The Greatest Vice?

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ABSTRACT

History teems with instances of "man's inhumanity to man." Some wrongs are perpetrated by individuals; most ghastly evils were committed by groups or nations. Other horrific evils were established and sustained by legal systems and supported by cultural mores. This demands explanation. I describe and evaluate four common explanations of evil before discussing more mundane and psychologically informed explanations of wrong-doing. Examining these latter forms helps isolate an additional factor which, if acknowledged, empowers us to diagnose, cope with, and prevent many ordinary and serious moral wrongs. In so doing, I do not assert that the explanations of first call are never appropriate. I claim only that their role is smaller than many of us reflexively suppose, and that the role of the later feature I identify is more significant, in part, because it supports and amplifies the more mundane and psychologically informed factors prompting wrong-doing.

"Evil is unspectacular and always human, and shares our bed and eats at our own table."

W.H. Auden "Herman Melville" (1939)

History teems with instances of "man's inhumanity to man." Some acts are the work of isolated individuals, like serial killer Andrei Chikatilo or con man Bernie Madoff. Many especially ghastly evils were perpetrated by nations or groups: the Holocaust, the Stalinist's purges, and the slaughter of Tutsis in Rwanda. Other horrific acts like slavery were established and sustained by legal systems and supported for centuries by cultural mores. Then there's politics. I find comments by many can-

didates and policy advocates alternately maddening and depressing. I am aghast at claims people utter with a straight face—assertions I assume they *have* to know are false. Finally, there are the everyday actions towards and comments to strangers, colleagues, family, or friends—things that hurt them deeply. When we survey the history of humankind, we have to wonder: how can so many of us act so callously—and occasionally savagely—toward others? Is there some feature or trait of us that explains our misbehavior?

People occasionally attribute wrong-doing to agents' defective mental states; more commonly they cite the agents' morally tainted characters. Ethicists may intellectually embrace more sophisticated explanations. However, in my experience many of us resort to the same explanations proffered by the person on the street: we reflexively cite what I dub "the explanations of first call." I describe four variations on these. Although these are not devoid of explanatory merit, none adequately explains many moral wrongs. We need a different and more robust explanation.

The search for that explanation begins by isolating more mundane—and psychologically informed—explanations of prudentially and morally misguided behavior. I show how understanding these factors points to a more general trait which, if acknowledged, would equip us to better understand, diagnose, respond to, and prevent many ordinary and serious moral wrongs. The vice I identify is a common and partly controllable human tendency that causes or undergirds numerous wrongdoings, in part by amplifying the injurious effects of those mundane factors as well as behaviors explained by the explanations of first call.

UNDERSTANDING MY CLAIM

The trait I specify near the end of this essay does not fit standard ways of ranking vices. Let me explain why I deviate from common approaches. Someone might humorously propose that we identify the greatest vice Cartesian style: the greatest vice is the one greater than which none can be conceived. This proposal does no work. Others might rate vices by the degree to which they expose the "darkness" of their possessors' hearts (whatever precisely that means). This approach likely includes Milo's notion of "preferential wickedness" (Milo, R. D. 1984: Chapter 3): the desire to do what it is wrong because it is wrong. Others might follow Judith Shklar (who followed Hume) in asserting that cruelty is the most despicable vice. "Cruelty," as she defines it, is the "deliberate and persistent humiliation [of others] so that the victim

can eventually trust neither himself not anyone else" (Shklar, J. N. 1984: 37; Hume, D. 1978/1740: 459). As loathsome as these traits are, I argue that they are not as common as we suppose and that people having such traits are unlikely to shed or alter them. Finally, we could rank vices aesthetically, so that the greatest vice is the one we find morally the ugliest. I understand the appeal of this approach; however, it has peculiar consequences. Pervasive hypocrisy is profoundly ugly. However, I doubt that it is the source of significant swaths of wrong-doing.

The fact that there are so many diverse characterizations shows that there is no single metric for ranking vices. (That is why my title ends with a question mark.) I have no doubt that these familiar categorizations are serviceable. Each isolates distinctive reasons why people sometimes morally misbehave. However, all overlook or obscure a propensity I find more salient. We can see the vice's importance if we focus not on its bare character—its ugliness or darkness—but on the myriad ways in which it *functions* in our lives. The vice I identify is serious because it is one to which we are *all* susceptible; it is frequently overlooked in ethical debate; it produces, permits, or sustains mountains of moral wrongs, and it is amenable to some control. While we have little chance of purging ourselves of preferential wickedness or extreme cruelty, many of us can corral the excesses of the vice I identify.

However, I am getting ahead of myself. Before reaching the argument's climax, I must engage in some academic foreplay. I must explore the explanations of first call and show why they will not do much heavy moral lifting. Although they do explain some wrong-doing, they explain less than many people suppose. Perhaps more importantly, most afflicted with these commonly cited vices are either unable or unwilling to change.

Reflexive Explanations of Wrong-doing

Many people reflexively claim that an agent's wrong-doing springs from her flawed moral character. Even trained ethicists often proffer this explanation as individual moral agents, even if, when acting as professionals, they acknowledge its inadequacies.

Occasionally, people claim or imply that the misbehaving agent was insane. This explanation is most commonly deployed when someone commits an especially gruesome crime. "Could (the cannibal) Jeffrey Dahmer be sane?" someone might ask rhetorically. "Or (the spree murderer) Adam Lanza?" The answer, the questioner

assumes, is "No." In these cases our rhetorical interlocutor might be correct if she interprets insanity by some legal criterion or as a form of psychopathology. However, although insanity in either sense doubtlessly explains some serious wrong-doing, unless we interpret the term "insane" trivially, there is no reason to think that many, let alone most, Germans or Cambodians or Russians or Turks or Hutu supporters of their respective genocides were insane. Since this explanation is plausible in only a few cases, I won't say anything further about it. I turn to the three variants of the more common claim that agents' wrong-doing flows from their flawed characters, including both defective motivations and reprehensible moral values reflected in behavioral dispositions.

CHARACTER FLAWS

Amoralism

Some people claim that agents who act wrongly are frequently indifferent to morality. Amoralism takes two forms. The first stems from the agent's beliefs; the second, from her behavior.

On the first, the agent believes—or claims to believe—that morality is an illusion: there are no genuine moral requirements. On the second, the agent is dispositionally indifferent to morality (Milo, R. D. 1984: Chapter 3; Brink, D. O. 1989: 46). For purposes of this paper, I shall assume that amoralism in the first sense is false. Were it true this paper would be misguided. If there was no morality, then there would be no moral vices; if there are no vices, there could be no greater or lesser vice. However, I shall not here defend the claim that morality is not an illusion.

What about the second variation? Doubtless some people do not care if there are moral demands. It is intriguing, however, that most of those who claim not to care about morality act *as if* they do care, at least when they are harmed. If someone harms them, they rarely say (or think) "There's nothing wrong with what the person did; I just don't like it." Most will aver that the other's behavior *is wrong*. Moreover, when others morally object to her behavior—or she anticipates that someone might—she usually proffers a justification of or explanation for her actions. The accused individual usually (a) denies that the event occurred; more commonly, she (b) explains why the behavior is not what we think it is (it is loyalty or patriotism or self-defense

rather than genocide), or she (c) explains why we needn't respond in the ways most people think we should (with revulsion, anger, disappointment, guilty, etc.) (Cohen, S. 2001: 7—11). Doubtless some who offer these explanations are simply seeking to insulate themselves from criticism. However, since those who proffer these "justifications" frequently appear to be sincere, I charitably conclude that many of these people do not embrace behavioral amoralism. There are, of course, some who really *do not* care about morality. I am inclined to think that such people exemplify a trait better described as immoralism.

Immoralism

When Jo claims that Bill acted badly because he has a flawed character, she might simply mean that Bill regularly acts viciously or selfishly even if he does not see, acknowledge, or understand his behavior in those ways. I consider these options later. I focus here is on what Milo calls "preferential wickedness" (1984: esp. chapters 2 and 7). On Milo's view, Bill is preferentially wicked if he knows that his actions are wrong but does them without the slightest misgiving. This view is similar to what Stanley Benn simply calls "wickedness" (1985). I suspect this notion could also include what Shklar deems "cruelty" (1984: Chapter 1). Not all instances of preferential wickedness are cruel, but arguably all instances of cruelty would exhibit preferential wickedness.

The belief that many wrong-doers are immoralists is a staple of private judgment and public discourse. In the United States, most liberals and conservatives do not see each other as "essentially decent [men] . . . man who [are] either temporarily misguided by false doctrines, or forced to [do the things they do] . . . against [their] better will and desire" (Gray, J. G. 1998/1958: 159). Instead, many liberals think most conservatives are selfish and mean-spirited moral busy-bodies, while many conservatives consider most liberals morally empty, personally irresponsible, arrogant tyrants. Similar views permeate the international arena. Former President Bush identified four national regimes as "The Axis of Evil." His claim clearly resonated with a significant portion of the American people. This view also animates Goldhagen's assertions that most German perpetrators of the Holocaust were motivated by demonstrably insidious views (1996).

Despite our professional protestations to the contrary, most of us reflect an unconscious commitment to immoralism when criticizing those who we think mistreat us, our families, or our friends. If Katrina says something false to me or my family,

I am prone to claim or assume that she is dishonest or a manipulator. If Rowena is insufficiently sensitive to me or my family, I am prone to claim or assume that she is crass or hateful, etc. It is not merely that Katrina and Rowena regularly act callously; I assume each knows that what she did was immoral. The tendency to attribute other's morally deficient behavior to defective motives is well documented in experience and in the psychological literature (Watson, D. 1982: 682; Knobe, J. and Malle, B. 2002: 6).

However, historians have long noted that immoralism is an inadequate explanation even for many heinous evils. As Tony Judt crisply put it (Judt, T. and Snyder, T. 2012: 34):

> *By the 1980s it was a commonly held view among specialists in the field that the history of Nazism, and indeed of totalitarianism in all of its forms, could not be fully grasped if it was reduced to a tale of malevolent persons consciously and deliberately engaging in criminal acts with harm in mind.*

Judt is correct. Although immoralism is sometimes an appropriate attribution, it alone does not adequately explain much immoral behavior. Even those who commit genocide rarely consider their actions immoral. Even fewer do it *because* it is immoral. Hitler certainly didn't (Synder, T. 2015). Many Germans who actively participated in or passively supported the Holocaust thought that by imprisoning and killing Jews they were protecting their families and defending the Fatherland. We find these people's beliefs mysterious and their behavior objectionable, regardless of how they explain their actions to themselves. Moreover, we have reason to think that they *should have known* that they were acting immorally. Albert Speer admitted at the end of the war that *he* should have known (Van der Vat, D. 1997). However, to say that someone *should* have known is not to say that she *did* know, let alone that she *consciously* knew. The best explanation for such people's wrong-doing is not that they were preferentially wicked. As Christopher Browning and others have argued, many atrocities were perpetrated by seemingly ordinary, generally decent, people who lacked the cognitive and moral wherewithal to see that what they were doing was wrong . . . and to resist the societal pressures to act outrageously (1992). I have no doubt that we should deem their obliviousness a moral defect. However, it is not what most people commonly mean when they assail others' characters. This is the first indication of what I shall identify as the greatest vice.

The same is true of Pol Pot who was largely responsible for the death of one

million Cambodians in the "Killing Fields." When he was interviewed twenty years later, he said that although he had made mistakes, "Even now, you can look at me: am I a savage person? My conscience is clear" (Mydans, S. 1997). Pot's claim exemplifies his commitment to the belief that only a savage person could commit genocide. He assumed that since he was not *consciously* savage, then he *could not be* preferentially wicked. That is a mistake. His behavior was morally outrageous because of what he did, not because he consciously chose to act wickedly. This suggests why immoralism is incapable of explaining even many grotesque evils.

The failure of immoralism to explain wrong-doing is even more obvious when evaluating the Inquisitions' overseers. Over several hundred years, church officials tortured or killed thousands of alleged heretics. It is implausible to think most of those officials were consciously motivated by immorality. Indeed, is seems more likely that most thought they were acting virtuously. The church, and even some who were tortured, interpreted that torture as a form of spiritual purification (Glucklich, A. 2001: especially pp. 16—32). Finding it hard to understand how they held such views does not show that they did not hold them. We must try to understand how ordinary, generally decent, people could endorse morally odious beliefs and act in morally monstrous ways. Being able to explain *that* helps isolate what is arguably the greatest vice.

Finally, we saw the same phenomenon at work in the U.S.'s systematic mistreatment of African Americans. It began before American independence, continued throughout constitutionally sanctioned slavery, and was still a dominant feature of most African American's lives for at least a hundred years after slavery's official end. This treatment of African Americans was morally disgraceful. However, I see no reason to think that *most* perpetrators were driven by consciously malicious intent. A majority of these citizens thought the constitution, the laws, the U.S. Supreme Court decisions, and local practices were at least permissible and perhaps morally required. I sheepishly admit that that is what I thought growing up. We whites had a ready explanation for our discriminatory policies and practices. Admittedly, our purported justifications were ludicrous. Yet, embrace them we did.

This explains why I think the behavior of many Nazis, Inquisitors, and ordinary Southerners—no matter how morally objectionable—cannot be explained by immoralism. These all-too-familiar actions must be explained differently. Perhaps these people were simply selfish.

Selfishness

Many people claim other's bad behavior stems from their decision to promote their own interests over those of others, to make an unjustified exception of themselves. This is doubtless a common cause of wrong-doing. However, describing people's behavior this way masks a crucial moral difference between conscious and unconscious selfishness. Many people talk as if selfish people are consciously aware that they are being selfish. I seriously doubt that. When it *is* true, I think it is more accurate to say these people exhibit a form of immoralism.

More commonly, people who behave selfishly are not consciously selfish. If someone criticizes them, they quickly redescribe the circumstances or their behavior so that their actions appear to be unselfish or at least permissibly selfish. Of course, this may be just a rationalization to inoculate them from moral censure. Many times, though, it reflects people's sincere, even if misguided, belief that they are not selfish.

The justifications, explanations, and excuses people use to explain (away) their apparent selfishness—like explanations and excuses people use when accused of all forms of wrong-doing—are variations on morally plausible ones. If they weren't, agents would not use them and no one would deign to accept them. Seeming wrong-doers rarely cite either demonstrably irrelevant or morally repugnant justifications. When Jo is asked why she cheated Beth, she doesn't say, "because squares have four sides" or "because I wanted her money." When Pol Pot was asked why he sent millions of urbanites into rural areas incapable of sustaining them, he didn't say "for years paint contained lead" or "I didn't like the slant of their eyes." These are not explanations Jo or Pol Pot or Ratko Mladic would use because no reasonable or morally sensitive person would buy them. People offer rationales "learnt by ordinary cultural transmission," drawn from a "well-established, collectively available pool" (Cohen, S. 2001: 59; inspired by Mills, C. W. 1940: 905—7). For instance, those who commit genocide or discriminated against blacks claimed that they were removing threats, promoting public safety, or treating others as they deserved. Each purported justification is plausible in some contexts (Mills, C. W. 1940). We all use justifications like them; sometimes we find them plausible. The proffered justifications have no moral purchase *in these cases* not because they are of *the wrong type*, but because their factual elements are false *in those contexts*: Jews were not threatening Germany; Cambodian urbanites were not undermining an ideal Asian society; African Americans were not sub-human.

Unconscious forms of "selfishness" are powerful precisely because the agent does not acknowledge them even to herself (Pronin, E., Lin, D. Y. et al. 2002; Pronin, E. 2009). Were she vividly aware of what she was doing and why she was doing it, then she might act differently. Ultimately we should discern why people so often fail to accurately understand their actions and motivations.

The most fruitful place to search for an explanation is by exploring common sources of imprudent and inappropriate behavior. These are familiar to most thoughtful adults; many have also been extensively studied by social scientists.

FAMILIAR SOURCES OF MISGUIDED BEHAVIOR

Most people who act immorally are not preferentially wicked: they do not do what they consciously know to be evil; certainly they do not do it because it is evil. Many are not consciously selfish. Even if they were evil or selfish, they were not so in the ways most people suppose when they brandish these explanations of first call. These agents' behavior is better explained as springing from a multiplicity of interacting and mutually reinforcing cognitive defects which the agent does not see or acknowledge. These lead people to rely on dubious premises, to misdescribe the situations in which they act, to misunderstand their motives, and to be blind to the likely consequences of their actions. By carefully examining our own behavior and the behavior of others, we can identify and understand the nature and power of these defects. Understanding them opens a route for identifying, and subsequently limiting, controlling, or correcting these cognitive and moral defects.

Ignorance of relevant information

We sometimes make good choices when we are ignorant; but if we do, we are lucky. We can reliably make wise choices only if we have the *relevant* knowledge to hand and use it. However, we need not be walking encyclopedias. Most of us, most of the time, can successfully navigate life even if we are ignorant of many details. Except in rare circumstances, I do not need to know the how many miles it is from Los Angeles to Tokyo or the name of the 9th President of the United States. This information would only rarely be relevant to important decisions. But sometimes ignorance leads to abysmal decisions.

There are five broad types of ignorance that can derail prudential and moral

choices, often by enabling us to concoct (to ourselves and others) less than convincing explanations of why our actions are not what others deem them to be. One, I may lack information defining the context in which I act. If I buy 100 acres in the Arizona desert to plant an apple orchard, I will have wasted my money. If I mistakenly think that someone is threatening me or my family, I may inappropriately harm them "in self-defense."

Two, I may be ignorant of relevant history. If I unknowingly father a child with my biological sibling, our offspring has an increased chance of developing a mild to severe disability. If, as chair of an academic department, I do not understand that a female faculty member's low research output resulted from years of systematic discrimination by the previous chair, then I may inappropriately deny her research leave. If I do not know that the United States aided in the overthrow of the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, and then financially and militarily supported the Shah's strong-armed dictatorship for more than three decades, I will not comprehend why many Iranians distrust the U.S. I may subsequently support misguided decisions about the appropriate foreign policy toward Iran.

Three, if I am ignorant of human motivation and psychology, I may have difficulty understanding others' behavior; thus, I may be less likely to relate to them appropriately. If I think all people (save me) are always out to promote their selfish interests, then I will not trust them; hence, I will never have genuinely intimate relationships. If I assume all Muslims are terrorists and all atheists are immoral, then I am unlikely to befriend either and will likely be ineffective when teaching them; I will also likely support policies detrimental to them.

Four, if I do not understand the nature and significance of institutions in determining what people believe, what and who they like and dislike, and what they do, I will make ill-advised prudential decisions or harmful moral ones. If I do not understand the ways that my preferences and beliefs are shaped by my social class, economic order, or religious affiliation, then I cannot control or counter their pernicious influences (Mill, J. S. 1985/1885: 39). I may thus choose a career because of its high status only to discover I find that career unsatisfying. Or a 1950s man may have assumed that women were instinctively meek, oblivious to the ways in which the political, economic, social, and religious orders of the day discouraged them from openly expressing their views.

Five, if I am ignorant of the information or skills required to reasonably predict the likely consequences of my (and others') action, I will often act inappropriately. I

am more likely to make misguided predictions if cannot grasp basic concepts of probability theory, am ignorant of relevant background information, or lack critical reasoning skills to use the available information to make plausible predictions. If in 2010 I spent my life savings purchasing Greek bonds assuming I would reap massive long-term dividends, I will have squandered my retirement income. If I am ignorant of the dangers of radiation, I may make an unwise decision about living (or not living) near a nuclear power plant. I may likewise make bad choices about whether to support building two new ones near the Grand Canyon or the Forest of Dean.

There is one additional consideration we must not forget. In the cases mentioned heretofore, the agents were ignorant simpliciter. However, ignorant people are typically ignorant of their ignorance. Even worse, many people think that they know "what just ain't so" (Billings, J. 1876). Thus, it is often not bare ignorance that misleads us (Judt, T. and Snyder, T. 2012: 265); it is ignorance coupled with the false belief that we are knowledgeable.

IGNORANCE'S COGNITIVE COUSINS

Sometimes we have easy access to relevant information but fail to apprehend, attend to, or employ that information when making a decision. Put differently, information is available but is not motivationally potent. It is better to discuss these cognitive belches separately from bare ignorance.

Inattention

Inattention occurs when we do not attend to the relevant knowledge to hand. I know the dangers of walking on a rocky hillside or drying the dishes. However, when I am doing these activities, I sometimes do not attend to what I am doing. I subsequently tear the ligaments in my ankle or break a serving bowl. Or I may have a lingering sore in my mouth. Although I abstractly know that such sores are early cancer signs, I do not attend to them until my next physical checkup, at which point I realize they have been gracing my mouth for seven months. Like other cognitive hiccups, inattention can be morally loaded. A friend asks me if I will be attending a particular professional meeting; he wants to talk. Without asking myself why he would make this request, I decline: I tell him that I am too harried. I later discover that he has a fatal debilitating disease. He wanted to commiserate with an old friend. I felt like a

heel. Still do. He could, of course, have been more insistent. However, had I been more observant and sensitive, he wouldn't have needed to be.

If he had been insistent and I still refused, then we could conclude that I was selfish. However, had I known that he was ill, I would have almost certainly have attended that meeting. That suggests that my vice was not being consciously selfish, it was that I did not bother to think about why he made this request. Knowing that does not make me feel better about myself. It does, however, more clearly locate the problem and thereby gives me a way to avoid making similar mistakes in the future.

Short-sightedness

Another cognitive cousin of ignorance is short-sightedness. We may know what we should do to promote our long term interests, but focus instead on our immediate desires. We want a second serving of potatoes, an extra scoop of ice cream, or a fourth beer; we guide our actions by our immediate cravings rather than a pursuit for our long-term health. We are tired and skip our planned cardiovascular, strength, or stretching exercises one day without considering that in so doing we may be slightly less likely to do them tomorrow.

We can also make morally fraught short-sighted decisions. In our desire to be safe from criminals or terrorists, we may support imprudent and immoral long-term policies. Out of a fear of crime, the U.S. now has the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world, and our criminal justice system does little to rehabilitate criminals or to fully readmit them to society once they have served their time (LaFollette, H. 2005). We should not be surprised that the country's recidivism rate is embarrassingly and objectionably high.

Psychologists claim that short-sightedness springs from several cognitive biases, especially the availability and representativeness heuristics (Tversky, A. and Kahneman, D. 1974: 1125-28). These biases were originally identified as explanations for why humans often make flawed judgments of probability. For instance, most people are unduly optimistic in assuming that neither they, nor a member of their family, will become seriously ill (Dunning, D., Heath, C. et al. 2005: 72); yet many are unduly afraid that they will die in an airplane crash. Later psychologists deployed these mechanisms to explain why we often focus on short-term consequences and dramatic recent events when deciding what to do.

Selective Attention

Selective attention is another cousin of inattention in which the information is not only available; it is ready to hand. Nonetheless, we are oblivious to relevant factors and focus on insignificant ones. When one student criticizes us while another praises us, we often embrace the positive evaluation uncritically and then scour for ways to discount the other student's negative comments. In its more common guises, selective attention is a form of bias, oft described in the literature as either "confirmation bias" (Lord, C. G., Ross, L. et al. 1979) or "information avoidance" (Melnyk, D. and Shepperd, J. A. 2012).

Biases

We are biased not simply in the sense that we tend to make predictable judgments about others and ourselves. Since we are habitual agents, we all do that. Sometimes habitual action is innocent; occasionally, it is fortuitous (or even laudatory)—if, for instance, I reflexively tell the truth (LaFollette, H. 2007: Chapter 14). However, this is not what I—or most people—mean by being "biased." Most of us are biased in that we make some important moral judgments without the relevant evidence. In other cases, the evidence is easily available, but we are indifferent to or do not attend to it.

We are not just biased, we are biased about our biases (Ehrlinger, J., Gilovich, T. et al. 2005: 2). Even those of us aware of the human proclivity to be biased assume we have escaped this tendency to which others are vulnerable. We assume that we would know if we are biased. However, biases are potent because they are largely out of sight. They operate unconsciously by shaping how we see and interpret events and persons. Generally, they leave no directly accessible introspective cues (Nisbett, R. E. and Wilson, T. D. 1977; Pronin, E., Lin, D. Y. et al. 2002: 372-73; Ehrlinger, J., Gilovich, T. et al. 2005: 7). Biases are especially potent forms of the final common source of wrong-doing: ignorance of one's self.

IGNORANCE OF SELF

Some forms of ignorance and its cognitive cousins are instances of limited self-knowledge. Others arise from it. All are exacerbated by it. To the extent that we are ignorant of ourselves, we often: (a) don't know what we know and don't know,

(b) don't know what we do and why we do it, (c) don't understand how and why we judge others as we do, and (d) don't see or acknowledge our own biases. Of course few people are *completely* ignorant of themselves. However, our knowledge of self is selective. There are behaviors and traits we all occasionally miss; some of us do not see them at all. Most of us think our more negative traits are less serious and less numerous than they are. We then focus on our (perceived) positive traits, yet focus on the (perceived) negative traits of others, especially people we dislike.

Although most of us acknowledge that *some* people lack self-knowledge, we think that unlike the hoi polloi, we know who we are, what we do, and why we do it. We think that if someone does not know herself she must be intellectually lazy. The belief that self-knowledge is the norm clashes with Ben Franklin's famous quip: "There are three things extremely hard: steel, a diamond, and to know one's self." It is also at odds with volumes of empirical studies (Dunning, D., Heath, C. et al. 2005: 69—70):

> *In general, people self-view hold only a tenuous to modest relationship with their actual behavior and performance . . . . People's general evaluations of their skills and character . . . [are not] tethered very tightly to objective performances in tasks that should reflect those skills and character traits . . . . [Moreover], when people offer specific predictions about how they will behave in a particular future situation, they make predictions that differ systematically from their actual behavior when that situation arrives.*

Here are some specific examples of people's mistaken views of themselves:

- People's rating of their intelligence correlates between .2 and .3 with their scores on IQ tests and their performance on intellectual tasks . . . . (Dunning, D., Heath, C. et al. 2005; Hansford, B. C. and Hattie, J. A. 1982).

- 70% of high school students thought they were above average in leadership ability; only 2% rated themselves as below average. Virtually all thought they were at least average in their ability to get along with others. One-fourth thought they were in the top 1% (Dunning, D. 2005: 7).

- People on average rate themselves at the 64th percentile of those possessing a series of desirable traits (e.g., sophisticated, disciplined, sensible), while they rate themselves at the 38th percentile on a series of undesirable traits (e.g., neurotic, impractical, submissive) (Dunning, D. 2005: 103).

It is not difficult to see how these forms of ignorance may lead to morally odious action.

How Could This Be?

We are ignorant of ourselves because most of us acquire many beliefs about ourselves through introspection. Introspection can be valuable, but only when it has been trained by experience, candid feedback, and rigorous scrutiny. Bare introspection has limited epistemological value. Suppose that after "looking inside" I conclude that I am humble since I do not spend hours consciously thinking about how terrific I am. However, if others see that I regularly toot my own personal and professional horn and behave haughtily toward others, then I am not humble.

If I claim to be generous simply because I contemplate—and have pleasant thoughts about—helping others, but everyone else sees that I am stingy and inconsiderate, then my claim is undermined, the limits of my introspection are exposed. Our characters are defined not by an inner state to which each person has direct access, but by the ways that we regularly behave. There are, of course, exceptional circumstances in which one's deeper disposing traits are not exemplified in current behavior. However, these exceptions are not the stuff of which an adequate account of character is constructed.

This is uncontroversial when attributing non-moral traits to others. Everyone recognizes that Joan's sincerely believing that she is intelligent or athletic or hard working does not make her so. If she commonly makes ignorant and inane claims, she is not intelligent. If she cannot lift thirty pounds, walk half a mile, or swim one lap in a small pool, then she is not athletic. If most people who work with her consider her a dawdler, then she is not hard-working. These non-moral traits are determined by what she does, not by thoughts traipsing through her brain. Why would we think it is different with morally laden traits?

We all see this when evaluating *others*' moral traits. No one seriously considers that Pol Pot was saintly because he did not, upon introspection, discover a "savage person" inside. When we want to morally understand others, we observe their be-

havior and we ascribe traits based on our "background beliefs about motives, reason, abilities, and biases." Yet, somehow, when we think about ourselves, most of us ignore or downplay these common and indisputable sources of self-information. The tendency to rely unduly on introspection and the failure to actively protect ourselves from ignorance and its cognitive cousins are not limited to the dull and uneducated (Pronin, E. 2009: esp. pp. 5-9). Professors have this tendency in spades. Ninety-four percent of us claim to be "above average" professors (Dunning, D. 2005: 7).

How to we explain these errors? It is not merely that many of us are bad at introspecting—although that is true enough. The core problem is that we expect introspection to provide what it cannot reliably supply (Ballantyne, N. 2015: esp. 149—52). Much of what we want to know about ourselves is simply not accessible introspectively. Our behavior and motives are often shaped by implicit attitudes and preferences we cannot detect directly. We cannot "see the origins of our beliefs or the causes of our motives" (Pronin, E. 2009: 18). This leads many of us to think that while *others* are susceptible to manipulation, we are relatively immune to it. We also assume that we know others better than they know us (Pronin, E. 2009: 17). It is one of many biases to which we are all susceptible.

Some people have more sophisticated accounts of self-knowledge. They acknowledge the limits of introspection. They see that they must also observe their behavior. I would like to think that I am such a person. Nonetheless I (and many like me) am too often blind to what I do because I frequently privilege my own introspection and am insufficiently attentive to my behavior.

WHAT THIS REVEALS ABOUT THE SOURCES OF WRONG-DOING

With these explorations to hand, we return to the question with which we began: how can so many people perpetrate, or be complicit in, ordinary and extreme wrongdoing? How did so many seeming decent Germans come to support the slaughter of Jews and other minorities? How could many southerners keep African Americas as slaves? How did they and their children support lynchings and other aspects of Jim Crow? How could devoted Church leaders kill and torture people because they failed to embrace the "correct" faith or had the audacity to suggest that the earth revolves around the sun? How and why did a veteran like Timothy McVeigh cavalierly deto-

nate a bomb in front of the federal building in Oklahoma City killing 168 people and wounding nearly 700 more?

None of these phenomena is primarily, let alone entirely, captured by the explanations of first call. It is doubtful that many of these perpetrators were insane, or that many thought that what they were doing was morally wrong; it is unlikely that most were consciously selfish. That does not mean the behaviors were not immoral or selfish. It is to say that many, and arguably most, thought that what they did was morally permissible; some thought it was morally required. From our vantage point, we find their beliefs incomprehensible. We want to know: how could anyone have believed *that*? The answer, drawn from the ordinary experience, history, and psychological studies, is that they were ignorant when they should have known; they did not see what was in front of them; they did not notice that they were focusing on their own interests; they were oblivious to their own biases.

Generally put, they did not think carefully about what they believed, what they did, and why they did it. Often they unquestioningly embraced the factual and moral claims of their culture, their parents, their teachers, their friends, their leaders, or their favorite political commentator. They were oblivious to the power of institutions to create and sustain preferences and beliefs. They made few—and perhaps no—efforts to protect themselves from these foreseeable sources of error.

We would like to think that *we* are different: that we could not have done what they did. But do we have any reason to think that we are unique? Most—and probably all—of us are inadequately self-reflective. The problem is that while most of us abstractly acknowledge our ignorance (Mill, J. S. 1985/1885: 17),

> *few [of us] think it necessary to take any precautions against their own fallibility, or admit the supposition that any opinion of which they feel very certain may be one of the examples of the error to which they acknowledge themselves to be liable.*

Mill's insight provides a way of framing an unnerving thought experiment. Most of us wonder how our parents or grandparents or teachers or business people or government officials could have believed and done the things they did. Doubtless, they almost certainly had similar thoughts about their parents and grandparents. What we should ask ourselves is: what will *our* children and grandchildren find equally incomprehensible about our actions and beliefs? This thought gives me the moral shivers.

PULLING TOGETHER THE STRANDS OF THE ARGUMENT

If I am right, we should not reflexively employ the explanations of first call: wrong-doing is infrequently the result of insanity, amoralism, preferential wickedness, or conscious selfishness. More commonly, wrong-doing results from ignorance (of history, background information, and the power of social, economic, and religious institutions), unconscious selfishness, ignorance of self, and (unconscious) biases. These cognitive failures blind us to the relevant moral dimensions of our actions. They lead relatively ordinary folks to engage in morally objectionable, or even horrendous, behavior. That is what Hannah Arendt meant by the "banality of evil" and what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn meant in proclaiming that "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being" (Solzhenitsyn, A. I. 1973: 168).

If we have any hope of being on the morally proper side of this line, we must engage in frequent, honest, and rigorous self-reflection. If we understood our ignorance, we might correct it. If we acknowledged our selfishness, we might constrain it. If we recognized our biases, we have some chance of restricting their sway (Kahneman, D. 2011: 722—68).

Of course, self-knowledge does not come simply via introspection. I would have hoped that would have been clear by now. We can identify the means for obtaining self-knowledge by slightly rewording Mill's description of a wise man (1985/1885):

> *In the case of any person whose judgment [about herself] is really deserving of confidence, how has it become so? Because he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct. Because it has been his practice to listen to all that could be said against [his views about himself] . . . Because he has felt that the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing [himself] . . . is by hearing what can be said about [about his actions and motivations] . . . by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying [them all]. No man ever acquired [self-knowledge] . . . in any mode but this; nor is it in the nature of human intellect to . . . [gain self-knowledge] in any other manner . . .*

I am not the first to urge that we acknowledge this moral flaw. Bishop Butler did the same nearly two hundred years ago (1827: 127):

> *[M]any men seem perfect strangers to their own characters. They think, and reason,*

> *and judge quite differently upon any matter relating to them, from what they do in cases of others where they are not interested. Hence it is one hears people exposing follies, which they themselves are eminent for; and talking with great severity against particular vices, which, if all the world be not mistaken, they themselves are notoriously guilty of.*

THE GREATEST VICE?

I propose that the greatest vice is our failure to engage in frequent, honest, and rigorous self-reflection. We insufficiently scrutinize our own behavior; we too quickly excuse our own callous behavior. Why would I suggest that this is such a serious vice? Recall my proposed criteria at the beginning of the paper. One, the "greatest" vice would be one to which we all succumb; two, it receives scant attention by philosophers and people in the public arena. Three, it directly and indirectly explains much wrong-doing. Four, it is a source of wrong-doing most within our control. If we are insane, we likely cannot cure it. If we are amoral or preferentially wicked, we are unlikely to change. However, if we recognize our ignorance, short-sightedness, inattention, and biases, we have some chance of corralling, controlling, and correcting these errors (Montmarquet, J. A. 1993).

The cognitive failings and biases of which I have spoken are part of who we are. Sometimes they even serve important evolutionary purposes (Kahneman, D. 2011: 45-46). To that extent, our bare susceptibility to these flaws is not the vice of which I speak. The vice is in making no, or only half-hearted, attempts to scrutinize our own motives and behavior. Not everyone is immoral or amoral or pervasively selfish. However, everyone is inclined to be insufficiently self-critical; that is why all of us occasionally act badly without acknowledging our misbehavior (Butler, J. 1827: 128):

> *There is plainly, in the generality of mankind, an absence of doubt or distrust, in a very great measure, as to their moral character and behavior . . . [this arises from] their not reflecting, not exercising their judgment upon themselves.*

We cannot battle the vice of which Butler speaks simply by engaging in more introspection. We must carefully observe what we say and do. We must listen to others' criticisms of or comments about us, and then take active precautions against these

nasty propensities. Once we grasp our susceptibility to this vice, we should detect ways in which cognitive deficiencies distort our motives, choices, and actions. We then have some chance to counter these deficiencies: directly, by changing ourselves; indirectly, by altering the external circumstances (including the institutions) within which we think, choose, and act (Doris, J. M. 2002, 2015). The later route to change explains why my proposal is compatible with situationism: sometimes the most effective way of changing behavior is not by brute will but by changing our environments to reinforce more laudatory behavioral dispositions (LaFollette, H. 2007: Chapter 14).

If we do, we can change how we see, understand, and relate to others. We are more likely to be charitable in interpreting their behavior. We would be less likely to reflexively resort to immoralist assumptions about them; we would resort to these claims only if impelled by the preponderance of evidence. We would instead search for a more sophisticated understanding of other agents' behavior and motivations. That will inform our search for effective ways to change their behavior. If we assume that they are misinformed or careless or short-sighted, we can explain why we think they are mistaken. They will not want to hear our explanations, especially if they are not only ignorant, but convinced that they indisputably know the truth, as is many such people's wont (recall the earlier Billings quotation). We must vigorously search for ways to expose their ignorance and disabuse them of their faux knowledge. This will not be easy or simple. I hold no illusions that they will like hearing our analyses. Nonetheless, most people will prefer this to brutal assaults on their character.

Moreover, were we to concretely admit our own propensity to make these moral errors, we would be less morally uppity. That does not mean that we will be indifferent to morality. Nor does it mean than we need to be so skeptical or worried about mistakes that we are afraid to act. What it does mean is that we should admit our fallibility; we she should watch ourselves like moral hawks. We should acknowledge and genuinely consider other's moral criticisms of us. We should be willing to change ourselves accordingly.

I propose that each of us should scrutinize ourselves as much as—and preferably more than—we scrutinize others. Our control over others is always indirect. Our control over ourselves, albeit circumscribed, is more direct and more extensive. We have an opportunity to find ways to better relate with family, friends, colleagues, clients, students, and strangers, ways to create and sustain a more civil and civilized world.

CONCLUSION

None of this denies that some people are insane, preferentially wicked or consciously selfish. However, it would be better were these to be explanations of last resort rather than ascriptions of first call. Sure, there are the Bernie Madoffs who will bilk people out of their life savings without a hint of concern. However, I am not primarily concerned here about the character or actions of moral monsters. I am concerned far more with common sources of wrong-doing of which we are all guilty, more often than we dare admit to others or ourselves.

What I have suggested is both radical and ordinary. It is radical inasmuch as it reveals the limits of reflexive explanations for wrong-doing. It is ordinary inasmuch as we are all vividly aware of ways the unself-reflective actions of others cause significant harm. Indeed, it is so commonplace, the claim might seem to border on the trivial. Expect for one thing. Even when most of us recognize in the abstract just how dangerous a lack of serious self-reflection is, we tend to forget or ignore this fact in the concrete.

Although this may not be the most despicable vice, or the vice greater than which none can be conceived, given the kinds of creatures we are, this vice causes enormous harm, likely more harm than amoralism, immoralism, or conscious selfishness. Thus, although nothing earth-shattering hangs on its *really* being the *greatest* vice, acknowledging the importance of this vice is a corrective to common moral thinking, a corrective with significant effects on the practice of ethics.

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