of being (our existence) is possible; in fact, it is clear that he believes we can overcome the good and evil form of discourse – traditional morality – for something life-

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39 Ibid.
affirming. Nietzsche does seem to suggest that evil is the diseased society whose discourse damages itself without reflecting on the **multiple perspectives** that make up our world. This may be a bit of a stretch, but perhaps not too much seeing that the question is whether there is a dialectical moral framework that is life-affirming. If so, there would be actions that are prohibitive, unjustifiable, or even monstrous. Would Nietzsche reject such an idea of evil? Perhaps, if the conclusion is not derived from metaphysics or transcendental thought but derived dialectically. How to interpret where Nietzsche takes us with his views on good and evil is the subject of controversy and debate. Nietzsche’s challenge to the traditional morality and its use of good and evil show that *when is evil* is not to be found in morality as Kant suggested but possibly as a phenomenon that relates to a moral framework.

As I reflect on these sophisticated and complex views, it is clear that these brief summaries only scratch the surface. In considering the thesis question, *When is evil?* the stoics and Kant argue that *agency* informs us of the nature of evil; yet, many wonder whether agency alone is sufficient to understand evil. Attempting to understand why people act the way they do may not be sufficient to determine *when is evil*. Is it not the act itself that we call evil – the unjustifiable? The stoics and Kant underplay evil or do not look at harm that comes from human action. It is the harm and devastation to the victims that some argue is an important component, if not the most important, of evil. With the stoics and Kant, there are serious metaphysical controversies that linger; the stoics are metaphysically materialist and Kant asserts a transcendental, idealist metaphysic. Nietzsche, on the other hand, approaches good and evil genealogically and polemically questions the traditional metaphysical views that surround the narratives of good and evil. His dialectic examines the psycho-social discourse that is intended to subvert the discourse and asks us to be suspicious of our own attempts to capture the meaning of evil. If there is to be something life affirming in our endeavors, it is wise to seek out ways in which we can understand the horrors that humanity inflicts. These theories fail to make sense of atrocities- the problems from hell that have been committed throughout history. As we will see in the chapters ahead, the stoics, Kant, and Nietzsche’s ideas still hold some explanatory power even as contemporary thought has turned to analytic philosophy and linguistic approaches to understand evil.
CHAPTER 3

SECULAR POSTMETAPHYSICAL APPROACHES

As I stated at the outset of this work, the goal is not to present a new theory but to engage the topic without chains of metaphysics and examining the *When is evil* as a different angle to see if it is valuable. The task of contemporary analytic philosophy is to provide a secular account that gives us a way to talk about the term ‘evil,’ paying special attention on what the term evil does. This chapter examines contemporary thinkers who interpret the term evil primarily from an analytic, secular/postmetaphysical perspective. This section explores interpretations that provide a way to understand terms like radical evil, the unjustifiable, or definitions like “worst possible term of opprobrium imaginable.”¹ In addition, a significant part of the discussion of this chapter is whether we can conceive of evil in the weak or strong readings of evil or should we collapse it to one reading. The weak reading is evil as wrongdoing – “including moral incompetence, lack of imagination, willingness to follow orders, overreactions, and a host of other reasons why people who do not have personalities that we would call evil do things that are wrong, often very wrong.”² The strong reading of evil is evil as atrocity is what we think of as an evil person, a severely evil act, the evil within, and other such expressions. The strong reading views evil as the worst that humanity has to offer when it comes to action.³

HANNAH ARENDT:
RADICAL EVIL AND BANALITY

As we will explore in this chapter, some understand evil through the weak reading and others through the strong reading. Most read evil in the strong sense, but philosopher Hannah Arendt presents two ways to understand evil that is rich and complex, and it may

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³ Ibid.
even defy the weak and strong readings of evil. Her writings on evil are profound and influence many of the thinkers that I will discuss in this chapter. The insights she envisages are a response to questions of evil through the eyes of the Holocaust. Arendt, herself a Jew, reflects beyond her heritage and devotes considerable amount of her intellectual energy to examining evil; she, along with other philosophers like Levinas and Jonas to name a few, were deeply affected by the Holocaust and the incredible loss of life. Reporting on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt witnessed what she saw as an unremarkable man participating in one of the worst atrocities in human history. It is in these reflections that she challenges the tendency to demonize and avers that the perpetrators of the Holocaust were not merely evil men with evil motives, but people who lived in “sheer thoughtlessness.” Yet, prior to this insight, Arendt examines Kant’s view of radical evil and takes it in another direction.

Bernstein discusses Arendt’s thoughts as “thought trains […] grounded in one’s experiences, energize thinking and provide it with concrete specificity. They crisscross, interweave, reinforce each other, and sometimes conflict with each other.” Similar to Kant, Arendt believes *reflective judgment* is “an extended way of thinking” not simply in an aesthetic sense, but also morally and politically. Formosa, Bernstein, and Allison debate as to whether Arendt’s thoughts on radical evil and banality are compatible.

There are five main themes in Arendt’s works: radical evil, elimination of unpredictability and spontaneity, delusion of omnipotence, traditional prohibitions are inadequate, and evil deeds do not arise from selfishness or sinful motives – banality of evil. Arendt’s work spends time reflecting on Kant and deeply appreciates his thoughts on radical evil in that he identifies human will and its denial of the categorical imperative as the source of evil. In spite of that appreciation, she disagrees that Kant’s idea of radical evil is radical enough. She argues that radical evil is the process of making people superfluous, which is beyond impinging dignity, as Kant suggests; it makes the human being valueless and useless. For Arendt, radical evil represents the true nature of *totalitarianism* as the “logic” of total domination. According to Formosa, Arendt is presenting the *what, how, and why* evil arises,

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but not in a comprehensive theoretical sense; it is merely a description of the totality of domination and the unimaginative motivations behind it.⁶

First, the what and how of total domination is the perpetration of a three step process: killing the judicial person, killing the moral person, and killing the individual’s spontaneity. The first part of killing the judicial person is to restrict legal rights, as the Nazis did to the Jews or perhaps the restriction of non-heterosexuals from marrying in American culture. Arendt writes, “The destruction of a man’s rights, the killing of the judicial person in him, is a prerequisite of dominating him.”⁷ The arbitrary restriction of rights is designed to humiliate and degrade the person(s) and facilitate a form of domination. In the second step, the killing of the moral person, the moral person is not able to make choices and decisions of conscience. This renders the possibility of good impossible since it denies the traditional outlet for the defiant, martyrdom. It becomes impossible for the victim to die as a person or a martyr, “robbing it of all testimony, grief and remembrance.”⁸ The final step of the logic of total domination is to eliminate any “trace of uniqueness, individuality and spontaneity” from the person.⁹ To make people superfluous is to destroy their ability to act – their natality or the capacity to begin something new, to act something unpredictable. This relates to plurality as well, to nullify spontaneity is to minimize their being. This is a transformation of what it is to be a human, and it destroys the person(s) as human beings. The Nazi concentration camps served this purpose, as Formosa writes, “to make the human essence absolutely superfluous, as an institution of radical evil, the concentration camps are themselves anything but superfluous.”¹⁰ Arendt suggests that it is not just the horrific treatment of the Jews in the camps, but also the hubris of the Nazis, as if they were omnipotent; they believed themselves to be Godlike in their extermination of the Jews and others by robbing them of their humanity through the complete destruction of their rights, morality, spontaneity, plurality,

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⁸ Ibid.
¹⁰ Ibid.
action, and freedom. These actions complete the process to total domination and to understanding the manifestation of radical evil. According to Formosa, we can interpret Arendt’s examination of the what and the how of evil in this part of her analysis, but not the why. The why comes in the form of the banal. The motivation for radical evil in Arendt’s thought would seem to imply total power over others, but this does not get to the depth of where she wishes to go in her thought. She surmises from her observations of Eichmann something even more disconcerting about the motives of perpetrators – banality. The common accounts of lust for power are insufficient to explain the motives of the Nazi perpetrators. She examines Kant’s view that motives of agents are not diabolical and that radical evil must not be mythologized. Arendt agrees with the latter but departs from the former in an interesting way. In the death camps, something else arose along with radical evil, the eradication of the concept of the human being. She writes:

The real horror began, however, when the SS took over the administration of the camps. The old spontaneous bestiality gave way to an absolutely cold and systematic destruction of human bodies, calculated to destroy human dignity: death was avoided or postponed indefinitely. The camps were no longer amusement parks for beasts in human form, that is, for men who really belonged in mental institutions and prisons: the reverse became true: they were turned into “drill grounds” on which the perfectly normal men were trained to be full-fledged members of the SS.12

How do perfectly normal men become mass murders or make what would commonly be known as horrors, something normal? Arendt’s account of why people do evil is a delicate matter and still rigorously debated. She argues that it was not only that cruelty was made normal, but also that Eichmann and his compatriots were commonplace – thoughtless.

The central issue for some commentators is her seemingly vague transitions from radical, to extreme, to banality of evil as Arendt shifts her later thoughts to motive. Formosa, however, thinks these transitions are her examination of the why. The how is to make people superfluous, the what is the process of how this is done, and the why is the thoughtlessness of those acting. Formosa believes Arendt is raising important counters to traditional ideas about motives. He says, “Eichmann’s thoughtlessness, challenges the traditional view that a

11 Formosa, “Radical Evil.”
12 Arendt, Totalitarianism, quoted in Bernstein, Radical Evil, 451.
perpetrator who habitually commits evil must necessarily have a diabolical character or pathological psychology.”13 Here Formosa sees Arendt agreeing with Kant that actors do not act from diabolical motives, and she offers a twist – the banality of evil. How we are to interpret this comes with an important caveat. Arendt asserts that her account is a “strictly factual account” not a “theoretical treatise” on evil, which requires us to understand this assertion. Interpreting Arendt’s meaning is the subject of debate, for if her claim of a strictly factual account is true, her view would seem rather mistaken in light of history and what many have experienced. The question Formosa asks is whether we can understand Arendt as arguing that all Nazi crimes – not just Eichmann’s – were motiveless or thoughtless. Formosa believes that, “instead of viewing them as stemming from inhuman, diabolical motives, Arendt now sees Eichmann’s crimes (and by extension, those of the Nazi regime as a whole) as essentially motiveless. […] Accordingly, evil loses its dimension of depth and becomes simply banal.”14 However, Formosa finds such a reading “simply untenable.”15 He believes it is a mistake to think that Arendt meant to construe that all the perpetrators of the Holocaust were banal. Eichmann’s evil is supposed to be thoughtless, but what Arendt means by thoughtless, Formosa argues is “specifically the inability to judge, a distance from reality, a lack of imagination, and a blind acceptance of the mores of society. But clearly not all perpetrators of evil commit evil thoughtlessly.”16 The architects of genocide are not thoughtless, and those like Hitler, Stalin, or Pol Pot cannot be considered as such since they thoughtfully perpetrated mass killings, and, unlike Eichmann, many Nazis did act from motives like sadism and hatred of Jewish people. If Formosa is right, Arendt’s idea of banality suggests a factor as to why people commit or participate in such severe activities. Radical evil is a type of evil that is a large-scale political phenomenon that requires institutions and coordination, which in combination can facilitate totalitarianism and is specific to the what and how evil is facilitated. The banal refers to a type of perpetrator who

15 Formosa, “Radical Evil,” 723.
16 Ibid., 723-24.
participates thoughtlessly in evil, has an inability to grasp reality, and possesses a gap in
psychology. Formosa writes:

> Banality is a localized phenomenon that refers to a type of perpetrator, and such a
> perpetrator does not require the apparatus of modernity in order to banally commit
> evil. What is new is not banal perpetrators, but the extent of evil (even radical
> evil) that can be thoughtlessly committed banally within the technical and
> organizational capabilities of modernity. That is, thoughtlessness is not a new
> phenomenon, though the extent of its implications may be.17

Thoughtlessness of perpetrators have been around as long as the perpetrators themselves;
however, it is the identification of the political apparatus that procures thoughtlessness and
puts it to work as novel. Thus, Formosa argues along with Bernstein that Arendt’s view of
radical evil and the banality of evil are compatible; however, Formosa takes the position that
the concepts are independent concepts. Bernstein argues that one is dependent on the other.
Banality is dependent on a presupposition of radical evil. Formosa disagrees with Bernstein
and argues that the two independent concepts are complementary. He says, “By
‘complementary’ I mean that not only can both accounts stand side by side without
contradiction, but that each shines a bit of light on the other, so that in combination the two
accounts provide a fuller philosophical approach to evil than either is able to do in
isolation.”18

Let us now turn our attention to the importance of Arendt’s thoughts to understanding
when is evil. As stated previously, Arendt, as well as other authors, use Auschwitz as the
paradigm of evil, where senseless atrocity marked humanity and the twentieth century in a
way that is still being explored. Arendt’s work is profound and often the starting point for
contemporary thinkers. Her totalitarian thesis suggests that radical evil is the consolidation of
power that then creates a climate designed to make the targeted people superfluous. To create
a socio-cultural climate that makes a people “valueless” and a citizenry that allows or attends
such a climate without rebuke are important symbols that constitutes evil. Intentionally to
make others valueless is more than wrongdoing, for it is a harm so severe that for Arendt it is
unforgivable - to treat any being as nothing. Her themes, the logic of total domination and the

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18 Ibid.
banality of those like Eichmann, show the texture and complexity that has explanatory power. Arendt’s thoughts on totalitarianism and banality of evil provide essential symptoms that are rich and complex. She shows us a way to see evil that defies the common thought that evil is merely the opposite of good. Radical evil is a phenomenon born from humanity’s darkest sense of politics to be carried out by its most incontinent people; it is not simply the reverse of good, it is a process with its own deformed language and morality. Yet, for as insightful as Arendt’s thoughts are, there are many questions about the meaning and cohesion of her thought and about how to interpret whether totalitarianism and banality are independent or dependent concepts. Nevertheless, Arendt’s philosophy strongly resonates for many contemporary thinkers. Arendt’s work suggests that we tread carefully as we read and reflect on evil and is a challenge to Morton’s weak and strong readings. To make people superfluous can be interpreted as a strong reading of evil and yet her banal thesis defies the distinction of strong and weak.

**MARCUS SINGER:**

**A CONCEPT OF EVIL**

For thinker Marcus Singer, the so-called weak reading of evil is not evil; only the strong reading can be evil. He agrees with Arendt that evil is not merely the opposite of good, nor is it simply the bad. Singer clears a possible path to *when is evil* by showing when evil is not and then argues that evil as a concept should be understood as a human motivation to do the most extreme harmful actions, “the worst possible term of opprobrium imaginable.” He believes that to understand evil, we must take on the “the grandiosity of the term evil” with the “aim at understanding the nature of evil when evil is understood as approaching or involving ‘the monstrous’. ”

Contrary to the long history of Western philosophy that suggests no one acts with the intent to do evil but with the mistaken belief that one commits the evil act for some greater good, Singer sets out to argue that evil, as he conceives it, is not the misguided attempt to do good. He begins by rejecting the standard accounts that define evil as the antithesis to good

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20 Ibid., 202.
or abstract conceptions that evil is the reverse of good; Singer and Arendt both use an
overgeneralized sense of evil. He avers, “Evil itself is something over and above this.”21 In
addition, he rejects the “ubiquitous” expression of “a necessary evil” since, as he will
interpret evil, it is never necessary and there is nothing that can come from it that one can call
good.22

According to Singer, evil is the worse term of opprobrium possible and it applies “to
persons, to intentions, to motives, to conduct, and to organizations, institutions, practices,
arrangements, programmes, agencies, endeavors, and situations.”23 As he sees it, evil
“applies primarily to persons and organizations, and secondarily to conduct and practices.”24
There is a continuity that Singer suggests; he writes, “Evil deeds must flow from evil
motives, the volition to do something evil, by which I mean something horrendously bad. One
cannot do something evil by accident or through thoughtlessness. Through accident or
misadventure one can do something wrong or bad even terrible, but not something evil.”25
This is a significant point that attempts to draw clear lines about how to understand evil. Evil
is no accident; it is intended and in stark contrast to Arendt’s view of the banality thesis.
Singer acknowledges that many will not agree with his view and cites the opposition of
Daniel Haybron who argues that “evil actions do not necessarily flow from evil motives.”26
Haybron says, “If we ascribe evil incorrectly, particularly as we are wont to, then we shall
fail to understand why evil-doing occurs; most evil actions are not the product of evil people
[…] the connection between evil-doing and evil character is much lower than most writers
suppose.”27 Haybron believes that to argue this can conflate or inflate and ultimately misuse
the term ‘evil.’ Singer does not agree, as there are terrible, even horrendous things that one
can do that Haybron would label evil and that Singer would exclude “if the resulting harm is

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22 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 190.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Daniel Haybron, “Moral Monsters and Saints,” The Monist 85, no. 2 (April 2002): 279, quoted in
not intended or reasonably foreseeable by the agent.”

As we will see, this idea of “reasonably foreseeable” harm is also important to Claudia Card’s view.

Evil is more than wrongdoing. It is “something over and above ordinary badness.” Moreover, evil is not confined to large-scale action like genocides or holocausts. To speak of such events is to speak carefully about something beyond bad or even malignant. Unfortunately, people are not always careful with their language and the word evil. It is thrown around with little regard for its meaning and proper usage; Singer says, “ordinary usage is a poor guide.” Evil is a term frequently used by people as a way to demonize their enemies or stand-in for wrong or as an expression of emotions of revulsion and disapproval. What we are after here are clear cases or “clear and uncontentious examples” to demonstrate evil. For Singer, if it is unclear or we have reasonable doubt about calling something evil, then we should withhold such a claim. Loose talk, such as this, does a disservice and can further distort perceptions. Singer muses, “Such ejaculations may reflect nothing more than a feeling of the moment, or frustration or anger.” Most would agree that loose talk does little for understanding or contribute to intelligible discourse about evil; such talk only, as Singer states, “darkens counsel.” The point is that it is important that we are clear with our language about things, whether it is justice or evil. Evil, for Singer, is to be distinguished from terms like wickedness, cruelty, and malevolence, though they are closely related and a person can be all those things, but evil is central. These terms can be used as part of the description of persons or their motives, but they cannot be used in the place of evil. Evil stands alone without counterpart.

Singer qualifies his definition of evil (“the worst term of opprobrium”) in light of this demarcation and asserts that terms like monstrous, inhuman, and unnatural can apply to persons and actions when their conduct is so beyond the pale that we are dazed and confused.

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 191.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 192.
33 Ibid.
by such actions. This observation is the basis for his first criterion: “evil acts are acts that are horrendously wrong, that cause immense suffering, and are done from an evil motive – the motive to do something horrendously wrong, causing immense suffering.” The evil motive gets us closer to Singer’s definition of ‘evil’; it flows from the intent to do something that is deemed beyond the pale as far as actions go. He cites several cases, one from the late 1970s, when a man kidnapped a 15-year-old girl, repeatedly raped and beat her, then chopped off her arms, and left her for dead. He also cites the case of James Byrd Jr., an African-American man chained to the back of a truck and dragged to death. There is also the Matthew Shepard case, the story of a young man brutally beaten to death and hogtied to a fence because he was gay. These cases are just a few that Singer uses to illustrate the opprobrium thesis – perpetrators of these crimes are evil. To treat human beings in such a way is an act of evil. The other terms – monstrous, inhuman, and unnatural – all imply evil and may go even further; however, Singer thinks they do not. In reference to these terms, he says, “They go beyond evil only in emphasis and expressiveness, not in meaning. They stretch our vocabularies as they stretch our imaginations, our understanding of what human beings are capable of.” Human beings are capable of many things and can conceive of doing terrible things, but most do not act on them for various reasons. The extremes of conceivability is what Singer calls the “test of conceivability.” It is not a logical test but a test of what a normal person with empathy or sympathy could imagine doing and not doing. The test criterion is that “no normal decent reasonable human being can conceive of himself (or herself) acting in such a way.” This is an appropriate psychological presupposition that Singer makes as he assumes axiomatically that it is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering for the sake of inflicting it. In discussing the limits a normal person has, he states:

Most people can conceive of themselves as lying, stealing, breaking a promise, robbing a store, hitting someone, even killing. But most people cannot conceive of themselves as treating another human being in any of these ways, certainly no normal decent civilized person can. So these terms tend to be reserved for conduct that one cannot conceive of oneself as engaging in – and for persons, human in

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35 Ibid., 195.
36 Ibid.
form and shape and appearance, totally lacking in empathy and sympathy (though they can fake it) who engage in such conduct.\textsuperscript{37}

Many of us can and have done bad things and even perhaps fantasized about acting viciously, but few intend to engage in such actions. He wants to hold evil to actions and practices that we cannot see ourselves doing. If we “normal” people can conceive of acting, then we may question it as evil – a “test of conceivability,” not a logical test. Few can conceive of treating people as the Nazis treated the Jews or of murdering a child. According to Singer:

\textit{An evil action is one so bad, so awful, so horrendous that no ordinary decent reasonable human being can conceive of himself (or herself) doing such a thing. And an evil person or organization is one who knowingly performs, wills, or orders such actions, or remains indifferent to them when performed by another in a situation where one could do something to stop or prevent them.}\textsuperscript{38}

This strong reading of evil would be perhaps the strongest. Singer writes, “The term ‘evil’ lies at the end point of a scale of badness.”\textsuperscript{39} Thus, acts that are bad like those we call wicked, mean, vicious, and malevolent increase in opprobrium to adjectives like monstrous, inhuman, and unnatural. The former is wrongdoing; the latter is evil. To be evil is to go all in, in a sense, and be at the farthest point of possible wrongdoing one can do. A possible way to think of this is to imagine two separate meters; one meter has two labels saying “Simple Courtesy” and “Greatest Good”; the other meter has two labels that read “Simple Wrongdoing” and “Pure Evil.” According to Singer, evil is the farthest reading toward pure evil as it could read. Singer goes further and takes what he believes is a “drastic move” to suggest that “people can do evil because it is evil,”\textsuperscript{40} and he argues that to take this step to the diabolical, as Kant called it, “is essential to take if we are to have an accurate and adequate account of evil.”\textsuperscript{41} For Kant, such a person would not be considered human, but Singer’s point is that evil is the most extreme action or practice when someone does evil for evil’s sake. This may be true in a metaphorical sense: a person that would act in such a way is as the adjective implies – inhuman – but what is important is that to place this title is to

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\textsuperscript{37} Singer, “Concept of Evil.”
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 196.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 203.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
make a moral judgment upon someone, or a practice, that is extreme or the worst possible
opprobrium one can do. In Singer’s view, this clearly confronts what many wish to avoid
with “the grandiosity of the term evil” and shows when is evil.

As with most words, several definitions exist to explain the same simple
phenomenon, and evil is no exception. John Kekes offers the definition of evil as “serious
unjustified harm inflicted on sentient beings.” As Singer turns his attention to the questions
of harm, he believes Kekes’ definition is insufficient since it fails to distinguish bad action
from evil action. Unjustified harm is terrible, but is it evil? Singer does not think so and
argues that Roy Baumeister’s definition of “evil as intentional interpersonal harm” is closer
to his own. Kekes’ account presents one condition for something to be evil, but Singer
argues that more is required, namely the person’s motives for inflicting unjustified harm
because the infliction of unjustified suffering is not separate from the intentions of the agent.
Singer states, “If it is evil, it is because of the intentions of the agent, and it is then these
intentions and motives that are evil. […] persons and motives are at the core, and it is actions
that are evil ‘only in a derivative sense’.” Singer’s point is to flip the idea that institutions
and agents can be evil, but only in a “derivative sense”; what counts is the person’s motive
and action derived from that intent. This makes evil an act that derives its evil from the intent
of the actor to inflict unjustifiable harm, giving support to his view that evil is never an
accident or simple misfortune. On this account, evil acts are horrendously wrong, cause
unjustifiable harm, and have the motives or intent to do something horrendously wrong and
cause unnecessary suffering. Evil action is the most extreme, such that if the action is thought
so horrific that any reasonably decent person could not conceive of doing the act, then it is
clear the act is evil.

Singer discusses in detail at least six degrees or gradations of evil to be distinguished,
what he calls the expressions of evil; of those who do something evil (or horrendously
wrong), it must be determined whether they do it:

44 Ibid., 204.
(a) knowing it to be evil, and because it is evil, or
(b) knowing it to be evil, but not caring, or
(c) judging it to be evil if inflicted on them or on people they are concerned about (such as those who worship the same God or are members of the same tribe), but not regarding it as evil if it is inflicted on others, or inflicted by themselves, or
(d) knowing it to be evil, but for other reasons, such as their own convenience, or (but these next two categories do not really fit under the concept of evil, though they may appear to),
(e) knowing it to be ‘evil’, or at least bad, but, in the light of a fair and full consideration of all the factors reasonably knowable, for the sake of some greater good to be achieved, or
(f) not believing it to be evil, but judging it to be good.45

He explains further the meaning of his list:

Pure evil, malignant evil, is defined primarily by case (a), secondarily by case (b). Case (a) is ultimate, pure, unalloyed, extreme evil, more evil than case (b). Case (b) might be characterized as ruthless evil, cases (b) and (d) as criminal evil. Case (c) exemplifies fanatical evil (such as practiced by the Taliban in Afghanistan or other religious or racist fanatics). Case (d) also exemplifies evil, but derivatively and secondarily; this is egoistic evil; in some instances case (c) also manifests egoistic evil. Cases (e) and (f), as I have said, do not really involve or exemplify evil at all – and therefore should be removed from the list, because for an action to be justifiably judged evil, it must be a clear case of evil.46

Singer wisely points out that this list would be “practically impossible” to determine with certainty since motives are notoriously difficult to establish. But we do have reasons to believe the list has merit from a distance. The question of motives is more a factual matter that may not be provable, since who can know the internal workings of another person for certain or that the motives are so dark they are evil. However, these degrees provide a basis to distinguish evil from wrongdoing. If proof is not possible, it could be argued that this is a plausible reason to deny such a view of evil. On the contrary, Singer argues that our inability to prove the fact of motives is “not a sufficient reason for denying that malignant evil is possible.”47 What we do have is strong reasons to believe even if there is some distance from our capability to prove it. We do make cases for motives and follow the logic of our conventions to determine the validity. Although we cannot be certain, it would be mistaken

45 Singer, “Concept of Evil,” 205.
46 Ibid., 205-06.
47 Ibid., 206.
to assume that people only act for reasons other than purely evil ones, reasons that defy the reasonably normal person’s view and are, in fact, the demons we think they are. Of course, this language is ambiguous, but if Singer’s criterion has any merit, such language, if careful, can be meaningful. The point is that it is possible, perhaps even plausible, that pure malevolence is itself a motive and we can carefully work to distinguish clear cases. For Singer, if it is not a clear case, it is best left off the list of evil.

Singer also addresses the question Arendt put forth of whether evil motives can be banal and whether figures like Eichmann were not monsters but excruciatingly ordinary. Singer is not sure how far we can take this idea since Arendt was not altogether clear. It appears her point is that evil can come without the demonic perpetrators and in the form of bureaucrats indifferent to the sufferings of others. Singer’s interpretation of Arendt’s banality idea is that she is trying to show that “evil presented in such banal guise is even worse than when presented in all its horror.”48 Nevertheless, evil is not banal, nor was Eichmann banal as a participant in the activity of evil; he was a willing accessory, and Singer says, “A knowing accessory to evil is also evil.”49

As a philosophical account, Singer makes a convincing case, and he is quite aware that practically speaking it would be challenging to determine those who are evil from those who are merely bad. For example, everyone in Germany at the time of Hitler was a member of the Nazi party and the Nazi party perpetrated the Holocaust. Is the entire country evil? It would be very difficult to determine. In Singer’s defense, this question would go beyond the account to some degree. The question of collective responsibility and evil is another matter, though related.

There are several possible objections to this theory. One is the problem of application, as Singer points out, and even though it is not the job of his project to apply it, for some this would weaken the theory’s explanatory power. I am unconvinced that even if properly worked out, an applicable version could be possible, but I think this project would go far outside the tasks of philosophy. He believes that the inability to prove it is not a good enough reason to deny evil. The second objection is Singer’s “test of conceivable” where some

48 Singer, “Concept of Evil,” 212.
49 Ibid.
might argue that the term “normally decent person” is ambiguous. One could argue that normal people can conceive of horrendous things and can commit such acts, but with the acts that Singer speaks of, it is reasonable to believe that most ordinary people could or would not do them. Perhaps the most significant question is whether evil is a root concept. *Root concept* means that there are no other concepts, it is independent of other concepts. To suggest evil is a root concept is problematic, and Singer is not arguing this position; however, he would agree that this would press beyond the conceptual to the metaphysical idea of evil in-itself. Evil as a concept is the farthest extreme of wrongdoing. Claudia Card argues that evil may be a higher order moral concept when she says, “Higher order moral concepts presuppose others, more basic. Although evil is of fundamental importance, it is not, logically, a basic concept.” Singer would agree that logically, it is not a root concept independent of others, but in a very narrow sense, evil as he conceives it, does not presuppose anything more basic. Evil is the most extreme conception of badness.

In considering *when is evil*, Singer’s account presents a secular view of evil and one that is a very strong reading. He warns about allowing colloquial or “loose talk” to count for intelligent discourse concerning evil. In addition, he implies the possibility of there being a root concept to evil, namely, the worst possible opprobrium imaginable. This provides a firm conceptual grounding for understanding evil without turning to metaphysics or theology. Evil is *when* an agent acts in the worst possible reproachable or contemptible harmful way imaginable and to do so is to commit acts that are beyond what any normal reasonable decent person would do, part of which is the intention to inflict such unwarranted suffering on others. The actor’s motives are evil, and the actions and practices he follows are on the farthest side of bad; the actions are not the opposite of good but are malignantly evil and have no counterpart. From the horrendous actions of rape and dismemberment, to hate crimes, to the extermination of Armenians in Turkey, the Holocaust, the Rape of Nanking, the killing fields of Cambodia, Rwanda, the War in BozniA, and the ongoing genocide in Sudan, such actions, whether by individuals or governments, are not mere wrongdoing but the worst possible wrongdoing. Such conduct is not accidental but intended to cause unjustified suffering and merits terms like monstrous, inhuman, and unnatural; they are

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deployable with good reason. We can know it by degrees starting with the far end of wrongdoing – pure evil – and move to criminal, but it is important that we do not think of there being lesser evils. There is only evil, and it is not the same as the lesser of two evils; there is no lesser of two monstrous acts in this context, only evil. This reading of evil justifies a strong reading and challenges the dichotomy of weak and strong. For Singer, evil is in part related to wrongdoing, but there is no weak reading of evil as defined by Morton; there is only evil. As I said earlier, this fits under the heading “atrocity paradigms,” a phrase coined by Claudia Card (it is also the title of her book). I will explore her theory shortly, but before discussing Card, I want to look at another thinker who examines and explains evil in a way that contrasts Singer’s opprobrium thesis.

**EVA GARRARD: EXPLAINING EVIL**

In “Evil as an Explanatory Concept,” Eva Garrard argues, albeit tentatively, that a concept of evil is worth explaining and can have explanatory power. To do so, certain questions require thorough answers, but she admits (rightfully so) that such explanation may not fully answer the questions (in a comprehensive manner) because this goes beyond the scope of philosophy although it can explain, in part, the horrors that are inflicted and that befall humanity.51

In examining *when is evil*, there are many ways that we conceive of what we call “evil.” Garrard identifies three ways the term *evil* is used. In a broad way, it can mean “everything adverse in human lives,” and this includes moral evil, wars, disease, and plagues.52 Another way of using *evil* is to narrow it to the “whole range of human immorality” including genocide, murder, torture, and rape.53 The third way is further narrowed, reserving it for “particularly horrifying kinds of action;” this third way is her focus, as is it Singer’s and mine, though it could be argued that the second and third are very similar.54

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51 Garrard, “Explanatory Concept.”
52 Ibid., 320.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
Nevertheless, to grapple with a concept of evil without the metaphysics can be a strenuous and difficult undertaking. For some, as already discussed, without metaphysics (ontology) or theology, it is unnecessary to use the term evil at all. For those like Nietzsche, evil is nothing other than the slaves’ believing there are limits. For others, its use is broad, a blanket term for concepts of injustice, immorality, and extreme wrongdoing. The latter understanding of evil or immorality is, as Morton suggests, a weak reading. What weak readings such as these fail to capture is that some “acts are not just very bad or wrongful acts, but rather ones possessing some specially horrific quality.”\textsuperscript{55} The focus on the idea of radical evil, as Kant termed, is human activity that is more than mere wrongdoing or immorality.

Nevertheless, the moral focus can provide some explanatory power in that immorality may shed light on evil, but if Singer is right, this does not work because it portrays evil as the opposite of good. Garrard examines immorality or the opposite of the supererogatory as one possible way to find such a feature by looking at evil actions as the counterpart to supererogatory acts; she explains “the supererogatory act at one end of the spectrum of moral excellence […] evil acts at the other, negative end.”\textsuperscript{56} However, it is quickly pointed out that this juxtaposition is not very revealing since acts that we call supererogatory are morally praiseworthy but not obligatory. Supererogatory acts are considered beyond the call of duty, while evil acts are not only outside the boundaries of prohibition, they fall directly into categories of the forbidden.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, we learn little about evil from the individual pairing.

In seeking a stronger reading of evil, without a clear secular theory or a theological one, Garrard suggests that we are left with an error theory of evil: “the view that its use does imply something Satanic or at least supernatural, but that what is implied is just false, and hence no statements referring to evil can be true.”\textsuperscript{58} Similarly, the stoics and ancient thinkers suggested it is error in our moral thoughts, not evil. We can observe this by listening to descriptions of mass murders or killers. The culture associates them as Satanic or diabolically evil, but few believe there is such a thing as an evil unto itself, which therefore renders evil

\textsuperscript{55} Garrard, “Explanatory Concept,” 321.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 327.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 325.
as an explanatory concept inert since we think we believe in only what exists. For many, the idea of evil leaves us with an “intellectual hangover from our religious past” or even just “an intellectual and ethical shrug of the shoulders.” Garrard believes that error theory is a plausible response in lieu of a secular theory. Thus, stoic and Kantian versions of error theory have explanatory power as fall backs without a secular account.

What is necessary is a theory that can explain a *special category of action* that assists in our understanding of *when is evil*, which would be a plausible secular theory of evil. On that note, Garrard asks what we need to devise a theory of evil with explanatory power. What is it that we want to explain? First, in exploring what it takes to explain evil, she presents two attributed explananda: *agents* and *actions*. Frequently, these two attributes are starting points for secular explanations of evil. If we seek to categorize persons and/or activities that are especially chilling, disturbing, or horrific, it is necessary to examine the explanatory power of each explanandum and the certain relationship between agency and action. She asks, “Is there some distinctive feature that such actions possess, or are we using the term ‘evil’ as a simple intensifier, to pick out cases of extreme wrongness (or badness), differing only in degree from other cases or wrongness? Secondly, there is the question of why such acts are performed.”

In discussing agency, it is assumed that people act from reasons and that they have some understanding of their undertaking, but “how are we to account for some agents taking themselves to have reason to act in these peculiarly terrible ways?” Consider the example of National Socialism of Nazi Germany and the belief in the elimination of the “lesser” or “inferior people.” Answering this question would necessitate a discussion of the agent’s state-of-mind and why that agent believes the action to be justified while at the same time excluding appeals to his character. To do so could run into problems because it implies many people are themselves evil or monstrous or “trans-human or inhuman.”

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 325.
certain people (Germans) are evil is problematic, and it sets those agents apart from others (in the trans-human sense). A reasonable secular theory should not have this feature while still attempting to understand the agent’s actions, which is a point brought up in Singer’s theory. In the example of the Germans, he would call the German people “evil” if we could establish the nation is an accessory to evil. Garrard finds this quite problematic.

Are there actions that are just so horrible that they can be put into the category of evil? Why do some think they are unjustifiable while others think such actions can be justified? One view recognizes evil by the terrible suffering inflicted by the agent’s actions; however, Garrard argues suffering is not enough. She states, “evil action is one which produces huge amounts of suffering, is not satisfactory [emphasis added]. The production of enormous suffering is neither necessary nor sufficient for an act to be evil.” This is the difficulty of measuring severity of harm from others, and it is controversial to compare sufferings. Small-scale suffering can still be thought of as evil while large scale suffering, like World War II, is largely considered justified; and the most sensitive area is comparing genocides like the Holocaust or Rwanda. Card agrees but thinks we can still have some idea in that we can distinguish atrocity from wrongdoing and still provide some understanding. In contrast, Garrard posits that comparing the degrees of suffering does not assist in understanding evil, but she does suggest a basic set of questions for explaining evil. She says, “an adequate account of what evil is would show” why certain acts are to be categorized together under the heading evil, why we respond as we do to them, and why (to some degree) the agents performed them. With this criterion for explanation in hand, Garrard sets out to see if there is a viable way to explain evil.

In considering what approaches one can take, she focuses on lessening the plausibility of error theory by narrowing the question to “What is it for an action to be evil?” We can recall error theory earlier in this section, which implies a false diabolical or satanic nature that invalidates evil as a concept but nevertheless takes hold of our perspectives for those that commit such acts. Thus, it is important to counter this and still acknowledge a secular theory.

66 Ibid., 322.
67 Ibid., 326
that “could present us with a way of seeing major perpetrators as both monstrous and human like us.” 68 Since, as stated earlier, suffering is not satisfactory by itself for a concept of evil; she examines other possible ways to approach a concept of evil, beginning with a look for distinguishing features that we can identify as evil.

Drawing from John McDowell, Garrard takes up an approach to evil that focuses on the agent’s motives considered at the far end of the moral spectrum. She avers, “The theory which I am going to propose suggests that the evil act can be identified by reference to the reasons which the agent sees, and fails to see, for acting.” 69 McDowell proposes the phenomenon of silencing as a way to distinguish differing kinds of agency using the example of the virtuous and the continent agent. The difference between the two is that the continent agent acts from an overcoming of temptation while the virtuous silences temptation instead of overcoming it. For example, in giving to charity, the continent person sees that it is good to give to the needy and help victims of disasters, but there is the temptation to keep the money for herself since she has things she wishes to purchase. The continent agent struggles, overcomes, and gives to charity. The virtuous see the importance of what needs to be done for others and all temptation is, in effect, silenced by the “reason-giving force.” 70 The motivational force, the silencing, is the understanding of suffering – there is no struggle to overcome. The villainous are blind to such understanding and the suffering of others. Garrard distinguishes between what she calls metaphysical and psychological silencing. They are contrasted by metaphysical silencing being the occasion of a person that fails to see the reality of the reasons which make an action wrong, while psychological silencing is “a total failure to see that certain considerations are reasons at all.” 71 This account of evil action is as follows:

The evil action is one in which the agent is entirely impervious – blind and deaf – to the presence of significant reasons against his acting. It is not just that he allows less important considerations, such as his own power or pleasure, to

69 Ibid., 329.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
outweigh these more forceful considerations, e.g., the suffering and loss of life of others; rather he is completely insensitive to these features’ reason-giving force.\textsuperscript{72}

For such a person, the reason-giving force that influences the virtuous person is psychologically silent. Thus, when such a person acts he does not see the restraints, to use Singer’s phrase, that a normal reasonably decent person does. However, Garrard points out that this blindness is insufficient to make the act evil and more is required to understand the structure of silencing that makes that act evil. A woman who betrays her Jewish neighbor to the Gestapo because she always disliked this neighbor is an example where dislike or unlikeability is a good reason for action. However, in this case, what awaits the Jewish woman at the hands of the Gestapo diminishes the “reason-giving force” of dislike, and it metaphysically silences that consideration. In sum, Garrard states, “On this account, the evil act turns out to be one performed by an agent who is suffering from a profound cognitive defect – an inability to grasp the presence of reasons of the first importance.”\textsuperscript{73} What the evildoer fails to see is the “overwhelmingly strong reasons”\textsuperscript{74} not to commit an act.

Although Garrard’s goal is not to present nor to defend a full account of evil, she presents some important ideas that she believes avoids the error theory of evil and accommodates its horrendous nature. She argues that the theory sketched out fulfills the three criteria mentioned earlier to explain evil. It identifies a subset of wrongdoing that tells us there is something in common – the acts are carried out by agents who silence the reason that are of supreme importance. Second, such reactions to horrendous actions by the evildoer, which in this case is someone with a severe cognitive defect or silencing, results “in the most terrible distortions of practical reason.”\textsuperscript{75} For an agent not to hear the screams of victims, Garrard says, is a “very dreadful condition indeed, given how central practical reason is to our conception of what it is to be a person.”\textsuperscript{76} In this description, we find an explanation for the “deformed and distorted capacity for practical reason” and a sense of those who can act

\textsuperscript{72} Garrard, “Explanatory Concept,” 330.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 331.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 321-32.
so horrendously.\textsuperscript{77} Garrard points out that this view does not lend itself to the argument, those who do evil are a breed apart or are cut off from everyone else. It leaves open the possibility that anyone could become as blind or that our cognitive state could become distorted under the right conditions. Additionally, the theory may explain why agents are willing to act in such ways because they are “impervious to the reason-giving force of these considerations.”\textsuperscript{78} Each component has explanatory power in the context and reveals something about \textit{when is evil}.

Garrard’s accounts and her analysis of explaining evil are fascinating, and they contrast, albeit not severely, with Singer’s. She asks the pivotal question - Is there some distinctive feature that such actions possess, or are we using the term ‘evil’ as a simple intensifier, to pick out cases of extreme wrongness (or badness), differing only in degree from other cases or wrongness? She answers that evil must be a special category of action. Garrard thinks it is possible to consider them monstrous and still all too human by explaining the role of the agent without the metaphysical or psychological and explain how a person can commit acts like Auschwitz or to abduct a young woman, rape her, and cut off her arms. These agents are blind and deaf to the force of the reasons why these actions are severely wrong.

A few possible objections to Garrard’s theory are that while she is correct that suffering alone is insufficient, it could be argued that she underestimates the importance the role of suffering plays. Another objection is that Garrard’s theory is too similar to the stoics or Kant, where the error is a form of ignorance or lack of understanding. The error is in the agent’s being silent to the reason-giving force of action. However, this silencing is not necessarily an error in thinking or character; it is a blind spot that is not premised on ignorance or lack of knowledge but to the reasons that force normal people not to act.

Her use of McDowell’s silencing resonates as an explanation as does the point that evil is something beyond bad, something possessing particularly horrifying quality. This reading of evil focuses more on the agent because suffering alone as a special category is insufficient. Garrard agrees with Singer that evil is not the opposite of good and that a theory

\textsuperscript{77} Garrard, “Explanatory Concept,” 322.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 324.
of evil that has explanatory power requires understanding of the explananda agents and actions. She avoids error theory and psychologizing and to some extent the intentions of agents with McDowell’s silencing theory, and suggests an explanation that fulfills the basic criteria for evil she posits. Evil is *when* an agent is blind to the powerful reason-giving force not to commit such an action. Garrard’s focus is more on the perpetrator while Claudia Card examines both agency and suffering as components of evil and emphasizes the victim over the perpetrator.

**CLAUDIA CARD:**
**ATROCITY PARADIGM**

Philosopher Claudia Card’s *Atrocity Paradigm* argues a strong reading of evil. This secular theory seeks to provide a philosophical infrastructure for a concept of *evil* without the metaphysical issues that often accompany it. Card begins by asking what philosophical theories of evil must entail, and she introduces a series of questions:

- Is “evil” a concept worth preserving? In what ways does evil exceed the merely bad or wrong? When is a person evil? An intention or motive? A deed? An institution? Are we all potentially evil? What is the role of suffering in evil? What is the role of culpability? Is hatred necessarily evil? How can we resist evils without doing evil in the process? Are there evils we should tolerate? Are some unforgivable? What can make evils difficult to recognize? Is evil an inevitable aspect of the human condition?79

Card’s intention is to respond to a number of these questions, and she states that the aim for her theory is to “articulate a conception of evil that captures ethically the most significant, most serious publicly known evils of [her] lifetime.”80 Card qualifies this by saying, “Philosophy alone cannot answer these questions,”81 and she acknowledges that many of the empirical questions of history, psychology, and sociology are not answered in this theory and that they should be answered by these respective disciplines.

Yet, she points out there are remarkably few secular theories of evil, mainly because, for many philosophers, to use the word *evil* is to mean *immoral* as in conduct that is wrong,

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80 Ibid., 5.
81 Ibid., 6.
loosely meaning *undesirable* as in the weak reading of evil. To say genocide or the rape of thousands of women or mass murder are unfortunate happenings is to deny the impact such evils have on humanity. It is beyond disconcerting to see ruthless cruelty, like torture, as merely undesirable.

To try to understand why people act may not be enough to know when evil is on the march. Card’s theory wants to balance agency with harm, emphasizing the importance of the agent’s responsibility rather than the motives of the evildoer. Harm or suffering, in this context, is not simply undesirable outcomes or harm in a trivial sense; not all harm is evil as the utilitarian might think, but there are kinds of harm and kinds of agency that make a proper definition of evil more complete.

What sets an evil act apart from, say, a trivial act like a subway rider’s not paying the fee, or a not so trivial robbery, is that *evil* “tends to ruin lives, or significant parts of lives.” Card makes the strong point that, “Evil is a heavy judgment. Much that is bad is disappointing, undesirable, inferior, even unjust or unfair, but not evil. Many wrong doings are trivial. Evils never are.” When we think of *atrocities*, the list includes genocide, slavery, torture, rape as a weapon of war, saturation bombings of cities, biological and chemical warfare, domestic terrorism of prolonged battery, stalking, and child abuse. (This does not exclude animal cruelty, but Card does not deal with the topic in the book.) Slavery is not trivial, and it is more than just immoral – it is an atrocity. To take a person willfully as property is to take away the possibility of that person’s autonomy and dignity. The harm is severe to the victim, for it allows a person or persons to treat another as objects without freedom of choice. The slaves’ inability to make choices on their lives destroys any sense of self-worth. This is an intolerable atrocity, is never trivial, and is far beyond disappointment.

The two components of intolerable harm and culpable wrongdoing are not reducible to the other. A person not paying the subway fee is culpable of the crime and is wrongful, but it is not evil under Card’s definition (and I think anyone’s) because the act is missing the

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83 Ibid., 3.
84 Ibid., 7.
85 Ibid., 8.
component of intolerable harm. Intolerable harm is the suffering (damage of a high degree) inflicted on someone by an agent. Without this, it is not evil, and the agent’s acting without inflicting severe harm is not evil. Card argues, “neither wrongdoing nor suffering alone is sufficient.”

This is important for understanding when is evil, but abstract definitions are not enough to have an adequate concept. What is needed is an interpretation and concrete examples that link evil to the experiences of victims (intolerable harm) and the blameworthiness of the perpetrators (culpable wrongdoing). Much of the literature about evil focuses on the perpetrators and their psychology but not the victims, or it focuses on just one aspect of agency or suffering, or mistakenly has folded the two together.

By placing the theory in-between what she calls the two moral extremes of utilitarianism and stoicism, Card brings the two together (intolerable harm and culpable wrongdoing) to make an account of evil more complete. She gives three reasons why she selected atrocity: (1) atrocities are uncontroversially evil, (2) they deserve priority of attention, and (3) the core features of evils tend to be writ large in the case of atrocities, making them easier to identify. Moreover, it allows us to go beyond the metaphysical pitfalls of an evil that is lacking an account of both critical components. “Atrocities” is plural, and she references Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblances to underscore that we can understand evils as a sort of human action “where wrongdoing means cruelty and intolerable harm” without the metaphysical problems. This contributes to understanding the fact that atrocities don’t just happen and people always suffer. Many authors often question and seek understanding as to why the perpetrators commit such actions, but Card’s theory shows a concept of evil “that is not defined by motive, although [it] implies culpability.” Accordingly, the prominent focus is the suffering and harm to the victims.

An interesting and important feature Card discusses is the relationship between the perpetrators and victims. Atrocity theory focuses on the intolerable harm victims’

86 Card, Atrocity Paradigm, 4.
87 Ibid. Claudia Card states this throughout the first chapter.
88 Ibid., 9.
90 Card, Atrocity Paradigm, 9.
experience, but does not assume that the testimony is right or accurate. Survivors of atrocity can distort what has transpired just as perpetrators do. The perpetrators underestimate while the victims overestimate the incident. Card describes this as what psychologists call the “magnitude gap.”91 The gap shows the distortion of both the victims’ and perpetrators’ testimonies, but the atrocity approach does not require accuracy of the victims, “nor does the possibility of that distortion count against the view that evil’s importance is best revealed by the suffering of the victims.”92 If there is a view that requires a broader theoretical understanding, it is the victims’ perspective. Giving the victims of atrocity more attention leads to what Card argues is the way we can discern the severity and degrees of harm, but she treads carefully to avoid the controversy that comparing atrocities can create. Severity of harm can be complex, yet it can be understood as a function of such “factors as (1) intensity of suffering, (2) effects on one’s ability to function (at work for example) and (3) on the quality of one’s relationships with others, (4) how containable the harm is (what Bentham quaintly called its ‘fecundity’), (5) how reversible, (6) possibilities of compensation, and also (7) duration and (8) the number of victims.”93 If Card is right, we can discern evil from wrongdoing and at the same time, we can discern the severity and degrees of harm to the victim. It is not that we must have some measurement of suffering or harm, but we can reasonably gauge the impact of an incident to see if it was a form of evil or wrongdoing.

Another approach to assessing degrees of evil is the component of culpability similar to criminal courts proceedings. Some motives are “worse” than others are, as sadism is worse than greed; however, as pointed out earlier, the motives of the perpetrators are not the focal point of the atrocity paradigm, and Card urges caution. She says, “To say that one evil is worse than another is thus multiply ambiguous and therefore apt to mislead. There are no simple correlations among the dimensions along which different evils might be compared.”94 This is a point well taken, but if the paradigm discourages such comparisons between degrees

92 Ibid., 10.
93 Ibid., 14.
94 Ibid.
of evil, how do we have a clear picture of atrocity? Moreover, are not the motivations and intentions of people important in understanding evil?

Card answers this, in part, by providing a clearer interpretation of the components of evil – intolerable harm and culpable wrongdoing: “(1) reasonably foreseeable (or appreciable) and (2) culpably inflicted (or tolerated, aggravated, or maintained) and that (3) deprives, or seriously risks depriving, others of basics that are necessary to make life possible and tolerable or decent (or to make a death decent).”\textsuperscript{95} The list of basics includes such things as clean water, food, and air; sleep; freedom from severe pain and debilitating fear; the ability to make choices and to act upon them; and a sense of one’s own self-worth as a human being.\textsuperscript{96} Card goes on to describe evil as “severe and unremitting pain or humiliation, debilitating and disfiguring disease, starvation, extreme impotence, and severe enforced isolation are evils when they are brought about or supported by culpable wrongdoing.”\textsuperscript{97} All of these can be inflicted by human action making them evil, and even those already in troubled circumstances can, to use a cliché, breathe the free air of freedom, but for those with barely the basics of life, these can be taken by the evildoer leaving them with little hope. Card thinks of tolerable existence in a normative sense and not entirely subjective to the individual. It is part of how we generally understand lives worthy of living.

What makes someone, or a group, culpable or blameworthy for a wrongful action? Culpability is willfully removing, or the attempt to remove, the basics of life from others. Card says, “To be culpable, we ought to have acted differently.”\textsuperscript{98} The basic components of culpable wrongdoing and intolerable harm establish the two roles that are associated with an evil: “perpetrator and victims, doers and sufferers.”\textsuperscript{99} Of course there can be multiple perpetrators and victims, but this is not as simple as it sounds since “there are many ‘degrees’ (kinds) of involvement in perpetrating an atrocity and many ways in which suffering extends to others than those most directly victimized. Bystanders become doers, in the relevant sense,

\textsuperscript{95} Card, \textit{Atrocity Paradigm}, 16.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 16
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.
if they choose to do nothing when they could have done something that might have made a constructive difference.”

Evil is culpably foreseeable harm that is inflicted on subjects, and it deprives, or seriously risks depriving, others of basics that are necessary to make life possible and tolerable or decent. Card gives an example that clarifies the idea of culpability: suppose a thief grabs a briefcase from a young woman for the money it may have inside, but the woman has a heart condition and the assault causes her to have a fatal heart attack. Has the thief committed an evil act? Card says, “However culpable the deed, it is problematic to count it as evil or regard the thief as a murderer.” The thief is partly responsible for the death of the woman and of wrongdoing; however culpable, he or she did not intend to kill the woman as it was a freak accident and therefore not evil.

Card’s expanded definition helps with the understanding of intent and motive. The aim of evil is to inflict intolerable or foreseeable harm, even if it does not succeed. An evil action is one that succeeds. A person may not be intending to do harm, but the resulting harm due to recklessness is still evil because the harm is foreseeable, if proper care were taken. This is a complex and important point about culpability and foreseeability. Card clarifies further: “Culpability in an evil intention can take many forms, such as (1) the aim to bring about intolerable harm, (2) the willingness to do so in the course of pursuing an otherwise acceptable aim or in adhering to some other value or principle, or (3) the failure to attend to risks or take them seriously.” Some examples, like torture, are evil because torturers know that intolerable harm is inflicted even if there is no sadism involved. A car salesman selling unsafe vehicles is evil because of the deception, even if the salesman wishes to use the money for philanthropy. A person that is sexually promiscuous and ignores safe sex in the time of serious STD’s, like HIV, is evil because of the recklessness, no matter the aims or motives. This applies to institutions or laws that do not intend harm even though it is foreseeable that harm could result. Card continues, “An agent’s motive is evil if it is no

101 Ibid., 20.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
accident that, when the motive is efficacious, evil results – that is, the agent would bring about harm that makes or threatens to make someone’s life intolerable.”¹⁰⁴ If a person is motivated by lust or hatred and threatens the life of others, he is blameworthy. What can motivate us, however, does not necessarily lead to evil, but we can judge a motive as evil when it is no accident and intolerable harm results. Even those who are indifferent or banal toward others, or who follow along, can be evil if their banality persists to a point that intolerable harm follows. Card suggests that a way to distinguish intentions from motives “is to regard an intention as a choice to act and a motive (such as compassion or sadistic desire) not as a choice but as providing a basis for possible choices. Motives incline us, but not necessarily all the way.”¹⁰⁵ Motives do not always lead us to an intention. We can feel a myriad of things that influences us to act, but if we examine our intentions, we may better understand our motives. Culpability is understanding actions that people do without calling someone evil without justification, and it follows “from these distinctions that evil people need not be evildoers (intentions may fail) and that evildoers need not be evil people (evil intentions or gross oversights may be anomalous). If we are interested primarily in the evils that people suffer and do, our focus should not be too much on evil people.”¹⁰⁶

What each of us does in our lives can become an evil, not simply because of our character or the human condition. Evil is not accidental, and the harm inflicted is not trivial. To perpetrate the conditions that are foreseeable and so severe as to make another’s life unlivable is evil. And for those who are victims, their lives are destroyed, whether violently, as with the savagery of war or by societal institutions that manipulate and oppress.

Card addresses many of the concerns about evil with atrocity theory and suggests that for a theory of evil to have explanatory power, it must be a strong reading that has both components of agency and harm. However, there are some notable objections. One, being that atrocity theory does not go to the heart of the problem of evil, i.e., the theological and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 22.
¹⁰⁶ Ibid.
metaphysical questions about God and the existence of evil.\textsuperscript{107} The logic follows that talking of evil without the theological or metaphysical leaves only semantics. Philosophically, the theological and metaphysical may not be the heart of the issue, but instead, as I demonstrated earlier, it is reasonable and necessary to argue for a conceptual understanding. To explain evil from a theological stance assumes the unknowable, ultimate, and divine. Atrocity theory does not assume a metaphysical position nor does it deny a theological one, but it argues that evil is a higher moral concept, not a basic concept in a metaphysical way. The challenge is to produce a sound secular theory that examines the possibility of understanding evil without the problematic assumptions.

An objection from within Card’s theory is that it does not take into account intention or motive and does not tell us why people do evil. This criticism misses the point of what the theory is after, which is a philosophically relevant, secular theory of evil. Card does examine intention and motive as a part of culpable wrongdoing, but she makes it quite clear that why we do what we do is best left for others to discern.

Measuring the degrees of harm or suffering of the victims is the last objection to her theory. Can we genuinely measure suffering? Is suffering subjective and incomparable? Card acknowledges the difficulties in evaluating individual suffering. However, it is not incomprehensible for humanity to understand what a tolerable and decent existence is. This diagnosis is analogous to a doctor’s saying a gunshot wound is worse than a broken finger. The victim’s pain may be subjective, but the intolerable nature of the injuries is not. Although the theory is not inclined to compare atrocities, it is compatible with the idea that some evils are worse than others.

In reflecting on When is evil? Card’s theory has impressive explanatory power and thoughtfully explores the roles of agency and suffering. Evil is when individuals and/or institutions act in such a way that it is not accidental but intend to cause intolerable conditions of living for other human beings. The intention to inflict intolerable harm makes the agent culpable and the intolérability of the suffering combined demonstrate what the term evil is equivalent to in language. The atrocity paradigm is perhaps the most comprehensive

\textsuperscript{107} Taken from student comments in Phil620 spring 2008, San Diego State University. I would like to thank my classmates for bringing up this objection.
secular theory of evil I have encountered, and author María Pía Lara agrees but thinks cruelty is at the center of the culpability. She proposes a theory that complements Card’s work and suggests that historical narratives and stories can provide us a way to understanding evil without turning to the ontotheology.

**MARÍA PÍA LARA: NARRATING EVIL**

María Pía Lara reflects the renewed interest to understand evil in a secular way. She rejects theology and theodicies for they conceive suffering as the central theme, and she argues the tendency of theodicies to aestheticize a view of necessary evil and imply some sort of reconciliation with it.¹⁰⁸ Lara avers a different secular approach with a different goal:

> The goal, instead, should be to offer a way to understand why this necessity has come to be seen as such a vital part of human life, and thus to suggest some kind of moral responsibility for avoiding it. Only if we begin to think of evil as a moral rather than an aesthetic problem can we move from necessary to the question of ‘why.’¹⁰⁹

It is our sense of moral responsibility, as we reflect on the past, that we can recognize the horrors that people can inflict with malice and the cruelty they use to perpetrate such actions. She acknowledges the failure of intellectuals to understand evil and the failure to stop it, as Delbanco’s statement suggests, but Lara is optimistic. She says, “in spite of our failure to cope with human cruelty, we possess a clearer, more moral way to analyze what we call ‘atrocities.’ Our last century was plagued by horrific actions of human cruelty; nevertheless, something about our understanding has been transformed.”¹¹⁰ Many secular thinkers I have discussed, like Singer, Garrard, and Card, believe there is good reason to justify a strong reading of evil by working out a conceptual, linguistic, and descriptive understanding.

A proponent of the postmetaphysical, Lara takes a different and interesting approach, one that emphasizes “telling stories” about evil. The postmetaphysical “involves the construction of a moral image of the world under which we can explain the particular forms of evil, always referring to a shared democratic framework of justice and fundamental

¹⁰⁸ Lara, *Narrating Evil*.
¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 240.
¹¹⁰ Ibid., 1.
Much of her work on evil is the attempt to answer the question “Why do stories seem to offer a better approach to evil than abstract or formal theories?” She argues that it is through our understanding of stories that we construct our moral conscience – that sense of responsibility. In telling stories and the exercise of reflective judgment in the postmetaphysical framework, “we are able to connect stories about evil to the moral accountability.”

Lara appreciates Card’s Atrocity Paradigm and joins her in examining evil in “purely secular, nonmetaphysical ways.” Lara’s theory argues reflection “on the problems related to human cruelty as belonging to the paradigm of evil.” The transformation Lara speaks of is in our understanding of culpable wrongdoing as Card describes, and Lara prefers the term cruelty. Lara proposes thinking of evil in terms of “thematizing human cruelty and our capacity to choose to act cruelly in terms of actions exemplified by narrated stories.” In addition, through collective efforts to understand the social and individual make up of our moral framework more clearly, we can recognize that even if we cannot always stop them, we can at the very least understand why atrocities happen. Her theory of evil focuses on the historical and fictional events, stories, and narratives that illuminate our understanding of human cruelty. It is in our understanding of meaning of the past that has transformative value, as we examine stories through the lense of reflective judgments. Reflective judgments can be conceptualized as processes of linguistic innovations that can facilitate paradigms. The concerted efforts to understand the past will clarify the future. She says,

An understanding of our failures makes it possible to learn from past catastrophes […] we can construct a moral conscience through collective efforts of self-examination and that these efforts have allowed us to produce institutions that

112 Lara, Narrating Evil, 239.
113 Ibid., 241.
115 Lara, Narrating Evil, 10.
116 Ibid., 28.
provide us with the sense that justice can be achieved after we understand the kinds of crimes that we commit against each other.\footnote{Ibid., 1.} The main point is that we can learn from the moral failures of history, we can “learn from catastrophes,” and good stories illuminate and disclose meaning about roles and moral responsibility in past events.

Determining which stories and narratives have explanatory power relies on reflective judgment as opposed to determinant judgment. “Determinant judgments subsume the particulars under a general rule. Reflective judgments, on the other hand, derive the rule from the particular. One can understand ‘the universal’ through the particular.”\footnote{Lara, \textit{Narrating Evil}, 184.} Lara draws from Kant and Arendt and uses reflective judgment as a guide to understanding the history and stories we come into contact with. Lara writes, “‘reflective judgment’ the basic moral tool for understanding evil, and that it is through storytelling that we are able to configure a ‘judgment’ that is capable of capturing the particularity and uniqueness of action.”\footnote{Ibid., 246.} The narratives and stories we tell and hear can have “illocutionary impact” that relates to the disclosive potential. Lara states, “My theory of reflective judgment focuses on the notion that disclosive language is an operation of opening up spaces for moral learning (i.e., seeing things differently).”\footnote{Ibid., 10.} This raises the possibility of connecting historical understanding of atrocity with particular actions depending on the quality of the narrative that is morally disclosive. She continues with this line of thought in that “this morally disclosive term is meant to connect the way a word describes a crime to a new sense of moral understanding.”\footnote{Ibid., 10-11.} Lara considers the example of Raphael Lemkin’s coining of the word “genocide.” Lemkin, having previously written on what was happening to the Jews in Europe, described it as barbarity and garnered a critical response. He had to come up with a powerful term to describe the events and capture what was happening to the Jews; he then used the Greek words \textit{geno} meaning race or tribe, and \textit{cide} from \textit{caedere} meaning to kill and
combined them into *genocide*. Lemkin’s term “disclosed a reality that produced a shock by being morally specific.” This exemplifies the process of narrating evil and the use of reflective judgment to understand evil through events of history.

Lara is aware of concerns raised by thinkers like Jürgen Habermas who question “the truthfulness of some historical revisionist theories.” Nevertheless, she asserts that critical questions of history are important even if people are weary of challenging widely held views. Lara agrees with Hannah Arendt’s view of “the need to keep the critical revision of our past open-ended.” She sees it as an important moral learning process that allows societies to self-examine and the important debates that occur in the public sphere are the exercise of collective judgments. She uses the example of the Post-World War II era and the process of seeking moral understanding by the Nuremburg and Tokyo tribunals as attempts, as Lara says, “of material justice – to prosecute individuals for atrocities.” Lara sees these examples as the process of making sense and meaning of the events that transpired from the war. It is through historical narratives, the stories that teach us about evil that “such narratives can open our eyes to new ways of recognizing evil deeds, it is because they can help us see the various dimensions of harm and cruelty. They might become a way to keep us ever vigilant.” She avers that human cruelty has been thematized in many stories throughout human history, and it is “judgment and imagination,” she says, that “allow us to express the unimaginable by creating linguistic terminologies that can convey the means to express what is unsayable.” In exploring narratives and stories, we are able to grasp representations of trauma and the ineffable that we cannot easily describe or find in theory. Lara discusses these stories that capture representation of men destroyed by violence like Kurtz in the book *Heart of Darkness* or the trauma of Paulina being a victim of torture and

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122 Ibid.
124 Ibid., 7.
125 Ibid., 9.
126 Ibid., 5.
127 Ibid., 7.
128 Ibid., 14.
rape and the rage she expresses when she meets her torturer in the movie *Death and the Maiden*. These emblematic stories capture essential truths about the collective memory and experience of people and society. I conclude with Lara’s statement that sums up what she envisages about narrating evil: “the formation of collective memory is the constructed bridge between the paradigm of evil and the paradigm of justice. The cycle of material justice begins when there are enough stories to disclose historical truths about moral wrongs, which can allow societies to strengthen their cases for the prosecution of criminals and perpetrators.”130 We grasp evil when we *master the past* and reflect publically about severe events; from there we obtain normative guidance.

This brief sketch of Lara’s theory shows its complexity that defies the weak and strong reading of evil for a more reflective approach to understand the concept. Her theory does not seek to merely define what we call evil, but it explores the open question of evil by proposing a method of reflection on history and stories that inspire public discourse about the severe events that affect us all. She answers her question of whether we can learn more from narratives than from theory, because some stories can connect or bridge the gap between evil and justice and inform some truth that is not easily captured intellectually. As we struggle to understand, say the impact of torture, we listen to the stories of victims, the perpetrators, and the surrounding events. We contemplate “why” and the “how could they do that” and struggle to makes sense of such atrocities. For Lara, this reflection engages us morally and intellectually. In using reflective judgment, it facilitates disclosive language that expresses the subtly of traumatic experiences and events to ascertain the possible meaning.

A possible objection, as stated earlier by Habermas, brings up concerns that revising history can alter the meaning of important events. This critique deserves more exploration beyond this work, but it may not be a fatal objection since one can argue history is frequently subject to interpretation and reinterpretation. History is not static; it is the story of humankind written by human beings. Thus, it is open-ended and stories, whether non-fiction or fiction, can reveal something meaningful about the severity of human experience. Another objection is the claim that we can learn from catastrophes like Auschwitz or the Virginia Tech Massacre. Some have argued we can learn nothing from atrocities like these but only work to

130 Lara, *Narrating Evil*, 160.
prevent them. This view, however, is shortsighted as we learn more from events like 9/11 than mere prevention. It is nearly a decade since the 9/11 attack, and as we reflect on the terrible loss of life and the vicious assault on the United States, there is something to be learned from the events of that day and the years since. The discourse can be controversial and polemical, but it is clear no simple sound bite from political pundits decide the meaning.

As discussed from the outset of this work, the interests of this essay are to examine primarily secular theories of evil and consider the *when is* as an analytical tool to see what the term *evil* does for our understanding of events and actions. Each persuasively demonstrates the philosophical relevance and value of exploring evil from a postmetaphysical point of view. They systematically explore the important concepts that make up the term *evil*. From the postmetaphysical view, evil is not a root concept but a combination of concepts that when arranged properly suggest a special category of action that, with good reason, is deemed evil.

Reflecting on the theories explored here, there are some possible statements that capture *When is evil*. Evil is *when* agents or society are blind to the reason-giving force prohibiting the commencement of the worst possible opprobrium and intend to inflict intolerable harm on others. Alternatively, we grasp the term evil *when* through collective reflection of history, stories, and narratives we find the nuances of experience and represent the suffering by victims inflicted by willing and thoughtless perpetrators, which brings a closer understanding to the unjustifiable.

I believe that secular approaches like Singer’s, Card’s, and Garrard’s show that evil is to be read *only* in the strong sense and would deny the weak reading as evil. Lara proposes we can understand the term *evil* by making careful judgments on narratives and stories that have disclosive power to inform about the catastrophes of human actions. Approaching the idea of evil from *when is evil* and not *what is evil* develops and enriches the discourse by showing that the term *evil* should be conceived in its most robust form. However, there are noteworthy challenges to the secular approaches. In the next chapter, I will explore alternative perspectives on evil that serve to further illuminate this discourse.
CHAPTER 4

POSTSECULAR APPROACHES

In the previous chapter, authors Singer, Garrard, Card, and Lara reject the theological and propose secular theories that arguably explain and inform (to some degree) *When is evil*. However, in making my critical study of secular theories of evil, I thought it wise to explore, in brief, some alternative approaches that bring into question and inform my approach to *When is evil*. There are many thinkers like Paul Ricoeur and Jean Naubert who discuss evil phenomenologically, but for this work, I selected Martin Matuštík and Emmanuel Levinas as archetypes of this perspective. They offer engrossing and intellectually demanding alternatives to secular theorizing about evil. Matuštík challenges secularizing the discourse on evil and meditates on the postsecular contribution to understanding evil, and Emmanuel Levinas avers that secularized explanations of evil are themselves modern theodicies that seek to synthesize the unsynthesizable and suggest a radical approach - evil as excess.

**MARTIN BECK MATUŠTÍK: THE SCARCITY OF HOPE**

Philosopher Martin Beck Matuštík agrees with others that we should not delete the term *evil* from the discourse; he says, “I think that by understanding it better we can bring a margin of sanity into public matters. Terror emerges in the wake of the ‘death of God’ and thus in existential despair over one’s powerlessness in the face of tragedy.”¹ He reflects on the secular/postmetaphysical (analytical) approaches that exclude the *ontotheological* and seek to identify concepts and frames of reference for what we term *evil*. What Matuštík terms *postsecular* raises important questions about the secular/postmetaphysical and the consequences of abandoning the spiritual.

In his book *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope: Postsecular Meditations*, Matuštík questions the purely secular interpretations of those like Lara’s. He says, “If radical evil

cannot be attributed to ordinary mistakes in judgment or erroneous decisions, then it is not
enough to narrate evil in terms of moral wrongs.” Narrating evil, as Lara argues, fails to
distinguish a weak and strong reading of evil but provides access to a wealth of information
and understanding. Matuštík says of Lara’s approach:

Lara (2007) seeks to open a space for coming to terms with human atrocities and
cruelty through reflective judgment about experiences that cannot be directly
communicated or conceptualized but can be narrated, for example, in truth
commissions. But she a priori limits her theory of any such narration to the
secular horizon of Kant’s “moral wrongs.” She stays decidedly within the secular
domain because she conflates the adoption of postmetaphysical reflective
judgment with her rejection of the religious perspective.3

This is an interesting critique of Lara’s postmetaphysical approach to understanding evil. The
specific charge of conflation is often used to show an overdetermination of something. Does
Lara’s secular theory conflate reflective judgment? Unquestionably, secular thinkers, if not
all thinkers, rely on judgments in making distinctions. The judgment for secular thinkers is to
exclude theological arguments because in the traditional form, the problem of evil assumes a
tenuous starting point in that it does not seek to examine evil but apologize for evil in light of
an all powerful and perfectly beneficent God. Yet, to release ourselves, methodologically
speaking, from the ontotheological and replace it with analysis of concepts and language is
not a unique approach, but in the case of evil it is still controversial. It is possible that Lara
does conflate reflective judgment and her rejection of religion, but I question whether all
secular analytic works I have examined conflates their conceptual approaches. Matuštík
argues that when coming to terms with the cruelty of atrocity, it is problematic to “arbitrarily
restrict the phenomena to the moral universe of Kant’s narration of evil.”4 The charge of
arbitrariness is interesting but mistaken. It is a mistake to think that setting this limitation is
arbitrary; rather it is a judgment about the parameters for the discussion of evil as opposed to
a sharp line arbitrarily drawn.

Matuštík offers a sustained meditation on radical evil that he calls postsecular and
negatively saturated phenomenon. He sees five approaches to discussing evil: metaphysics as

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2 Matuštík, Scarcity of Hope, 8-9.
3 Ibid., 9.
4 Ibid.
theodicy, theoretical arguments, propositional analysis, moral arguments, and the existential transformative. He takes up the *existential transformative* to show a perspective on evil that understands it as a phenomenon in lived experience that is an excess or saturation of hopelessness. He calls the approach to understanding *redemptive critical theory*, and he explores how the excess or saturation of hopelessness can be overcome.

Matuštík believes, “Meditating earnestly on radical evil in the twenty-first century calls for postsecular sensibilities. Postsecular is to secular as postmodern is to modern.”

Postsecular thought “designates the co-existence of various religious and secular phenomenon.” He claims his work begins where Kant, Habermas, and Lara end. He examines human evil by four intensities or modalities. The first level of intensity Matuštík discusses is banality; it is commonly understood as thoughtlessness, as people “tranquilize themselves in the trivial pursuit of good.” Morally radical, the second level, is similar to Kant’s idea that “practical evil distorts the human capacity for free development.”

The confrontation of desires in a “good life with the insurmountable conceptual and linguistic dissonance, a sort of malignant sublime” is paradoxical, the third intensity. The fourth level is the diabolical intensity; it is the “human-all-too-human acts of cruelty” that can surpass the bounds of reason that Kant denied.

Matuštík challenges the political economists, social theorists, and activists with certain spiritual questions regarding evil or what he calls “intransitive hope.” Trying to negotiate radical evil is no simple task, particularly if we seek normativity. He understands this pursuit as attempting to make sense out of senselessness because “radical moral evil lies in humans willing destruction even at the cost of their own downfall.” This sort of aimless action strikes at the heart of normativity and lives on the precipice of nihilism. Matuštík states:

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 3.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 8.
While the classical and the analytic approaches to the question of evil are for the most part preoccupied with metaphysical, conceptual, or propositional analysis, the post-Kantian approaches do not primarily raise validity claims but speak to a mode of existence or through raising an injunction to a certain way of existence. It is in this sense that I call them existential transformative. Instead of discussing theodicy, proofs, postulates, or evidential arguments, one is confronted with the quality of hope or despair as those categories qualify one’s entire mode of existence.12

It is obvious that this approach deviates from the analytical or propositional that is the hallmark of analytic philosophy and my own project. By “existential,” it is not the existential sense as in the examination of “ontological structure of being-in-the-world”; Matuštík means it in the “passionate care for one’s soul found in Job, Socrates, Jesus, Buddha, Augustine, Pascal, and Buber.”13 His book offers a meditation on the problem of excluding the spiritual with the complex layers of human experiencing from our understanding of evil. It is the possibility of hope, despair, and our lived experience that defines his understanding of the existentially transformative. Matuštík’s meditation defines evil as: “Evil that I call ‘radical’ distorts intelligence and free will in their capacity to guide and sustain human development and well-being.”14 Radical evil, as he sees it, is purposeless and exceeds the ordinary bad or morally wrong; it exceeds secular understanding because it is the uncanny, a negative saturation of experience. After the Auschwitzes of history, we are compelled to try to make sense of what happened, and secular approaches like Singer’s, Card’s, and Lara’s are in a way, as Levinas suggests, a kind of theodicy because they attempt to integrate the non-integratable. The dispatching of the spiritual by secular thought is troublesome for many because of the secular struggle to deal with human experiences and the strong intuitions that come from the context in which we interact with the world. Instead of presenting propositions or arguments about evil, Matuštík meditates on the transformative nature that a negatively saturated phenomenon has on the possibility of hope and despair. Matuštík believes that a reintroduction of the secular and spiritual is required genuinely to grasp and to grapple with evil.

12 Matuštík, Scarcity of Hope, 7.
13 Ibid., 6.
14 Ibid., 8.
He proposes or “holds out” for what he terms critical redemptive theory. This postsecular angle, he contends, is better to unmask “the impetus of holy wars insofar as their underlying motives feed on the phenomenon of evil or its conquest.” Critical redemptive theory is a discourse about the possibility of hope from hopelessness. He says, “Redemptive or redemptory awaits the possibility of healing the world crushed by hopelessness. The entropic nothingness of the *khôra* is religiously deaf, mute, and even free of the existential anxiety’s nothingness, and so as wholly exterior to the possibility, it neither can explain the excess of radical evil nor await hope.” With the “death of God,” the emptiness of being (*khôra*), and the horrors that have and do transpire, it is a challenge to find hope when there appears to be few reasons to believe there is.

Matuštík draws on Jean-Luc Marion’s idea of the “saturated phenomenon” of religion. Radical evil is a “special instance” of saturated phenomenon as the manifestation of the scarcity of hope, or in Marion’s term, a negatively saturated phenomenon. Human evil “dramatizes a special case of saturation not because of its levels of excess or intensity could not be deemed at times banal, but rather because in human agency doing evil always reveals a positive excess and yet this positive is at the same time something done in a negative mode.” Saturated phenomenon or excess “is defined according to the infinite overflow of all determinations and all actualities; it is the site of the undecidability of all decisions.” This overflow of experience is “an unconditioned and irreducible phenomenon” that breaks the rational boundaries of experience. In other words, a society experiencing saturation of negativity is not reducible to categories, and it crosses the boundaries of rational intentionality. This unfastens Kant’s four categories of quantity, quality, relation, and modality for saturated phenomena of the first order. First order saturated phenomena have four basic types: events, flesh, the idol, and the icon. Phenomenologically speaking, experience is in layers or orders that can reveal counterexperiences in relation to the basic

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 83.
19 Matuštík, *Scarcity of Hope*, 84.
types of saturated phenomena. Thus, radical evil reveals itself through the four modalities: banal, morally radical, paradoxical, and diabolical, with the varying sense of saturation, just as with other positive phenomenon, where the phenomena of evil is in a purely negative sense. This creates what Matuštík calls impossible hope, a paradoxical desire for hope when none is possible. He eloquently surmises his perspective:

Radical evil is the \textit{negatively saturated phenomenon} that breaks the subject-object poles of possible experience and the bounds of rational categories. In all its intensities, from banal to morally radical to paradoxical to diabolical, practical evil exceeds what is intended by the common or ordinary phenomena of doing something wrong or bad, and hence it engenders counterexperience […] if radical evil can be described and yet is something that escapes purely rational explanations (it is neither visible nor bearable; it is singular and indirect), then we have come across a saturated phenomenon. It is negatively saturated phenomenon because, unlike the sublime, loving, or faithful that break rational bounds in seeking receptive and accepting relation with the beautiful, self-giving, and the holy, radical evil breaches those bounds in defiance.20

Evil saturates what we experience. It breaks the bounds of our moral experience by defying it and creates a counterexperience that defies the possibility of meaning or hope; it is not the absence or privation but a full eclipse. What Kant most feared and believed not possible, we observe, as Arendt did, the danger of totalitarian views that seek to make selected people superfluous with actions that are unforgivable, uncanny, and irredeemably cruel. The secular can only define the representations, frames of references, and expressions, but Matuštík says,

The process of secularization has been gradually translating sacred or traditional beliefs into publically redeemable validity claims, thus overcoming the problem of intolerance and violence. Yet if the outcome of this process is a degree of the emptiness that renders human existences unlivable, can the vanishing point of secularization offer a true path to uprooting sectarian intolerance and violence?21

How is there hope or redemption in secular thought? Secular thought cannot readily speak to such things as hope and redemption, however, it does not outright dismiss such ideas. It is limited in its scope, and for the most part, ideas of hope and redemption are understood in culturally psychological terms. There is an existential/spiritual blank spot in secularization that extends only from moral outrage to intolerance and violence without recognizing the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{20 Matuštík, \textit{Scarcity of Hope}, 128.}
\footnote{21 Ibid., 145.}
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impact on our greater consciousness. Matuštík’s observation is that reasonable, purely secular cultures are anemic when it comes to making sense of evil other than, as he says, “publically redeemable validity claim,” or as Levinas claims, secular theodicies. Simply to rationalize or to psychologize the unspeakable is troubling and inadequate. Secularized approaches fail to recognize lived experience in a culture saturated by negative phenomenon. Matuštík continues, “The answer to the question, Is secularized consciousness capable of living without redemptive hope? is not whether or not modern mind wants to keep rooting out the most entrenched source of evil, but whether it can do it by its secularizing resources.” Does the secular approach have the wherewithal or, as he says the resources, is the question of this thesis and the implicit challenge of Delblanco’s statement. I believe there are solid reasons that the When is evil approach provides answers to this question, albeit tentatively. In addition, the authors mentioned in chapter 3 demonstrate a wealth of resources for dealing with this issue.

From reading and contemplating Matuštík’s meditations on postsecular thoughts of evil, I take but a few things from it; it is a point well taken that the secular is limited, but I disagree that it arbitrarily restricts what is explored. It is important to contemplate evil systematically; yet, trying to identify frames of reference, concepts, and experiences is the effort to bring evil to the intelligible in the propositional or theoretical sense. To ask When is evil? is an important discourse, and the idea of negatively saturated phenomenon adds to that experiential understanding. To put it simply, evil is when what we experience is saturated by negativity, and this excess of negativity creates a scarcity of hope that seriously threatens the possibility of living meaningfully.

We are on the periphery of the understandable when we explore the unjustifiable, and we are acutely aware of what the struggle is, namely to clarify our systems of thought. Secular thinkers follow a narrow path that finds the spiritual as troublesome as evil. To describe and identify is not the totality of understanding, and the concerns about what secular thought lacks, in regards to the meaningfulness of life and the severity of despair, bears significance to the discourse on evil.

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22 Matuštík, Scarcity of Hope, 145.
23 Ibid.
Emmanuel Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas’ thoughts, like Hannah Arendt’s, are a reflection of Auschwitz and the attempted extermination of the Jews by the Nazis, but as with Arendt, it is much more. What makes Levinas so important to this discussion is his complex and nuanced thoughts on morality and evil. I will rely on Richard Bernstein’s and Peter Dews’ understanding of Levinas for this task and I will not try to string Levinas’ works together as that is beyond this essay. For my purposes, I will explore only some basic ideas that resonate in the discussion of evil.

Bernstein comments on Derrida’s thought about Levinas in that it “compares it to a wave crashing on a beach: always the ‘same’ wave returning and repeating its movement with a deeper insistence.”24 The issue that occupies Levinas’ work, in part, is a response to Nietzsche’s challenge that morality is interpretation of phenomena, a self-deception. Levinas’ concern is “to know whether we are not duped by morality.”25 It would seem that “from a standpoint of a sober, dispassionate characterization of the human world, Nietzsche may appear to have a strong case.”26 Do we delude ourselves that there is good and evil? Do the Nazi death camps show good to be a mere illusion? Levinas asks, “Can we speak of an absolute commandment after Auschwitz? Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?”27 For Nietzsche, peace is merely a ceasefire until self-interest sends us back to battle for supremacy, and no treaty or pact can restrain it. However, Levinas argues for an understanding of peace in a radically different way. Levinas orients us “towards an ‘eschatology of peace’ a relation with being beyond the totality or beyond history.”28 This finality of peace rests in being beyond being that for Levinas is the relation to transcendence or infinity. In a sense, this is discussing relationships of human beings with the totality of

24 Bernstein, Radical Evil, 166.
28 Bernstein, Radical Evil, 159.
being, which is a theme in existentialist thought; but for Levinas there is a conflict or a rift in culture, for there is no triumph of peace over war, nor does war triumph over peace. It is a disparity not between compulsion and need but a response to the “oppressive limitless of being.”

This statement is a preface of sorts to Levinas’ famous claim that ethics precedes ontology, his complex retort to Nietzsche.

Levinas’ “entire philosophical project can best be understood as an ethical response to evil – and to the problem of evil that we must confront after the ‘end of theodicy’.” For Dews, “much of Levinas’ philosophical effort is devoted to revealing that an ethical encounter with the infinite doe indeed occur: that we are dup by morality.”

What Levinas means by the “end of theodicy” is interesting to the discussion of this thesis. He sees it as an end to the temptation to release God from responsibility, or saving morality or in making suffering bearable. Yet, theodicy is not restricted to religion but has persisted in the secular age “in a watered-down form at the core of atheist progressivism which was confident, nonetheless, in the efficacy of the Good which is immanent to being, called to visible triumph by the simple play of natural and historical laws of injustice, war, misery, illness.”

This insightful observation is telling to the entire project of secular theories of evil and serves as a warning against the temptation to seek justification and reconciliation for unbearable suffering and evil.

According to Dews, Levinas drastically reworks the Kantian view. Levinas envisages our ethical encounter as it takes form of the face-to-face relation with other human beings, and like Kant, Levinas argues, “we stand under unconditional ethical obligations.”

Levinas suggests a phenomenology (direct experiencing) of evil that follows “after the end of theodicy” in three movements: evil as excess, evil as intention, and the hatred or horror of

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32 Ibid., 160.

33 Levinas, “Paradox,” 161.

evil. The idea of evil as excess suggests a quantitative intensity or some form of measure, but Levinas says, “evil is an excess in its very quiddity.” Quiddity is the essential nature of a thing, and evil as malignancy is by itself excessive. Yet, it is not the unbearable suffering that is the excess of evil; it is as Levinas states, “The break with the normal and the normative, with order, with synthesis, with the world.” What makes evil as excess so disturbing is its non-integratability with the world. Levinas says, “Evil is not only the non-integratable; it is also the non-integratability of the non-integratable.” This nearly unintelligible statement lends to the idea of evil as an ineffable experience that cannot be put into one’s experiencing of life. He continues:

It is as though to synthesize, even the purely formal synthesis of the Kantian “I think,” capable of uniting the data however heterogeneous they may be, there would be opposed, in the form of evil, the non-synthesizable. […] In the appearing of evil, in its original phenomenality, in its quality, is announced a modality, a manner: not finding a place, the refusal of all accommodation with […], a counter-nature, a monstrosity, what is disturbing and foreign of itself. And in this sense transcendence.

Levinas’ complex statement reflects the idea of evil as excess, something not synthesizable, as per a Kantian view, and this would mean that there is no experience. But for Levinas, transcendence in the sense of evil is the unsynthesizable, it is foreign, but Levinas goes against the Kantian view that if it is not synthesizable there is no experience. Bernstein sees Levinas arguing that “the malignancy of evil is experienced as ‘something’ that cannot be synthesized, as something that is at once experienced and yet defies categorization.” This is not a denial of knowledge or understanding of evil but the recognition that it escapes total comprehension. The transcendence of evil is the non-integratable.

In the second movement, the intentionality of evil, Levinas talks of intention as a phenomenon. He says, “evil reaches me as though it sought me out; evil strikes me as though there were an aim behind the ill lot and pursues me, as though someone were set against me,

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36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Bernstein, Radical Evil, 175.
as though there were malice, as though there were someone. Evil, of itself, would be an ‘aiming at me’.\textsuperscript{40} One could interpret this as saying we experience evil not as an accident or misfortune but as something personal. Evil is not neutral; there is intentionality to evil that reaches out, like the story of Job or the Holocaust. Evil damages with the malice of useless suffering that begs for reasons for why such things are happening, and from that there is the temptation of theodicy – the justification of useless suffering – which Levinas argues we should resist. Levinas makes an important and challenging shift from the transcendence of evil, the non-integratable, leading to the first metaphysical question when he says it “is no longer Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s question ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’ but ‘why is there evil rather than good?’ It is the de-neutralization of being, or the beyond being.”\textsuperscript{41} This second movement is what Levinas means by the statement “ethics precedes ontology” or being beyond ontology. He says, “The ontological difference is preceded by the difference between good and evil.”\textsuperscript{42} The ethical is prior to the ontological, or as Bernstein states, “the ontological presupposes the ethical.”\textsuperscript{43} Levinas challenges what he calls “ontological imperialism” and disputes Martin Heidegger’s understanding of being. Heidegger argues that metaphysics means the forgetfulness of Being and that metaphysics obscures the fundamental ontology of Being. Levinas asserts “the primacy of metaphysics” and does so in order to “show that there is ‘something’ beyond Heidegger’s fundamental ontology.”\textsuperscript{44} This is his challenge to ontological imperialism. Levinas says, “Western philosophy […] has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being.”\textsuperscript{45} Levinas seeks to confront evil in a way that Heidegger’s ontological thought is lacking due to its limitation; he does so by attempting to escape the limits of ontology.

\textsuperscript{40} Levinas, “Transcendence and Evil,” 181.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 182.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 176.
\textsuperscript{44} Bernstein, \textit{Radical Evil}, 177.
\textsuperscript{45} Levinas, \textit{Totality}, 43.
The third movement - the hatred or horror of evil - is another source of temptation for
theodicy because in the experiencing of horror, one is opened up to the irreconcilability and
yet we are compelled to attempt to reconcile evil. It opens us to an ethical relation with
others. Bernstein points to a passage that sums up Levinas’ view:

This is no longer a transcendence absorbed by my knowing. The face puts into
question the sufficiency of my identity as an ego; it binds me to an infinite
responsibility with regard to the other. The original transcendence signifies in the
concreteness, from the first ethical, of the face. That in the evil that pursues me,
the evil suffered by the other man afflicts me, that it touches me, as though from
the first the other was calling me, putting into question my resting on myself and
my conatus essendi, as though before lamenting over my evil here below, I had to
answer for the other – is not that a breakthrough of the Good in the “intention” of
which I am in my woe so exclusively aimed at?46

The breakthrough Levinas speaks of is to the idea that we are not exclusively being; we are
beings that possess a drive to preserve ourselves. Levinas references Benedict Spinoza’s idea
of the conatus, which can be understood as the law of being. However, Levinas argues we
are not Dasein (being there) as Heidegger suggests, but that we are human beings. Levinas
goes on to say, “The horror of the evil that aims at me becomes horror over the evil in the
other man. Here is a breakthrough of the Good which is not a simple inversion of Evil but an
elevation. This Good does not please, but commands and prescribes.”47 It is a command that
is similar to Kant’s categorical imperative. Bernstein suggests a formal analogy to clarify the
points:

Kant argues (counterfactually) that if we were exclusively natural beings, there
would be no categorical imperative, and consequently no morality, so Levinas
argues that if we were exclusively beings, there would be no ethical imperative.
And just as Kant claims that nature has its own laws, so Levinas claims that being
as its own law. For Kant, there is nothing intrinsically good or evil about the laws
of nature; for Levinas the law of being is itself neither good nor evil. According to
Kant, to acknowledge the moral law does not mean that we always follow it.
Nevertheless, we can obey the moral law. […] So too for Levinas, to
acknowledge the supreme ethical imperative does not mean that we always follow
it; but we can obey this command.48

47 Ibid.
48 Bernstein, Radical Evil, 179.
For Levinas, saintliness is not an accomplishment but a value that is an ethical priority. Thus, for ethics to be possible, a rupture with Being and conatus is required. Evil is not simply the wanton pursuit of desire but is revealed as the sin of refusal to respond ethically to others.49 Evil comes about when we deliberately deny or violate the ethical imperative. Bernstein states it precisely: “To become human is to transcend my own law of being, and to respond ethically to evil that afflicts my neighbor.”50

This statement reflects perhaps his most fascinating contribution, his assertion of infinite responsibility. For Levinas, a majority of Western philosophy (Kant and Hegel in this sense) has “explicitly or implicitly identified infinity with totality.”51 Levinas’ starting point is neither Kantian nor Hegelian but a view of the infinite that ruptures totality and being. The rupture “opens the space for ethical relation to the other that resists and opposes any assimilation to totality and being.”52 As difficult as this may sound to the ears of many, Levinas’ point is radical; to assert infinite responsibility seems troubling on many levels. What could possibility be beyond being? Moreover, Dews writes, “Throughout his work, he emphasizes the starkness and illimitability of moral responsibility.”53 It seems not to be grounded in ordinary living, but Levinas argues that such ethical relations run very deep. Bernstein surmises the point:

It is the type of responsibility that precedes, and is more primordial than, my own autonomous freedom. I can never totally fulfill my responsibility to the other (l’autrui). But this is neither a doctrine of despair nor an ethic of heroism. It is an ethic of everyday life, because in the simplest act or gesture of welcoming I can act in an ethically responsible way.54

The desire to comprehend evil is the desire to comprehend our deepest responsibility to each other. The one’s face-to-face relations with the other is the ethical encounter that is being

50 Bernstein, Radical Evil, 180.
51 Ibid., 180.
52 Ibid., 181.
53 Dews, Idea of Evil, 162.
54 Bernstein, Radical Evil, 181.
beyond being; it is asymmetrical and nonreciprocal and an anchored “ethical obligation in the
everyday realities of interpersonal relationships.”

Now let me turn our attention to see how this fits into the discussion of *When is evil?*
What I glean from this brief but intense study of Levinas’ thought on evil is that evil is
“something” that we cannot integrate into our experiencing of life. We experience the
intention, the personal directness of it that pursues us. Evil as phenomenon is the “seduction
of irresponsibility” that permeates a failed society. The temptation of theodicy surrounds
the discussion because evil threatens morality, and we long for explanations or justifications
for Auschwitz and the like. Yet, both religious and secular theodicies are but a delusion that
we can fully comprehend evil. The thought is that it is not through more knowledge or
details, but only through the ethical response do we begin to grasp the idea of evil, for evil is
when the agent is aware of the infinite responsibility and denies it.

Matuštík and Levinas are excellent exemplars of continental thought on evil. They
agree with secular thinkers that examining the problem of evil is a worthwhile philosophical
project, but they challenge the diminution of the spiritual for linguistic concepts in the vain
attempt to integrate the unintegratable. The phenomenology of evil is an excess of
experiencing that goes beyond any reading whether weak or strong. It defies the analytic and
moral categories that try to confine evil to the knowable; instead, it saturates every aspect of
living that gives us hope of a good life and makes it scarce. If they are right, secular
approaches lack the resources without some sense of the spiritual as part of the discourse. We
are left simply to define terms without harnessing the deeper insights about what it is to be
human and how evil negates it. Perhaps Levinas’ insightful question presses the deepest; he
asks, “Why is there evil rather than good?”

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56 Ibid., 174.
57 Levinas, “Transcendence and Evil,” 182.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

What I have attempted to show in this work is that examining a concept of evil need not be theological and is a worthwhile problem for philosophical reflection. It is an open-ended process, as Bernstein suggests, one that defies closure or completion. There will always be gray areas that will require attention. The *When is evil* approach I have argued for attempts to reconceptualize the approach by first correcting the erroneous question *What is evil?* and refocuses on the *what* in terms of *when* that asks what evil does for our understanding and overall moral discourse. The secular postmetaphysical approach demonstrates a concept of evil without reification and the unwieldy metaphysical issues. Instead, it examines the symbols and descriptions of linguistic concepts and the meaning of the use of the word *evil* without referring to mere abstractions. In this work we looked at *themes*, the secular beginnings of the stoics, Kant, and Nietzsche as grounding for the work. Then the secular postmetaphysical thinkers Arendt, Singer, Garrard, Card, and Lara were investigated as principal theorists on the discourse on evil. Where each thinker adds to the discourse, Singer adds the strongest case for evil that collapses the weak and strong distinction and argues his opprobrium thesis. Garrard looks to explain evil in terms of a strong reading that is best explained by agents whose moral compasses are silent to sufferings of the other. Card’s atrocity paradigm theory shares the strong reading of evil and is the most comprehensive of all those we encountered in this paper. Unlike most other authors, she emphasizes the victims’ intolerable suffering over the motives of the perpetrators. Lara accepts Card’s atrocity paradigm and exemplifies the open-ended nature of investigating by proposing a theory of evil using reflective judgments to understand evil through the power of stories and narratives. The postsecular thoughts of Matuštík challenges the meaningfulness of the purely secular thematizing to deal with the despair like that of Delbanco’s statement in the introduction. The phenomenology of evil defies definition, saturates experience, and destroys the possibility of hope. The denial of the spiritual by the secular denies the possibility of healing. Matuštík suggests a reintroduction of the secular and
the spiritual to make sense of the purposelessness of evil. Levinas questions what he characterizes as the delusion of secular theodicies and argues evil as excess, the confrontation with the unsynthesizable experience that is encountered in the asymmetrical face-to-face relations with the other; it is the denial of my infinite responsibly to the other that evil takes root.

As discussed from the outset of this work, my interest is to examine mainly secular theories of evil and consider the *when* as opposed to the *what*, as well as explore alternative perspectives to the secular that enhances the discussion. The two tendencies\(^1\) in philosophy, the analytic and continental traditions, often conflict as to where we are to set limits in our philosophical inquiry. The debate is often between phenomenology, language, and how we are to conceptualize the world, which goes beyond the parameters of this work, but it sits in the background and requires more investigation. Nevertheless, my thesis of *When is evil* is well served, albeit asymmetrically (to reference Levinas) by both tendencies. Both secular and postsecular alike agree that evil is worthy of our philosophical energies and they both see evil as more than wrongdoing; it is the breaking point that shatters the distinction of the weak and strong reading and strains our ability to comprehend.

The goal of this work was to explore *When is evil* from mainly the secular perspective and show that Morton’s weak and strong reading of evil must be collapsed into only the strongest reading. I believe that secular approaches like Singer’s, Card’s, and Garrard’s show that evil is to be read *only* in the strong sense and would deny the weak reading as evil at all, similarly to Matuštík and Levinas. Evil is *when* there is atrocity or the worst possible opprobrium one can commit. It is not by accident nor simple moral failure that constitutes evil, but something that is beyond bad or immoral; it is the breaking point of comprehension where we simultaneously learn the limitlessness of action and become blindly ignorant to the responsibility we have to others.

The next step in my research will be to continue developing the *When is evil* approach and examining more perspectives on evil as well as investigating in much greater depth the continental or postsecular perspectives by expanding on Matuštík and Levinas and discussing

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works of Paul Ricoeur, Jean Naubert, and Jean Baudrillard. It would be interesting to explore
the implications of their views of secular thought and spirituality with Charles Taylor’s views
on modern spirituality.

As this chapter and this work ends, I marvel at the yearlong journey into the question
of evil. Evil is a complex and demanding idea that carries significant difficulty, not simply
because of the lengthy history, but because it requires one to explore deeply humanity’s
darkest places in thought and action. It is my hope that this work strengthens our response to
and enriches the discourse on evil.
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