

Jeske, Diane. *The Evil Within: Why we need Moral Philosophy*.

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In *The Evil Within: Why we need Moral Philosophy*, Diane Jeske focuses on the moral implications of several case studies involving (except for one) men morally involved in either slavery or genocide. The cases, presented after a brief introductory chapter, include three antebellum slaveholders, Thomas Jefferson, Edward Coles and Charles Colcock Jones, and three prominent Nazis, Albert Speer, Franz Stangl and Rudolph Höss. Jefferson, the defender of a Lockean view of the natural rights of men, was able to rationalise his position as a slaveholder and even father a child with one of his slaves. Jones, who held anti-slavery views as a younger man, was able to justify his position by preaching to his slaves. In contrast Coles, from the same milieu, refused to rationalise his role as a slaveholder, and instead freed his slaves and moved them and himself to Illinois. This raises the question: how could intelligent men like Jefferson and Jones go so wrong? How could they not see that slavery was clearly wrong, especially given the presence of anti-slavery ideals and the example of people like Coles who showed them an alternative possibility? Similar questions are raised by the case studies of Speer, Stangl and Höss. How could these Nazis participate in an evil as great as genocide? Finally, we have the anomalous inclusion of serial killer and rapist Ted Bundy. Bundy seems (unlike the others) to have been a genuine psychopath. Whereas all the other cases involve men who were under massive social pressures to not stand up to evil, Bundy was under no such pressure. Instead, he flouted social norms by perpetrating horrible crimes. The lessons one might learn from such a psychopath aren't likely to be highly relevant for the general population.

Jeske's case studies go over well-trodden territory and she adds little to the record since she largely follows a single source for each case study rather than synthesise a range of sources. The implications that might be generated by such a study are heavily dependent on the choice of case studies. Unfortunately, the choices here are somewhat narrow and repetitive. The Nazi cases are

particularly well-known and looking at one Nazi would probably have been enough. What would we have learned from looking at less well-known cases, such as perpetrators involved in the Rwandan genocide where much of the killing was done face-to-face with machetes? What about other cases of criminality that do not involve psychopathy? The lessons drawn from such cases might well be quite different.

As the subtitle of the book suggests, Jeske's answer to the question, "how could they do it?", is (in part) by failing to employ the resources of moral philosophy. Jeske does not make the simplistic claim that moral philosophy is either necessary or sufficient for avoiding complicity with evil, but she does claim that it is protective in this regard. She defends this by arguing that there are psychological techniques, which she explores in the next four chapters, that made the evildoing of men like Jefferson or Speer possible and that moral philosophy can help us to avoid these.

Chapter 3 examines moral relativism and whether we can make moral judgments about other cultures, such as the antebellum South. Her focus is on whether those who acted badly in such cases could have had an excuse because they held, given their historical milieu, *justified* but nonetheless false moral beliefs. Two conditions that might lead to such an excuse are isolation from alternative views and an inability to rationally consider alternatives. Here Jeske challenges Susan Wolf's well-known claims about the moral responsibility of Nazis and antebellum slaveholders by pointing to the example of Coles to show that some in the antebellum South could reject immoral views about the permissibility of slaveholding. Indeed, given the widespread discussion of anti-slavery ideals that men such as Jefferson and Jones were not only familiar with but even seemed to espouse in their youth, any claims about isolation from alternative viewpoints is implausible. Similarly, the Nazis, in trying to hide what they were doing or expertly evading knowing what was going on, must have understood that others would have very different views of their actions.

Chapter 4 looks at the proper role of consequences in moral reasoning. Jeske considers whether supposedly good consequences might have been able to justify the actions performed by the men in

her case studies. For example, Stangl might have reasoned that failing to do his job would have done no good, as someone else would simply have done it and might have done it even better, and he and his family would suffer negative consequences and perhaps even be killed. The main problem with this line of reasoning is that Stangl did not consider *all* the possibilities open to him and he gave his own interests and those of his loved ones undue weight in his deliberations. Part of Stangl's failure here was a refusal to imaginatively consider counterfactuals. Perhaps Stangl could have done his job less efficiently (this never seemed to occur to him) and tried to help the resistance and, even if he was killed in the process, he might still have saved many lives beforehand and his sacrifice might be an inspiration to others. Thinking imaginatively about all the possibilities open to us, properly weighing the interests of all, and thinking through long-term consequences are all important parts of good moral reasoning, whatever moral theory we think is right.

Chapter 5 moves on to the role of the emotions. Jeske notes that many Nazis had to learn to suppress their emotional responses to killing Jews and that Bundy, as a likely psychopath, suffered significant emotional deficits which helped to facilitate his evil actions. These examples suggest that the emotions can have an important role in the acquisition and maintenance of moral knowledge and as strong motivators to action. In her discussion Jeske focuses on empathy, understood as putting yourself in another person's shoes, and sympathy, understood as caring about another person's plight. One way to block empathy, which can in turn lead to sympathy, is to take others to be too dissimilar to us. For example, by failing to see their slaves as fully human, slaveholders could block empathising with them, which in turn dampened any sympathy they might otherwise have felt for their plight and which might have motivated them to act differently. Literature and art have complementary roles to play here in helping to extend our powers of empathetic engagement with the lives of diverse others. However, while Jeske maintains that there is an important role for the emotions, she argues that the "reflective analytic stance inculcated by philosophical studies" is also "crucial for good moral agency" (155) since our emotions can also lead us astray.

Chapter 6 looks at what Jeske calls “moral evasion”. Speer provides a compelling example of this. Speer claimed not to know about the final solution, despite being one of the most senior Nazis. But Speer also knew that there were certain things that he needed to avoid finding out. Self-deception, wilful ignorance, compartmentalization and rationalization all help to facilitate moral evasion. Compartmentalization can help to keep inconsistent beliefs away from each other so that we don’t have to confront their inconsistency. Rationalisation involves explaining away evidence when “it fails to support or even undermines what one wants to be true” (201). Our “self-schema” of ourselves as basically good people, prompts us to rationalise our actions so that they remain consistent with that self-image. Since Jefferson, for example, could not conceive of himself as having anything to do with evil, he simply “redefined evil” to maintain his self-schema (223). Bundy alone didn’t seem to have any need for moral evasion, again emphasising the peculiarities of his case compared to the others. The techniques these men employed for moral evasion are likely familiar to us all. They include thoughts such as, “I can’t do anything”, “others would do the same”, “the problem is too big” and techniques such as not thinking about it, not finding out about it, distancing ourselves emotionally and cognitively from it, and reaching for (implausible) justifications.

Jeske argues that the “study of moral philosophy can help us to avoid developing habits of thought” (204), such as those outlined above, that can lead to evil. These resources include: imaginatively thinking of the full range of possibilities open to us; cultivating our empathy and sympathy for others, especially those very different to us; critically questioning our social norms and exposing ourselves to alternative views; refusing to psychologically distance ourselves from harms and suffering; putting our actions in a broader context and taking opportunities to learn more about the impacts of our actions; being aware of the way that distractions and superficialities, such as celebrity gossip and social media, can leave no time for serious moral reflection (215); giving our own interests and those near and dear to us undue weight in our deliberations; and awareness that our self-schema can lead us to rationalise away our immoral behaviour.

Chapter 7 returns to the case of Jefferson. Jefferson is important because if someone like Jefferson could become complicit with evil, then it forces us to rethink whether we too could go similarly wrong. Here Jeske works up to the moral punchline of the book through a focus on our treatment of animals. Like slaveholders raised in a society that revolved around slavery, we are raised in a society that revolves around eating meat. While we would be morally outraged if a pet were to be confined to a small space and condemned to a life of suffering and misery, the same thing is done to millions of farm animals that we eventually eat. How do we avoid letting our “eating habits affect our image of ourselves as good people”? (228) By employing, Jeske argues, the exact same techniques employed by many of those involved in the great evils of slavery and genocide. Indeed, Jeske notes that the “mechanisms for suppressing or eliminating sentimentality” toward farm animals that we teach children so that they can happily eat meat show an “eerie parallel to the process undergone by members of the killing squads on the Eastern Front” (176). Similar considerations, although they receive much less discussion by Jeske, apply to our response to the facts of global poverty and environmental degradation (including climate change). Like slaveholders and Nazis, we use similar techniques of moral evasion to avoid confronting these issues and our involvement with them. We are basically good, right? We couldn’t be involved in great evils, could we? Anyway, what could we do about it? After all, the problems are too big, too hard, and too distant from us, everyone is doing it, there are no alternatives, and it is much easier to focus on our own interests and simply not think about such issues. Jeske forces us to move beyond smugly looking at Nazis and slaveholders and asking “how could they act like that?”, to face the more difficult moral question: are we doing the same sort of thing in terms of our treatment of animals, the global poor and the environment? Will future generations look back at us like we look back at the Nazis or slaveholders and ask: how could we act like that? Didn’t we know it was wrong? Why didn’t we do more? Are we “failing to see the moral crimes right in front of” us? (224)

Drawing connections between the Nazi genocide and factory farming is hardly new. But for the approach to have philosophical force, Jeske needs to show not just that we employ similar

psychological techniques to live with the reality of factory farming, but also that our treatment of farm animals and our practices of eating meat (even when “ethically produced”) are all morally unjustified. The fact that we are squeamish about the realities of meat production and don’t like to think about it, doesn’t mean by itself that eating meat is wrong, any more than does the fact that we are squeamish about the realities of surgery mean that there is anything morally problematic about surgery. A proper engagement with the moral debates around animal ethics would therefore seem necessary at this point, but the book never engages with these debates. This is a significant omission. Even so, we can hardly refuse the book’s closing plea to be open-minded to the fact that we might be wrong about the permissibility of our meat-eating practices.

Where does this leave the book’s main claim that studying moral philosophy is protective against evil-doing? Jefferson knew Locke’s works and Adolf Eichmann could give a reasonable paraphrase of Kant’s categorical imperative. Some Nazis liked to read (or misread) Nietzsche, and Heidegger’s relationship to Nazism is complex. Further, many of those who saved Jews during WWII did so, not because they were experts in moral philosophy, but because they felt that they couldn’t do otherwise. More recent empirical evidence suggests that specialising in ethics doesn’t seem to, as one might expect if Jeske’s claim were true, make you behave morally better than your relevant peers (Eric Schwitzgebel and Joshua Rust, “The moral behavior of ethics professors”, *Philosophical Psychology* 27:3 [2014], 293-327). A related issue that would also have been worth looking at is the role of situational forces in all but the Bundy case. This might suggest that, rather than looking to individuals to protect themselves against evil through studying moral philosophy, it would be more effective (as others, such as John Doris, have argued) to focus on changing situations in the forms of institutions, norms and practices. Another concern is that even if we *know* through studying moral philosophy that something is wrong, we still need to *prioritise* morality in action even when doing so is very costly. Indeed, this is Kant’s point about humanity’s radical evil – at the root of our character we are not *committed* to always putting morality first since we all have our price at which we give up on morality (Paul Formosa, “Kant on the Radical Evil of Human Nature”, *The Philosophical Forum*

38:3 [2007], 221–245). Will studying moral philosophy really help us to overcome our radical evil?

Unfortunately, Jeske doesn't engage with any of these issues, although of course a single book cannot do everything.

Jeske aims for her book to be broadly accessible, since if moral philosophy is to help us to avoid evil then it needs to be accessible. Accessibility often amounts to a lack of references and a failure to engage in detail with much of the relevant literature, while maintaining a punchy and lively prose.

There are many times when I wanted, and the arguments in the book would have benefited from, a deeper engagement with the relevant literatures, beyond a few token references to well-known texts. For example, for a book with "evil" in the title, it is surprising that the book has almost no direct engagement with the extensive contemporary literature on evil. Specialists in the relevant literatures touched on by this book will consequently likely find themselves frustrated at times by this lack of deeper engagement. But while missing the detail that specialists will be looking for, the book also risks being too long and dense to be genuinely accessible to a much broader audience. Even so, the overall picture of evil doing that the book develops is compelling, and the moral questions it forces us to raise about ourselves are timely and significant.

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