

Peter Brian Barry, *Evil and Moral Psychology*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 198 pages. ISBN: 978-0-415-53290-7 (hbk.). Hardback: £ 80.00

Peter Brian Barry's book contributes to the recent philosophical literature on the secular concept of evil as a moral superlative or wrong intensifier. We use this concept of evil when we say things such as: Hitler was not merely a bad person, he was evil; or genocide (unlike lying) is not merely wrong, it is evil.

While there are many things that we might call evil, Barry's focus is on evil *persons*. The most common approach to developing a theory of evil persons is to start with a theory of evil *actions* and develop from that a theory of evil *persons*. According to this common approach we might say, for example, that evil persons are those who are disposed to perpetrate evil actions even in "conditions [free from undue pressures] that favor their autonomy" (p. 82). Barry rejects this common approach since he is "skeptical" of attempts to defend a theory of evil actions. His scepticism is based in the worry that any such theory must be committed to there being a single "unique property possessed by all but only evil actions" (p. 82), and Barry doubts that there is any such property. Unfortunately Barry fails to note that the most plausible theories of evil actions hold that there is not a single simple property, but rather a combination of properties (such as the perpetrator's motive and the harm inflicted) which together mark the presence of an evil action. Even so, Barry's approach is worth investigating and will particularly appeal to those who think that character and not action should be primary in moral theory.

Barry starts with the "modest proposal" that "the evil person is the morally worst sort of person" (p. 16). Drawing on Dante, Barry offers the following metaphor to illustrate his proposal. If we imagine an elevator which drops people off at different distinct levels of moral goodness and badness, evil people would exclusively occupy the very bottom level. No matter how bad a person is, if there is a morally worse sort of person than her then she can't be evil. This view invites the obvious worry (p. 17) that it follows from this that no one is evil, since we can always imagine a slightly nastier version of Hitler called Hitler\*, and a slightly even nastier version called Hitler\*\* and so on, such that no one, not even Hitler, is an evil person since there can always be a worse sort of person than him (namely Hitler\*) and so on. Barry's response is to argue that, given how bad a person Hitler already was and the extreme vices of character that he had, a slightly nastier version of Hitler would not be a worse *sort* of person, but would be (roughly) on a moral par as a person. This response might work well in some cases, but less well in others. Assume that Hitler was genuinely and consistently kind to all animals. It would seem that a Hitler\* who was identical to Hitler, except that he also loved torturing animals for fun, would be a worse *sort* of person. But even if Hitler\* is a worse sort of person than Hitler, that shouldn't undermine the fact that Hitler himself was still evil. A different guiding metaphor that could avoid this problem would be that of a *threshold*. Evil people are those who have crossed an extreme moral threshold, even if they cross that threshold to greater or lesser degrees.

Before presenting his theory in full, Barry defends two key claims. First, that there is a common *structure* to the characters of evil people; namely, that they possess "extremely

moral vicious states of character” (p.56). What makes a vice extreme? Vices can be extreme either by having “especially morally disvaluable objects”, such as a state of affairs in which undeserved persons are harmed, or by “*greatly*” disposing someone to “act wrongly” (p. 60). Malevolence, unlike timidity, has an especially morally disvaluable object and therefore counts as extreme in the first sense. If one’s malevolence also greatly disposes one to act wrongly, then it is an extreme vice in both senses. Evil persons, Barry argues, have extreme vices in both senses. This view allows that evil persons can have a good side and still be evil, provided they have extreme vices. But while it is possible that evil persons have a good side, given that virtues and vices tend to “cluster”, an evil person is at best likely to have only “modest virtue” (p. 60). Second, that there is a common *content* to the characters of evil persons. While different evil people might have different vices, there is one “master vice” (p. 79), cruelty, which all evil people have.

Barry’s full theory of evil persons has three parts all of which must be satisfied (p. 87). First, that an evil person must be both weakly receptive and reactive to moral reasons for action. This is another way of saying that evil persons must be *moral* agents, since if they are not then they can hardly deserve our worst term of *moral* condemnation. Second, that an evil person must be “strongly and highly fixedly disposed to act wrongly” even under conditions that favour his autonomy. A person will only be so disposed if he has extreme vices in both senses. Third, “when faced with choices that a morally decent person would find painful” (p.87), an evil person will tend to lack the feelings, such as contrition, which barely decent people will tend to have.

Here are three possible counterexamples to this theory. First, that of a moral agent who is strongly and highly fixedly disposed under conditions that favour his autonomy to perpetrate *trivial* wrongs, such as stealing tiny amounts of money, and feels no contrition about doing so. Such an agent does not seem to be an evil person. One response to this example is to modify the second condition to specify that an evil person is disposed not merely to act wrongly but to act *evilly*. However, this response would make the theory dependent on a theory of evil actions, which Barry wishes to avoid. An alternative response is to modify the second condition to make explicit the earlier claim that an evil person must at least have the extreme vice of cruelty. An agent disposed to perpetrate only trivial wrongs probably lacks extreme cruelty. But this response might make the theory too restrictive, since some evil persons might be callous and vindictive without being cruel. The second counterexample is that of a mildly contrite Hitler. My intuition is that even if Hitler tended to be mildly contrite about at least some of his wrongful actions, such as those that led to German (but not Jewish) deaths, this would not be enough to undermine the claim that he is an evil person given the great harms he is responsible for. The third counterexample is that of a moral agent, call him Stan, who is highly and fixedly disposed to act wrongly *only* in situations where he is faced with choices that a morally decent person would find *not* painful but very easy, and who feels no contrition. For example, when faced with the choice of whether or not to torture an innocent child for fun, the morally decent person finds the choice not to torture to be, not painful, but very easy. Someone, such as Stan, who *is* disposed to

torture in such situations and who feels no contrition about it seems to be an evil person, yet Barry's theory cannot accommodate this intuition without modifying his third condition.

After presenting his theory of evil personhood, Barry applies his theory to a discussion of a number of issues. First to moral responsibility, where Barry addresses the concern that a Strawsonian account of moral responsibility in terms of reactive attitudes can't make sense of the moral responsibility of evil persons. Next to abnormal psychology, where Barry argues that at least some clinical psychopaths are in fact morally responsible agents who are reactive and receptive to moral reasons and therefore can count as key examples of evil persons. Finally to capital punishment, where he argues for the conditional claim that *if* capital punishment is morally permissible then it is morally permissible to be used on evil criminals. Although in this last case Barry is explicit that evil persons should not be put to death for trivial crimes, a theory of evil actions could help Barry make his claim more clearly by allowing him to say that *if* capital punishment is morally permissible then it is morally permissible to be used on evil persons who commit criminal evil actions.

Overall, this book makes an original contribution to the philosophical literature on evil in general and evil persons in particular. I recommend this book to anyone interested in understanding the very worst sorts of persons.

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