The Problems with Evil

Paul Formosa
University of Queensland, Australia.
Email: p.formosa@uq.edu.au

Introduction

The concept of evil has been an unpopular one in much political and ethical thought of the twentieth century.[1] There are undoubtedly a number of historical reasons for this (Neiman, 2002). However, there have been of late an ever increasing number of articles and books that have once again taken the concept of evil seriously. Is this movement to be applauded or abandoned? One way to justify and argue for the abandonment of such projects is by pointing to the many problems *with* the concept of evil. It was surely because of some of these problems that the concept of evil fell out of favour in the first place. The standard grievances brought against the very concept of evil include: that it has no proper place in secular political and ethical discourses; that it is too overloaded with metaphysical, cultural and theological baggage to be of any use; that it is a demonising term of hatred that leads to violence; that it is necessarily linked with outdated notions related to body and sexuality; that it only hinders rather than aids our ability to understand; and that it is an 'irrational' concept which only 'mystifies' and 'obscures' discussions of political and ethical issues. In other words, it is either unethical, unpolitical, imprudent, or no longer relevant to use the concept of evil. I shall seek to argue in defence of the concept of evil against these charges. The upshot of this argument is that the language and concept of evil has a justified and important role to play in political and ethical discourses.

Ethics and the Concept of Evil

Traditionally all of life's 'minuses' have been lumped together under the rubric of evil. In its broadest sense evil can cover 'everything adverse in human lives' from 'wars and massacres' to 'drought and plague' (Garrard, 2002, 320). This is the axiological sense of evil, and it is in this sense that evil takes on its familiar role as the opposite or lack of good. Here the terms evil and bad are essentially equivalent. However, we use evil not only in an axiological sense, but also in a moral sense. The moral sense of the term evil is itself used in two further senses. Firstly, it is used 'to refer to the whole range of human immorality' (Garrard, 2002, 320). In this sense

the terms evil and wrong are essentially equivalent. Secondly, it is used in a more restricted sense when we say things like: 'What Hitler did was not merely wrong, it was evil'. Moral evil refers to those acts performed by moral agents that are beyond the pale of *mere* wrongdoing. For example, what Hitler did was not merely wrong, it was evil, whereas failing to keep a promise may be wrong, but it certainly isn't evil. Evil acts are those acts that go significantly beyond the pale of mere wrongdoing, and for this reason, we judge them to be worthy of our very strongest moral condemnations.[2] No other term can substitute here for 'evil'. To say that what Hitler did was merely 'wrong' or 'bad' completely fails to convey the appropriate moral gravity of Hitler's actions.[3] To say that Hitler was merely 'aggressive', 'violent' or 'destructive' is only to *describe*, rather than normatively *condemn*, what he did. What Hitler did was evil, and we need to hold on to this language.

As such, evil does have an essential role to play in secular ethical discourses. That role is to name and condemn, in the strongest possible moral terms, the very worst actions of which humans are capable. We need the strong and stark language of evil in order properly to confront the depths of depravity to which humans can sink. Hence, even though the term evil has metaphysical, cultural and theological baggage, this baggage does not render the term useless. Evil begins with no more baggage than is attached to terms like 'good', and no one is suggesting that we rid ourselves of that concept. However, the baggage attached to evil does force us to re-think and clarify, clearly and precisely, just what the concept of evil does and does not entail. We need to do this so that the language of evil can unambiguously play the role that we need it to play in our ethical and political discourses.

It is some of the extra baggage attached to the concept of evil that has led some scholars to think that evil is an 'out-dated' or 'unhealthy' concept. The worry here arises out of out-dated (and largely Christian) equations of evil (or sin) with sexuality. Mary Midgley (1984) notes that much of the reaction against the concept of evil arises from its equation with sin, and in turn the equation of sin with sexuality. Thus at 'a popular level', when people say that evil is 'out-dated', they mean that 'sexual activity has been shown not to be sinful' (Midgley, 1984, 11). We might add to this list the likes of 'sex outside marriage, homosexuality, masturbation, work on Sunday, collecting interest on loans, [and] playing cards,' which at one time or another have all been called evil (Kekes, 2005, 130). However, it is not the concept of evil itself that is out-dated, but rather the erroneous

judgments about the sorts of acts that belong under that term. We should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Evil acts are not those acts that 'sinfully' transgress conventional sexual and social customs, but rather those acts that (without consent) wrongly inflict life-wrecking harm and suffering on others. Moral evil refers to acts like torture, on a small-scale, and genocide, on a large-scale. To call such acts evil is not out-dated.

Friedrich Nietzsche expresses the concern that the concept of evil has often been deployed, at least in the Christian tradition, to limit human flourishing. The reason for this, according to Nietzsche, is that 'evil' embodies the so-called slave's unhealthy '*ressentiment*' of their noble and healthy masters. Such '*ressentiment*' leads to the devaluing of things like body, sexuality, robustness, strength, power and anything else above the herd-mentality, as evil (Nietzsche, 2000). While I agree with Nietzsche's concerns about condemning power and the like as intrinsically evil, the solution is not to move beyond good and evil, but to make clear what evil does and does not refer to. When we think of evil in terms of torture and genocide, rather than body and sexuality, then it is clear that preventing evil does not harm human flourishing. Indeed, it does quite opposite. It is evil, by violating 'the limits that protect minimum conditions of human well-being,' which 'creative lives' depend on as much as 'insipid ones', which suffocates human excellence (Kekes, 2005, 130). A world with less murder, rape, torture and genocide is a world in which human creativity, excellence and freedom are more, not less, likely to flourish and prosper.

Politics, Evil and the Problem of Demonising

Perhaps the best and strongest argument for desisting in using the language of evil is that 'thinking in terms of evil tends to demonise others,' and the demonisation of others tends to lead to 'violence and destruction' (Geddes, 2001, 1; Card, 2002, 43; Morton, 2004, 4-6). If thinking in terms of evil tends to lead to evil, then perhaps we best stay away from the concept altogether (Cole, 2006, 235-6).

The demonising of others comes in various degrees. At its worst, demonising involves thinking of others as inherently evil. To demonise others to such an extent involves more than *mere* hatred, for while we may hate our rivals, we do not think of them as *evil*. To demonise, at its worst, is to embrace a *dehumanising* hatred of another person, group, collective or type, and one of the ways that we commonly express such strong demonisation is through the term 'evil'.[4] To dehumanise others

is to see them as not worthy of basic human respect – after all, they are akin to evil demons, and so they are too different and too inhuman to deserve the sort of respect that we 'normal' humans deserve. One need not hold on to the usual rules when faced with a demonic opponent. Indeed, to strike first, indiscriminately to 'wipe out the evil ones,' is really no more than self-defence.[5] But thinking in this way can make *us* think like evildoers.

While we can demonise individuals, demonising only becomes a significant and large-scale problem when the hatred it encapsulates is both dehumanising and shared by a group of people who direct it at another group of people. For this reason, I focus here only on group demonisation, at its worst, of other groups. Such group demonising serves the function of indiscriminately dehumanising the members of another group *en masse*. Of course, we never demonise our *own* group, but always *other* alien or foreign groups – for we all know that *we* are not inhuman demons. Demonising thus becomes an important problem when we move from ethical to political discourses and think in terms of groups rather than individuals. While, if my arguments from the previous section hold, evil has an important role to play in ethical discourses, does it also have a role to play in political discourses (if we can even make a strong distinction here)? In order to answer this challenge, I shall argue that to use the language of evil is not to *necessarily* demonise others.

In any case, the question we still need to ask is: why do we demonise? Sigmund Freud (2004, 64-5) argues that the demonising of outsiders is an important outlet for humanity's aggressive tendencies. If humans universally have aggressive tendencies, as Freud suggests, then that aggression must be directed towards those outside one's own group, if one's own group is to remain harmoniously bound together. As such, far from being surprised, Freud saw it as almost a psychological necessity that the Nazis, in order to bind the German people together, directed hatred towards some foreign group-identity that they portrayed as challenging the very existence of the Nazi group-identity.[6] Arne Vetlesen (2005, 295) similarly argues that it is fear and insecurity about identity which 'when [politically] seized upon, rhetorically manipulated, and channelled,' largely drives forward the process of demonising. David Wong (2006, 133) examines the psychological evidence of human tendencies to: favour one's own 'in-group' in order to boost self-esteem; recognise the diversity of one's own in-group, but see *all* the members of an 'out-group' as 'similar and interchangeable'; and explain the negative behaviour of those

in out-groups in terms of bad personality traits, but those in in-groups in terms of situational factors.[7] The logic of demonising is clear - when 'we' do badly it is because of a bad situation, but when 'they' do badly it is because they are bad people.[8] Furthermore, since 'they' are all the 'same', if a few of them act badly, then they must all be bad.[9]

Demonising, in part, is fuelled by a fear that the other will destroy not only us, but our identity, our 'way of life', and our deepest values. This fear and insecurity is part of what makes demonising hatred so strong, for it is not only oneself, but what one values most deeply, that is perceived to be under threat. In times of social, political, or economic upheaval, such a threat is likely to be felt more acutely (Staub, 2003, 419). This leads to a strongly felt difference of identity, which is perhaps the source of the idea that *all* the members of a demonised group are inhuman. For if 'we' are human, and 'they' (who are all the 'same') do not share and are even hostile to our identity and values, then 'they' must be inhuman.

Vetlesen (2005) argues that it is no mere coincidence that the twentieth century has been the century of both genocide and what he calls the 'discontented modern self'. The discontents of the modern self are based in 'its insecurities and fears upon being freed … from collective structures and long-lasting moral and social bonds' (Vetlesen, 2005, 293). However, it is important not to overemphasise this link. A demonising fear and hatred of others, a defining of the political 'we' in terms of the challenges posed by those groups with different and competing (in particular religious) identities, has a history far older than that of the modern self. While, perhaps, the modern self is *more* insecure than the 'pre-modern' self, humanity has always been beset by more than enough insecurity about other groups or tribes, coupled with psychological and aggressive tendencies, to initiate a demonising hatred of others. Demonising is not new, although the size of groups who share a common identity has increased, in line with the rise and expansion of the nation-state and international associations, and this has made demonising a more widespread and potentially dangerous phenomenon than ever before.

To demonise at the group-level is to declare one's own group to be all good and the other group to be all evil. As such, the process of demonising, due to its dehumanising element, necessarily employs what I shall call a 'Manichean imagery'. Manichaeism is (simplistically stated) the doctrine that good and evil are separate and distinct 'forces' and the world is their battlefield (Midgley, 1984, 17-8). We

employ Manichean imagery when we think of all evildoers as belonging to something like an alien species, or when we think of some groups (our own) as the embodiment of 'pure' good and other groups (not our own) as the embodiment of 'pure' evil.

Such Manichean imagery is deployed politically when phrases like a war between 'good and evil' are used. We can see this imagery at play in George W. Bush's employment of what Peter Singer (2004) calls the 'American-Manichean tradition,' in his use of the term 'evil' to demonise America's enemies in the so-called 'war on terror', while simultaneously proclaiming America to be 'genuinely good'.[10] Hitler and the Nazis employed similar demonising language,[11] as illustrated in the following sickening SS pamphlet:

> From a biological point of view he [the Jew] seems completely normal… But in fact he is a completely different creature, a horror. He only looks human, with a human face, but his spirit is lower than that of an animal. A terrible chaos runs rampant in this creature, an awful urge for destruction, primitive desires, unparalleled evil, a monster, subhuman (Glover, 2001, 339).

The Nazis depicted 'the living shape of the Jew' as the 'personification of the devil' and 'the symbol of all evil' (Landau, 1998, 164), while simultaneously depicting the living shape of the Aryan as the symbol of all good (Haas, 1988, 176). Such Manichean imagery reoccurred in the Rwandan genocide, where Hutu party officials 'described Tutsis as devils – horns, hoofs, tails and all – and gave the order to kill them' (Gourevitch, 1998, 94).

Given such dangerous political rhetoric, it is no wonder people cringe and feel extremely uncomfortable with the language of evil when they hear it used in this way. The term 'evil', when employed in this Manichean sense as part of the process of dehumanising an opponent, has the sorts of connotations and baggage that many of us would like to leave behind. Indeed, one may wish to shun altogether the use of the term 'evil', when it is employed as a collective term in political discourse, as decidedly unpolitical.

However, interestingly enough, one of the first people to object to the use of the concept of evil on the grounds that it is unpolitical was Carl Schmitt (1996). Schmitt argues that because, under the influence of 'humanism', we misconceive the nature of the political, we come to see our enemies as evil, inhuman monsters. As such, we 'monopolise' the term 'humanity' for ourselves and deny it to the 'evil' enemy. This 'denying the enemy the quality of being human and declaring him to be

an outlaw of humanity' has 'incalculable effects' and 'a war can thereby be driven to the most extreme inhumanity' (Schmitt, 1996, 54).[12] Thus far, Schmitt fairly accurately describes the phenomenon of demonising and locates its origins in the humanistic misconception of the nature of the political.

Whether or not Schmitt's claims about humanism and the nature of the political are correct, Schmitt is mistaken to locate the origin and cause of demonising in purely political phenomena. The thought is: get rid of the language of evil from the political and we will get rid of demonising. It is this same thought that makes us wish to rid ourselves of the language of evil when we hear political leaders such as Bush deploying it in a demonising fashion. The error with this line of reasoning is that the solution offered, namely getting rid of the language of evil, will not fix the problem, which is the demonising of outsiders. And it will not fix the problem because the origins of demonising are to be found in part, as I have already argued, in human psychological tendencies. These tendencies are not created, but merely inflamed and directed, by political rhetoric about the 'inhuman evil enemy'. Even without political fuel, the fires of demonising can burn of their own accord.

Rather than give up the very concept of evil as a tool for thinking about human actions altogether, we can instead see that to use evil as a tool for demonising is never appropriate, but this does not mean that such a tool cannot be used for other useful purposes. While we may still possess psychological tendencies toward demonising outsiders, these tendencies can (perhaps) be counteracted by a concept of evil that undermines the Manichaean imagery that fuels demonising. To understand evil, and not to pretend that it doesn't exist through silence, is the way to undermine the appeal of demonising. There are at least two ways to create a strong cleavage between using the term evil appropriately and using it in a demonising fashion. Both involve removing the demonising thrust and Manichean imagery from the very concept of evil.

Firstly, the entire process of demonising, with its Manichaean imagery, is premised on the view that evildoers are completely unlike us. Their acts are inhuman, therefore they are inhuman, and this means that we 'good' humans become the sole bearers of humanity. The way to undercut the force behind such a position is to show that evildoers are not inhuman, even if their actions are. Evil, in other words, is an all-too-human phenomenon. There is a weak and a strong way to articulate this claim.

Weakly, it is enough to argue that given a bad enough situation, 'normal' humans can and will perpetrate evil. As was noted above, part of what fuels demonising is a downplaying of the importance of situational factors when it comes to explaining the behaviour of outsiders. Part of redressing this problem is to pay close attention to these factors.[13] I argue elsewhere in depth (Formosa, 2007b, 66-7) that, put in an 'evil-encouraging situation', it simply is an unfortunate fact that many 'normal' humans can and will head down the path towards evil. The likes of war, injustice, poverty, lack of education and opportunities, to name but a few, are the sorts of situations that tend to encourage evil, whereas the absence of these conditions tends to discourage evil. The infamous Milgram experiments also show us how authoritarian situations can lead 'normal' people to perform horrifying acts (Formosa, 2007b, 65-6). Similarly, Hannah Arendt's (1965) famous study of Adolf Eichmann illustrates how 'normal' people, with banal, everyday motives, such as to do their job well and gain promotion, can (in certain circumstances) perpetrate the most radically evil acts. Thus 'normal' humans, in tough moral situations, can perpetrate evil.

More strongly, it can be argued that, above and beyond situational factors, there are eradicable human tendencies towards evil. Freud (2004, 61) draws upon psychoanalysis to argue that 'man is a wolf to man', and that aggressive tendencies towards violence and evil are a natural part of human nature.[14] Georges Bataille (1986, 186) draws upon anthropological evidence to argue that humanity has a 'double nature', such that the same person who is 'orderly and decent' in one circumstance, can just as well practice 'pillage and arson, murder, violence and torture' in another. As Bataille (1986, 186) puts it, all 'savages or barbarians' are capable of decency and civility, just as all 'civilised' people are capable of barbarism and savagery. John Kekes argues that all humans naturally have potentialities towards both good and evil independently of (but influenced by) external circumstances. Kekes (2005, 171) claims that this propensity to evil

> is not the result of a psychological malfunction, corruption by external influences, or a biological defect. It is a property as natural to human beings as ferocity is to sharks…
>
> These are the familiar vices: cruelty, aggression, greed, selfishness, [envy] and the like.[15]

Even a perfectly just political state, combined with the most enlightening education, cannot ever completely eradicate the likes of greed, selfishness and envy. As long as we are human, we will at times envy those who are better than we are, and greedily

want more than is our due, and these vices can form the basis of eradicable tendencies toward evil. Immanuel Kant (1996) argues more generally that all humans, the very best no less than the very worst, have an impure disposition that is indicative of a universal human propensity towards wrongdoing and even evil (Formosa, 2007c). For Kant, to be human is to be frail, impure and corrupt. As humans, evil is beyond none of us, and even the very best of situations will not prevent all human evil.

Both the weak and strong arguments, alone or in combination, support the view that all humans, at least if in certain situations, are naturally torn between the potential to be either good or evil. While most people, most of the time, do not perpetrate evil acts, as humans, the possibility and potential to do so is not absolutely beyond most of us. There is a false sense of righteousness, based on self-deception and complacency, underlying the idea that 'we' are all good and that evil is *constitutively* beyond us. This dangerous idea encapsulates the illusion that evil is entirely eradicable because 'we' are all good, and if we could only eradicate all of 'them', then evil would be no more. Such dangerous self-righteousness, which is simply the other face of demonising, has all too often led the 'fight against evil' to be driven to the most evil extremes.

Indeed, the only way to *completely* eradicate evil is to eradicate humanity. According to Arendt, totalitarianism and the death factories that it spawned sought to do just this, by radically killing off what makes us persons, and thereby making humanity itself superfluous.[16] The *Mussulman* in the death camps were not *able* to perpetrate evil because their very agency, spontaneity and moral personality had been (at least temporarily) stripped away from them through barbaric ill-treatment (Levi, 1959). While transforming all humans into *Mussulman* is one way of eradicating the human capacity to perpetrate evil, it does so at the expense of perpetrating the most radical evil in the process. This is not the path the fight against evil should ever go down.

The way to fight evil, without perpetrating evil, might seem to be to not brutally pursue the illusion that we can eliminate all the 'evil ones', but instead critically challenge prevailing situations, institutions, social beliefs and customs, wherever those are likely to encourage evil. But not all evil-encouraging situations, beliefs, institutions and the like should or can be eradicated. While unjust inequalities should arguably be rectified (assuming that some inequalities are

unjust), it would be unjust to rectify just inequalities, such as the natural differences between people. Indeed, Arendt argues that the most perfect 'equality' was obtained in the Nazi death camps, where all, young or old, weak or strong, were indiscriminately stripped of their personality and reduced to the lowest common denominator – identical organic bundles of reactions. But the imposition of such 'equality' is itself an instance of the most extreme evil.

Even the most ideal state cannot eradicate *all* the roots of evil. There will always be some humans who will feel envy toward those who are (even deservedly) better than them, even if only physically or socially,[17] who will hate those who are different or who compete with them for sexual partners or who spurn them in love, who will at times feel aggression, anger, rebelliousness, boredom, greed, selfishness and malice. And all or any of these, which are part of what makes us human, can be sufficient incentives, for some frail and impure persons in certain situations, to perpetrate evil acts. There are many roots of evil, and while some of these roots have their origins in regrettable situations that can be rectified, others have their origins in what *makes* us human. And this we cannot eradicate without eradicating our very humanity.[18] As such, it is either a fool's dream or an evil nightmare to think that we can completely eradicate evil from the human world.[19]

It is thus misleading to think that human nature has only propensities toward goodness, so that those who are not good cannot be of the same nature as the rest of 'us'. This undercuts the Manichean imagery which fuels demonisation – we are all humans, and as humans, we all bear the possibility of tremendous good, no less than horrendous evil. Humanity is not composed of two distinct opposites, those with 'horns on their heads' and those with 'wings on their backs'. To understand that the human moral condition is to live with propensities to both good and evil is to cut evil free from the constraints of Manichaean imagery.

Secondly, it is always inappropriate to use the term evil to designate all the members of a group, in cases where membership of that group cannot be either gained or dissolved by a voluntary act. To be a member of a national body politic, racial or cultural group, is not a matter of choice. We are, by and large, born into these groups and leave them only by dying.[20] To call such groups evil is always inappropriate, for it is to call someone evil solely because of their membership in a group that they did not freely join and cannot freely leave. People can be called evil (or good) because of what they do, or intend to do, but not simply because they are

born into a certain group. Thus it is always wrong to indiscriminately call all the members of a national, ethnic, religious or cultural group, 'evil' (or 'good'), just *because* they are a member of that group. This undercuts the Manichaean imagery from both sides. As such, to call, for example, the Jews as a people 'evil' and the Aryans as a people 'good', as the Nazis did, or to think of the 'new global order' in terms of a world which 'is divided into good and evil' (Cole, 2006, 2), is simply not a cogent use of the concept of evil. The world order does not divide into such morally neat categories, but this does not mean that certain *acts*, like genocide, should not be called 'evil', whoever perpetrates them, a point I return to later.[21]

However, it may, with great care and judgment, sometimes be reasonable to label as evil the members of a *voluntary* associational group, such as the Nazi party, a criminal gang, or Al-Qaeda, *because* they are members of that group. For we are calling such people evil not because they are somehow completely different in kind to us, and so not worthy of basic human respect, but because they have freely chosen to associate themselves with an organisation or party that engages in and supports evil acts. However, this does not imply that *we* are all good. Indeed the past misdeeds of the West, including Colonialism, numerous unjust wars, and the recent torture scandals associated with Abu Ghraib and the so-called 'war on terror', should undermine any sense of Western moral self-righteousness.

By ridding evil of its Manichean imagery, we are able to deal with another common complaint against evil, namely that it is an 'irrational' concept that only 'mystifies' and 'obscures' discussions of political and ethical issues, as it precludes any attempt at understanding.[22] The worry here is that evil sometimes acts like a 'black box' that precludes any attempt at comprehending the nuances of individual acts of evil. They are evil, that is why they did it, and there is nothing more to be said. We find evil deployed in this way, according to Terry Eagleton (2003), in the so-called 'war on terror', where evil is used to 'shut down thought' in order to avoid the need for any 'political explanation' of terrorism. As Eagleton (2003, 141) explains: 'If terrorists are simply Satanic, then you do not need to investigate what lies behind their atrocious acts of violence… The word 'evil' transfers the question from this mundane realm to a sinisterly metaphysical one'. But is to deploy the concept of evil, at least politically, necessarily to shut down thought?[23]

The reason why we might think that the evildoer per se is beyond our powers of human understanding is if we are held captive by the Manichean view that

evildoers are somehow completely different in kind from us 'normal and good humans'. No human could ever do such evil things, and thus no human could ever understand why such evil things are done. I have argued above that the first part of this claim is false. Weakly, 'normal' humans in bad situations can do evil and, strongly, even 'normal' humans have tendencies toward evil, above and beyond situational influences, because of our very nature as human beings. While evildoers go, in important moral ways, far further down the path of wrongdoing than most of the rest of us dare (or wish to) tread (under normal circumstances), the path they tread is not an altogether different one, even if the extremes down which they venture are unusually reprehensible. As such, there is no strong prima facie reason why we cannot understand evil behaviour as well as any other type of human behaviour (Formosa, 2007b).

When we understand that evil acts are perpetrated for all sorts of reasons and in all sorts of situations, it is clear that the concept of evil should act as the *opposite* of a black box. This is because to understand why evil occurs we need to pay close attention to the nuances of individual cases. The deployment of the term evil should stimulate thought, and not shut it down, for acts of evil are the sorts of acts that should raise our deepest moral concern. And our moral concern should be to understand why such evil acts occur, so that we might prevent or minimise future recurrences of that type of evil. We do not cloud our understanding by thinking of the very worst human acts in terms of evil. Rather the opposite is the case - we would cloud our understanding if we *didn't* think of such acts in terms of evil, for in so doing we would misunderstand the moral gravity of such horrendous acts. To call an evil act, like genocide or war-rape, anything less than 'evil', is to actively misconceive the moral significance of such offences.

Evil and Taboo

The Manichean imagery that has infected our understanding of evil has also lent the 'evil person' a certain unnatural aura, or an element of 'taboo', in Freud's sense. Freud (1946, 32, 44) argues that a person who violates a taboo become themselves taboo, and this is why evildoers (as taboo breakers) can seem 'sacred, above the ordinary, and at the same time dangerous, unclean and mysterious'. The same impulse to see evildoers as completely different in kind, which can lead to demonising, can also lead to glorifying evil and evildoers, by making the evildoer

seem 'superhuman', sacred and above the ordinary. While Freud locates taboos as part of an earlier stage of human development, something of this more 'primitive' mode of relating to the evildoer remains today.

Freud's work helps us to understand why we can respond to evil with both hatred and adulation. While the former response seems understandable and even appropriate, the latter is more puzzling. Why is there a tendency to glorify evil and evildoers? The answer we get from Freud (1946, 32, 44) is clear – they do what we (unconsciously) want to do, but which we lack the 'strength' or 'courage' to do. For this reason the example of the taboo-breaker is 'contagious,' as they have done something forbidden to us, but which we also (unconsciously) desire to do. This is why we can revere, envy, adore and glorify the taboo-breaker, for they act upon (unconscious) desires that we share but do not satisfy, as well as hate and resent them, for they unfairly violate norms that we have all agreed not to violate.

While, for example, some neo-Nazis have, unfortunately, found the example of Hitler contagious and worthy of imitation, this is not true of all evildoers in general. This is clear if we turn our gaze from Hitler to Eichmann, the petty bureaucrat. Who would want to imitate Eichmann? Presumably no one. When we think of Eichmann, the banal nobody, thoughtlessly following rules, we find no hint of the romantic connotations of 'greatness' often associated with evil and personified so majestically by Milton's Satan and Melville's Ahab. Indeed, in Nazi Germany greatness was required *not* to perpetrate evil. When evil becomes 'normalised' it requires strength to do good, as it is good and not evil that becomes 'tempting' for the reason that it is forbidden (Arendt, 1965, 150).

Clearly not all evildoers are banal nobodies who, like Eichmann, lack character (Formosa, 2006, 514-5). The attempt to paint all evildoers as impotent, petty and small characters is not realistic. The attempt to do so gains its inspiration, perhaps, from rejecting a dualistic Manichean imagery and instead adopting a monistic privation imagery. On this view, there is but one force, good, ruling the world, and as such evil is simply a lack of good. Good is here equated with being, so that a complete absence of good (i.e. pure evil) would be nothing, literally non-being.[24] Hence the more evil the person, the lesser they are. The most evil person lacks character and personality altogether - they are literally nobodies.[25] Evil is nothing but a pathetic weakness, parasitic upon strength and goodness.

However, this imagery is also misleading. The mistake here is to confuse the question of the ontological status of evil in its axiological sense (i.e. is evil a lack of good or something in its own right?), with the question of the personality of human beings who repeatedly perpetrate evil acts. Hitler, like Ahab, had a certain charisma and strength of personality. He had character, even if that character was evil.[26] No small and pathetic person can, as John Silber (1960, cxxix) puts it, lead a 'civilised nation to moral disaster and a continent to ruin'. Hitler was able to inspire others, often through sheer personality, to share his warped and perverted vision of the world. Whatever Hitler was, he was not weakness personified. But if evil is not weakness, do we not unnecessarily add to the 'glory' of such 'great' evildoers simply by discussing and thinking about evil? Are such examples too contagious to be allowed to see the light of day?

Part of the reason, no doubt, that Hitler's example is for some 'alluring' and 'exciting' is because of the 'thrill of evil' (even those who rightly condemn Hitler may still, even if they don't admit it, feel a certain 'fascination' with his character and crimes).[27] In contrast, Eichmann got no thrill from his evil, and there is nothing thrilling about either him or his actions. This is part of what Arendt meant by the 'banality of evil'. However, evil can at times be thrilling and anything but banal. Bataille has argued that there is a certain erotic thrill in knowingly violating society's taboos. Kekes (2005, 113) examines how boredom can lead to evil, as evil can provide a thrill that can appease one's boredom. Crime, which in its worst manifestations can become evil, is often not required for mere subsistence, but can become thrilling and exciting and pursued for this reason. It can make the toil of the everyday work-world seem, by comparison, boring and mundane.

The way to respond to the allures of evil is not to remain silent, in the hope that no one will notice, but actively to remove the attractive sheen from evil. There are two ways to do this – make evil acts seem less 'attractive' and make evildoers seem less 'great'. The way to make evil acts seem less 'attractive' is to emphasise the fact that evil acts are ugly, because they corrupt the world morally by their mere presence, and lower the esteem with which we can regard our own humanity.[28] This leads to a focus, not on the perpetrator's psychology, but on the victim's suffering and the ugly, horrifying and life-wrecking injuries that they are forced to wrongly endure. This focus, at least for those who can muster even the smallest amount of sympathy for others, can remove a considerable amount of the 'attractiveness' from

evil. Of course, the chief way society has always made evil seem unattractive is through punishment. While there is much debate about how effective a deterrent punishment is, it is undeniable that punishment is a deterrent, and to the extent that it is a deterrent, it makes punishable offences seem less attractive.[29] Further, making other alternatives more attractive can make the potential thrill of evil seem less alluring. Education and opportunities can make creative intellectual, social, cultural and artistic endeavors seem far more appealing than inflicting life-wrecking harm on others for a 'quick thrill'.

The way to make evildoers seem less 'great' is to make their example look less worthy of imitation. We can find an element of 'greatness' in the evildoer only to the extent that we can identify with them and endorse the goals and desires that drove them to become evil in the first place. It just may be the case, for example, that a conscious or unconscious hatred of difference and otherness is endemic to humanity. Freud might be right – perhaps a necessary part of what binds us together as groups is hatred of those outside that group. The way, then, to undermine any 'greatness' about those, like Hitler, who act on such a demonising hatred of outsiders, is to undermine the likelihood that people can *consciously* identify with and endorse such hatred, even if they *unconsciously* share it. We can do this by showing that the fear of difference that underlies such hatred is without foundation and the Manichean imagery that fuels it is misguided. We can add to this effect, for example, by criticising Hitler's ideology and exposing its lack of foundation, so as to make its adherent look foolish for believing such an implausible, racist mishmash. It is not without reason that Arendt makes Eichmann look like a fool, for the fool is an object of mockery and not imitation.

The 'sacredness' of the taboo-breaker has also led to a certain mythologising of evil. Giorgio Agamben (1999, 32) argues that to 'glorify and adore' God is to say that His nature is incomprehensible, unsayable and unspeakable. But 'to say that Auschwitz is 'unsayable' or 'incomprehensible' is equivalent to *euphemein*, to adoring in silence, as one does with a God. Regardless of one's intention, this contributes to its glory'. And likewise with all evil. If Agamben is right, to leave evil unsaid only gives evil a glow of incomprehensible 'sacredness'. To pass over evil in silence, to employ a rhetoric of inexpressibility in the face of evil, is only to mythologise and glorify evil. Arendt, perhaps more than any other philosopher, has sought to avoid this trap (Nieman, 2001, 88-9).

However, against Agamben it can be argued that to employ the rhetoric of inexpressibility is not to glorify evil or evildoers. Rather, it is simply to give voice to a morally appropriate reaction that the horrors of large-scale evils invoke. When we bring ourselves face to face with immense evil, when we read about and imagine the inner workings of a Nazi death camp, we cannot but help to feel horror mingled with shame, outrage and disgust. In the face of such moral enormities, what can we possibly say? Whatever we say will never be enough, and it is this thought that tends to give rise to the rhetoric of inexpressibility. But while we can never say enough, we can say too little. We do the victims and survivors of atrocities no favours by framing our response to evil in terms of utter incomprehensibility. The only group that gains from a reluctance to think, comprehend, speak, document and ultimately judge large-scale evils in a thorough, honest and open way, are the perpetrators of that evil. The rhetoric of inexpressibility tends to cloud such an important task by cloaking large-scale evils in a sort of incomprehensible 'sacred' mist that does nothing but conceal the truth of what happened, and why it happened, from seeing the full light of day.

To say that Auschwitz is unsayable or that evil is inexpressible, is not in itself, as Agamben suggests, *equivalent* to adoring in silence. But such a move inevitably plays into the hands of those who wish to glorify and worship evil, as it invests evildoers with the sort of 'sacred' veneer that they often seek for themselves.[30] This, in effect, can also feed the illusion that 'we' humans are incapable of evil, by inadvertently peddling the comforting myth that it takes some sort of fundamentally inhuman monster, who is beyond the powers of human comprehension, to perpetrate evil. This, whatever one's intention, only gives wind to the Manichean sails that keep demonisation politically afloat. The way to challenge evil, and remove its sacred glow, is to name and expose it for what it is, and understand why it comes about, so that we can fight it in the future. Tempting as it might seem, we must not remain silent in the face of evil or keep alive comforting myths about the utter inexpressibility of evil.

The Holocaust, more than any other event, has accentuated the important role that silence plays in large-scale evils. Indeed, the Holocaust, at least in part, was made possible only by the relative silence of bystanders (Bernstein, 1999, 160). Silence is often read as tacit agreement or acceptance (Staub, 2003 292, 331-2), and we must never be in agreement, tacit or otherwise, with evil.[31] The long history

of ineffective responses to large-scale evils, from the Holocaust to Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur, illustrates that the major difficulty posed by such events, in relation to bystanders, is how to engage an apathetic international community into taking action to stop the carnage. That such apathy should arise is understandable, for one's own concerns, and the concerns of those nearest and dearest, all too often overwhelm and silence the concerns of those neither near nor dear. Further, we have all learned to become desensitised to images of immense suffering, from mass slaughter to child malnourishment. The very ubiquity of such images renders them emotionally impotent for many of us. In the face of yet another distant atrocity, it is all too easy to ethically 'shutdown'.

The language of evil has its role to play here. Just as the language of genocide imposes important political duties on governments, above and beyond those generated by lesser acts of violence,[32] so too does the language of evil impose important moral duties upon bystanders, above and beyond those generated by lesser moral wrongs. The term evil, if invested with the appropriate moral gravity, can draw attention to the great suffering of victims of evil and make it difficult, both morally and politically, for bystanders to remain silent and apathetic. We need to deploy the language of evil politically to describe events, such as the recent genocides in Rwanda and Darfur, so that such events have the sort of moral starkness that bystanders cannot (at least easily) ignore apathetically.

Further, by undermining the allure of demonisation and the Manichaean imagery that gives it its force, bystanders can avoid becoming evildoers themselves in the process of fighting evil. Bystanders must realise that they themselves are not angels, and that they do not deal with devils. Bystanders, like victims, must not replicate and imitate the instigators of evil by allowing their legitimate grievances to turn into a demonising hatred. This lack of demonising can allow the process of understanding why evil has occurred to begin in earnest, and it is only through understanding that we can learn how best to combat and prevent future evils. Evil is not so mysterious as to render any action against it futile. This, hopefully, can empower us all as bystanders to the world's many evils to act, and not sit by in silence, and this is precisely what the Holocaust teaches us needs to happen.

Conclusion

While evil has of late got itself a bad name in much recent Western academic discourse, the problems *with* evil, that have led to this infamous reputation, can be avoided. Such problems are not endemic to the very concept of evil itself, but arise from a particular and misleading way, inspired by a demonising Manichean imagery, of thinking about the perpetrators of evil. To call *en masse* Jews, or Muslims, or Americans, or any other such group, 'evil', is a demonising use of the term. We should object to such uses of language as misleading and dangerous. It is misleading because it feeds off a Manichean imagery that sees 'us' as good, and 'them' as a homogenous mass of inhuman monsters seeking our destruction for its own sake. It is dangerous because this way of thinking can lead *us* to commit atrocities and to ignore the real causes underlying such destructive behaviour.

But this does not mean that the concept of evil has no political and ethical role to play. To call the Nazi genocide of Jewish and other 'undesirable' peoples 'evil', or the recent genocide in Rwanda 'evil', is neither a misleading nor dangerous use of language. Indeed, rather the opposite is the case. To be unable or unwilling to deploy evil in this way is misleading, for it fails to convey the moral gravity of such crimes. It is also dangerous, for without the starkness and power of the language of evil, bystanders might not be shocked out of their apathetic indifference, which is the sort of indifference that can directly fuel and encourage further violence. Part of facing up to evil is naming evil when we see it. This is not something we should shy away from doing. Evil is a strong and stark term, and one that can carry an enormous moral gravity and political weight, but at times no lesser term will do the job. Evil is not some historical relic of a bygone age, but something that we urgently need to address now and into the future at both ethical and political levels. We still need, perhaps more than ever, to speak the language of evil. But we must do so with care.

Notes

[1] Hannah Arendt's work is an important exception.

[2] There have been a number of recent attempts to offer conceptualisations of evil that explicate how a moral evil differs from a moral wrong. However, I do not rely on any particular conceptualisation of evil

here. But see, for example, Claudia Card (2002), Paul Formosa (2007a), Eve Garrard (1998), John Kekes (2005), Adam Morton (2004), Marcus Singer (2004), and Arne Vetlesen (2005).

[3] Garrard (2002, 43) claims that the terms 'wrong' and 'bad' 'seem deeply inadequate to the event, and so we reach for some more powerful term of condemnation: we say that the Holocaust was evil'. Daniel Haybron (2002, 260) likewise argues that 'such tepid language' as 'wrong' 'seems terribly inadequate to the moral gravity of' the Holocaust.

[4] From now on, when I use the term 'demonise', I mean 'demonising at its worst', for it is only at its worst that we think of those we demonise as inherently evil.

[5] For this reason Konrad Lorenz goes so far as to call humanity's 'ability to demonise his opponents more serious than the invention of weapons' (Fogelman, 1993, 172).

[6] But, of course, there were historical and ideological reasons (and not just psychological ones) why it was the Jews, and not some other group, that were 'chosen'. Arendt (1967) explores these issues.

[7] An 'in-group' is a group one is in, and an 'out-group' is a group one is not in.

[8] Henry Staten (2005, 12) argues that it is because we have a picture of 'the evil one as the alien' that 9/11 was described in terms of evil, whereas the mass murderers at Columbine, as they were perpetrated by 'us' and not 'them', were characterised in the public forum, not in terms of evil, but in terms of 'a failure of society'. In other words, situational factors, such as the 'failure of society,' only enter into explanations of the actions of 'us' and not 'them'.

[9] There is at present a tendency amongst (some or even many) Western people to view *all* Muslims as 'evil' and bent on our destruction, just as there is a tendency amongst (some or even many) Muslim people to view *all* Westerners as 'evil' rich capitalists, bent on unjustly exploiting them and profiteering from their misery. Both images, in combination with a fear that one's identity is being threatened, breed demonisation, even though such images are largely inaccurate and such fears are largely without foundation. For a similar view see Morton (2004, 65-8).

[10] It is for this reason that Peter Singer (2004, 2, 183, 207-9) thinks that 'many American Christians see their own nation as carrying out a divine mission'. It is important not to overlook the bitter irony that the same groups that Bush labels 'evil' think themselves to be good, and America, driven solely by 'pleasure and material interest', to be the embodiment of evil (Wong, 2006, 126-7).

[11] Of course, my intention here is not to somehow equate Hitler and Bush – my point is only that they both use similar imagery and employ 'evil' in a Manichean and demonising sense.

[12] Schmitt (1996, 36) argues that if we degrade 'the enemy into moral and other categories' we are thereby 'forced to make of him a monster that must not only be defeated but also utterly destroyed'. Schmitt instead tries to conceptualise the political in terms of 'friends and enemies'. We should not demonise our enemies – they are our foes, and not inhuman monsters. But while one's foes may not be inhuman, one is under no ethical constraints in how one 'gets rid of them'.

[13] On the importance of situation in explaining and predicting human behaviour, see John Doris (2002) and Morton (2004).

[14] Freud (2004, 61) writes: 'Their neighbour is not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to take out their aggression on him, to exploit his labour without recompense, to use him sexually without his consent, to take possession of his goods, to humiliate him and cause him pain, to torture and kill him. *Homo homini lupus* [Man is a wolf to man].'

[15] Kekes (2005, 171) claims that a similar account has, in various forms, 'been defended, among others, by Hobbes, Butler, Kant, Bradley, and Freud.' More recently, we can add Morton (2004) and Midgley (1984) to this list.

[16] Arendt argues that radical evil is perpetrated through a three step process (Formosa, 2007d, 718-20). This process involves the killing of the *juridical* person, who is the bearer of rights, the *moral* person, who can make free moral choices, and finally by removing any remaining trace of uniqueness, individuality and spontaneity.

[17] Kekes (2005, 80) argues: 'the reason why the threat of envy cannot be eliminated from moral life is that differences in excellences and talents, skills, and admirable characteristics will persist as long as there are human beings, people will go on taking pride in their excellences; and they will continue to feel badly about their deficiencies.'

[18] Freud (2004, 164) would agree. He claims that: 'there is no such thing as 'eradicating evil' [because] the deepest essence of human nature consists in instinctual impulses which are of an elementary nature' and which can presumably sometimes lead to evil.

[19] This is, of course, not to say that we cannot *reduce* the amount of evil in the world. And one important way to do this is to reduce the prevalence of evil-encouraging situations and challenge the demonisation of others wherever it rears its ugly head.

[20] This differentiates between associational and non-associational groups. See John Rawls (1996, 482).

[21] One problem that I cannot address here is *which* acts count as evil. Of course, what one person or group sees as an atrocious act of evil might be seen by others as justifiable revolutionary action. However, the crux of this disagreement revolves around, not evil, but moral justifiability, and so cannot be dealt with here. An act that is very harmful is not evil if it is morally justifiable and therefore not wrong.

[22] For the idea that evil is intrinsically 'mysterious' and 'beyond rational explanation', see Thomas Cushman (2001, 80) and Morton (2004, 2). Inga Clendinnen (1999) argues that references to evil take us beyond the domain of the human to somewhere 'sinister and metaphysical "beyond the moral pale" ... and therefore beyond the possibility of human understanding' (Garrard, 2002, 323).

[23] Richard Bernstein (2005, viii) argues that such 'evil talk' is not a use but an '*abuse of evil*', as it is deployed to 'obscure complex issues, to block genuine thinking, and to stifle public discussion'.

[24] We find variants of this basic view in the works of Boethius, Augustine and Aquinas, and it is prevalent amongst many other Christian and Neo-Platonist thinkers (Gillespie, 2006).

[25] Boethius (2001, 102) likens vicious men to various beasts who lack human personality. Vicious people are literally 'metamorphosed by vices' so that 'you can no longer judge' them to 'be a human being'. Vicious men are like wolves, or dogs, or foxes, or filthy sows, not humans.

[26] Character is used here in the Kantian sense of a firmness of principle. For a discussion of Kant's concept of evil characters, see Patrick Frierson (2006).

[27] But such fascination should never turn into a *mere* fascination. A similar point is raised by Jennifer Geddes (2001, 7) who argues that: 'Evil has taken on a glamorous sheen… We the viewers of such evil become anaesthetised such that our questions take the form of curiosity, rather than concern.'

[28] Whether this leads to 'shame at being a human being' is another question – see Arendt (1994, 131). Robert Nozick (1989, 238) thinks that it does.

[29] This is not to say that responses to large-scale evils should *only* be punitive, for to punish *all* those complicit in a large-scale evil, such as the Holocaust, would be neither feasible nor beneficial. Equally, though, to punish no one over such an evil would be inappropriate. The nature of this balance, especially when reconciliation is thrown into the mix, is not easy to resolve.

[30] Steven Aschheim (1997, 137) quotes Scott Montgomery, who argues that the Nazis have been 'transformed from historical truth into icons… The Nazis have been given a disturbing purity, a kind of sacred uniqueness, even a mystifying grandeur of depravity that finally gives back to them certain qualities of myth they sought for themselves.'

[31] As Cushman (2001, 92) notes: 'Western passivity in the face of the media images of the war [in Bosnia] was actually an active force because it clued in Serbian forces to the fact that they could engage in future destructive actions with impunity.' On the failures of the West in regard to Rwanda, see Philip Gourevitch (1998).

[32] Theodor Adorno (2003, 60) wonders whether 'the day will come when discussions will take place about whether some new monstrous act falls within the definition of genocide; whether nations have a right to intervene, a right of which they have no real wish to avail themselves; and whether, given the unforseen difficulties in applying the term in practise, the whole concept of 'genocide' should not be deleted from the statutes.' Unfortunately, in relation to recent events in Rwanda, Adorno's fears have become reality. Jonathon Glover (2001, 122) notes that: 'there is a legal obligation to take action against genocide and the Clinton administration was worried about this [in Rwanda]. State Department officials were instructed not to use the word 'genocide' about Rwanda.'

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