Atrocity, Banality, Self-Deception

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When talking about *evil* we must make a fundamental choice about how we are to use the term. We may use it as half of the contrast "good versus evil," in which case it covers everything that is not good. 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. Call this the weak reading of *evil*: evil as wrongdoing. Or we may use it with the meaning suggested by "evil person," "really evil act," "the evil lurking in all of us," and other such idioms. 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. Call this the strong reading of *evil*: evil as atrocity (for more on this contrast see Morton [2004] and Card [2002]).

Kubarych, following Peck, thinks of evil in the strong way. Most of the time at any rate: Some of the philosophers, such as Kant, that he draws on are thinking of evil in the weak way, and some of his quotations are from the German, where good/bad/evil distinctions are not drawn in the same way as in English. He explores a general explanation of evil that seems to be targeted at the psychology of extremely abhorrent actions. But, I argue, his account is in danger of collapse in either of two directions. Depending on how we interpret Kubarych's account, it could turn out that it describes all wrongdoing as evil, or, making some different choices, it could turn out that there are no really evil people.

The strong reading of evil is definitely the most interesting and potentially fruitful. After all, we have no shortage of satisfying explanations of why people lie to get out of unwelcome appointments, steal to support their children or their drug habits, or defraud investors to become rich. But we do feel deeply puzzled by those who commit torture, serial murder, or genocide. We ask of these people not so much "Why did he do it?" as "How could he do it?" We feel the need of a philosophical or psychological theory that can give us even a slight handle of these people and their deeds. There are two risks associated with the project of explaining atrocity, though. The first is the risk of accepting unsatisfactory accounts, just because they purport to explain what we desperately want to understand. The second is the risk of supposing that there is a single explanation when the causes of the phenomenon are in fact too varied. On other topics these two risks have often combined to make people believe what seem to us now to be evident falsehoods. Humans have often for example wanted to know the causes of disease, and as a result have accepted blanket explanations, in terms of

evil spirits or lack of faith, that seem ludicrous to us now that we have a better grasp of the variety of factors that can cause our bodies to misfunction. So before asking naively "Why and how can people do these awful things?" we should ask "Is there a deeper causal unity here, beyond the fact that we react to these acts with horror?"

My suspicion is that there is not much unity, that it is asking too much to want a common profile to the psychology of serial killers, or of proponents of genocide, let alone a profile that applies across these and other categories. What we can do, I believe, is describe our concept of evil in such a way that we can leave some parameters to be filled in by a large variety of objective psychological factors. Even this runs the risk that the really relevant factors cannot be forced into the role that the philosophical account requires. In that case there would be a deep discrepancy between the way we think of perpetrators and the way perpetrators think: We should not rule this out. On my account, the conceptual commonality is that in actions that arouse horror in us some person has overcome a barrier to inflicting pain, death, or humiliation on another. (See Chapter 2 of Morton [2004] for a more careful formulation. I might say also that I would prefer to be able to say simply "barriers to inflicting humiliation," but I am unsure of making such a simpler account fit the real world cases.) The Peck–Kubarych account is similar. According to it the commonality is that evil actions result from creating barriers to knowing that one's act is wrong. Because the acts in question are in some cases quite obviously wrong, as any normally constituted person would see, the creation of such a barrier can amount to a deliberate, if usually unconscious, self-deception about one's motives and the nature of one's actions. Evil is a special kind of self-deception. (The view is reminiscent of Sartre's notion of bad faith, self-deception about one's deepest choices in life; see Sartre [1956 part III section 3].)

So the Peck–Kubarych account can be taken as trying to explain all our evasions of barriers to inflicting atrocity on one another in terms of creating barriers against knowing that what we are doing is wrong. Can this work? It is certainly a deep feature of human personality that we maintain our self-respect if at all possible, and so we do not readily admit that we are bad, stupid, ugly, or incompetent. So it is likely that very often people who commit atrocities will have ways of protecting themselves against realizing the nature of their acts. (Arendt [1963] describes some of these ways.) Note two facts about this explanation, though.

First, it does not explain why atrocities appeal to those who commit them, but rather describes a feature that we can expect many people who do commit atrocities to share. It is conceivable that all evil-doers deceive themselves about the awfulness of their acts, but that no evil-doers commit their acts because of self-deception. Conceivable but not likely, though. On the one hand it seems clear that some perpetrators are attracted to extremely wrong acts because they are so wrong, so wonderfully thrillingly, convention-defyingly wrong. This motivation is not only compatible with but depends on thinking of one's act as immoral. (A mundane analogy would be the pleasure of violating some shallow social norm: saying *fuck* in church or the like. We can all imagine a childish illicit thrill from acts like this; now, magnify the moral stakes.) And on the other hand it seems clear that the possibility of doing horrendous things crosses the minds of nearly all people, but that we do not explore these possibilities further in part because we wish to retain our moral self-respect. So a way of silencing that inner criticism would remove an important barrier to transforming dangerous fantasy into action. I have written "seems clear" for both possibilities; as plausible as the suggestions may be, what we really need are firm data about actual human motivation.

Second, there is a danger that the account will apply too widely. Evil-doers deceive themselves about the moral character of their actions. Does that mean that every person who is systematically mistaken about the rightness or wrongness of their acts is evil? Suppose that abortion is deeply wrong: Does it follow that everyone with a pro-choice bumper sticker is evil? Yet all those in favor of permissive abortion laws take steps to protect themselves against the threatening imag-

ery of fetuses as babies. Suppose that refusal to permit abortion is deeply wrong: Does it follow that everyone with a pro-life bumper sticker is evil? Yet all those in favor of stringent restrictions on abortion take steps to protect themselves against knowing too much about the horrors of amateur abortion or the fate of unwanted infants. We have here a moral dilemma that perhaps no person can touch without anaesthetizing themselves to some extent against the strength of the pulls in different directions. (For more on the strength of both pulls, see Dworkin [1994].) In fact every person deceives themselves about many things, nearly always including the moral character of some of their actions or motives. How many actions and how many motives depends a lot on what our moral duties in fact are. Each one of us living in rich countries could have saved many lives by contributing to famine relief the money we spend on luxuries. We know this in the abstract, but keep the knowledge safely hidden away from our want **<AQ1>** for fancy shoes and digital cameras.

This difficulty would be lessened if we could read the definition in terms of self-deception about whether our acts are evil rather than merely wrong or less than ideal. But this creates an obvious danger of circularity. We could avoid the circularity if we had a separate description of atrocity, and then we could formulate what I take to be the central idea of the Peck–Kubarych account, as the claim that evil motivation is essentially tied to self-deception about whether one's actions have atrocious consequences for others. And this is now a much more plausible position. There is still a danger of overgenerality, though. Most Americans keep out of the center of their minds the fact that the quality of life of the average Iraqi is significantly lower than it was before the U.S. invasion, that children are hungrier and life expectancy is shorter. Does this make the average American at least an accomplice in evil? It depends very delicately on how we define our terms. (Is it relevant whether the sufferings of Iraqis owing to American actions may result in a better future in the long term? Stalin's deportations might have resulted in a better future in the USSR. Perhaps—just perhaps—they even did reduce total suffering over decades. Should we even consider thinking this way? That is something that would have to be thought through carefully.)

Following the Peck–Kubarych line, then, involves us both in subtle questions about how precisely we are to formulate our definitions, and in hard-to-answer questions about which of the many motives found in human beings causes or blocks which others. These are real questions, and in pointing to their difficulty I do not mean to suggest that they should be evaded. Much better to face them and negotiate the delicate compromises between the little we know about human nature and the slight freedom we have to choose our concepts, than to impale ourselves on the other horn of the dilemma to which the account is liable. That is to construe malignant self-deception as an archetypal psychological complex in which the person is enabled to satisfy some impulse to atrocity solely by the capacity to close their eyes to the suffering of others or their own role in causing it. That complex would be so far from the psychology of any actual human person that it could serve only to reinforce the pernicious cultural stereotype of the evil doer as a diabolical force utterly different from the rest of us. To think that way is itself to enter into a kind of self-deception. It is to blind ourselves to the amount of horror in the world that results from the actions of normal, well-intentioned, kindly people, struggling to evaluate the actions they are agents or accomplices in.

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