Figures of Evil in the Business World

Daryl Koehn

When you ask people "What is evil?", their responses are striking in several respects. They tend to name individuals, singling out certain people as evil—e.g., Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, or Joseph Stalin. They typically view evil as inhering in people or in quasi-personal agents (e.g., devils or vampires), not in animals or natural forces. Respondents never describe themselves as evil or as in any way complicitous in evil deeds. A recent poll of Americans who regularly attend church estimated that only three percent believe that they are the ones who might go to hell. And they perceive evil as an active, creative, and even autonomous force at work in the world.

This last response suggests that perhaps the popular imagination knows something that ethical theorists do not. Ethicists who study businesses and organizations typically attribute malevolence and cruelty to the part of businesspeople to either a failure of moral reasoning or to a complete lack of empathic imagination. Some ethical lapses do appear to be the result of individuals' failure to think; they operate on a kind of moral autopilot, following a script they have never thought to question. The pilots who, during the 1950s, routinely dumped fuel into the ocean prior to landing did not set out to harm the environment. They were simply following the landing procedures they had been taught by those pilots who were their teachers.

If evil is identical with mindlessness, then the best way to combat it is to instill habits of mindfulness. Those of us who teach ethics try to do so by asking our students to consider cases with a view to determining where and why people went wrong. We look for revealing patterns and causes. We
argue that mindlessness results when employees or managers are so stressed that they do not have time to ponder their acts, when they focus only on the bottom line or when they adopt a short-term perspective. Individuals unwittingly mislead themselves when they use bad metaphors to characterize their activities, referring to business as a "game" or to students as "customers." We act mindlessly if and when we get so caught up in making money that we fail to ask ourselves what money means to us. Since money is the bearer of our psychic desires, we easily become unthinking, uncaring slaves to money and to our desires if we never stop to examine the role money is playing in our lives.

But is evil the same as mindlessness? This paper explores the possibility that evil sometimes assumes a more active and creative form. In particular, evil often appears to be identical with imaginative figurings that have the effect of (1) absolving the imagining agent of any responsibility; (2) preventing this agent from engaging in self-scrutiny; and (3) reinforcing the agent’s view that he or she is acting ethically and, therefore, does not need to change his or her behavior. In the long run, these three effects will work to render the individual mindless. However, such mindlessness is better understood as the result of evil, rather than as identical with it. This paper explores the possibility that evil is imaginative figuring that has the three effects just listed.

A Few General Remarks about Evil

Evil is often conflated with harm, yet it cannot be identical with harm or damage. A tornado may destroy a barn, but the barn did not suffer evil. Even if the tornado kills a farmer in the barn, we do not think the farmer was the victim of evil. He had the bad luck to suffer an accident resulting from a destructive natural force. Natural forces that produce destruction and death are not evil. If they were, we would have to say that the whole of nature "bloody in tooth and claw" is evil.

We reserve the concept of doing evil for human or quasi-human acts, intentions, or modes of thinking and imagining. A dog, cat, or horse can be bad; and an animal may be the victim of evil (e.g., animals tortured by human beings), but only human acts appear to fall under the rubric "evil." Thus, while evil may be harmful to the self or to others, it is not identical with harm or damage.

Should we, then, define evil as harm produced by malicious people? This definition has the merit of associating the doing of evil specifically
with human beings, but it errs in making evil reside in the harm. Suppose that just as a serial killer is about to strike his next victim, someone else happens on to the scene, scaring away the would-be murderer. The killer fails to murder anyone, yet most people would not say that the fact that the killer has been frustrated makes the attempted murder less evil. This sort of example suggests that evil resides in a malicious intent or in whatever imaginings lie behind the intent, not in the harm produced as a result of an agent having this intent or entertaining this imaginative figuring. Indeed, if Socrates and Confucius are correct, it is impossible for anyone to harm us. According to these thinkers, the only real harm or evil we can suffer is the damage we inflict upon our own souls by doing bad deeds. Suffering an injustice may not be pleasant, but it does not rot our being in the way that plotting and executing an injustice does.

Still, we must be wary of too quickly identifying evil with intent to harm. Individuals may be swept up in mass hysteria. When members of a community seize upon a scapegoat, they usually intend to rid themselves of a curse or disease. They do not deliberately plan to hurt the singled-out party. There is no sadism or malice involved. Ideologues who persecute their fellow citizens tell themselves that they are doing so for a good cause. They think that they are creating a better, more just society and assisting those with false consciousness to rectify themselves. These ideological soldiers may endure many setbacks and much pain and may reap little in the way of material rewards or honor. They see their “virtue” as being its own reward. In these types of cases, evil seems to be at work, but it is a stretch to impute a sadistic or malicious intent to do evil to the hysterical or ideological individual.

A case can be made that hysteria and ideology do not conduce to either individual or societal happiness in the long run. Should we, then, define evil as whatever human behaviors, intentions, imaginings and/or modes of thought interfere with personal and societal thriving and flourishing? This revised definition keeps evil squarely in the human realm. Under this definition, evil may be intentional, but it need not be. Evil is an effect of sorts—the interference with human flourishing—but this definition does not reduce evil to any particular harmful act (e.g., murder, theft, or adultery) or to any particular suffering (e.g., intense pain or the loss of life). If a would-be serial killer is frustrated in his every foray, he would nonetheless be evil insofar as his preoccupation with murder would interfere with his ability to develop his distinctively human capacity for love, justice, and kindness, his
ability to make and keep friends, and his ability to refine his judgment so that he could do the right thing, at the right time, in the right manner and for the right reason. In short, his preoccupation with death would prevent him from living a full and rich life, and would thus qualify as evil under this definition. A similar point applies to the ideologue: the ideologue who rigidly enforces rules never learns from experience. If she sacrifices her friends for the sake of a "higher cause," she destroys the very people who may lovingly teach her some lessons she needs to know. Her mode of thinking and way of being, like that of the serial killer, interfere with her ability (and with that of others) to thrive.

This last definition, that evil is whatever human behaviors, intentions, imaginings and/or modes of thought interfere with personal and societal thriving and flourishing, seems the most defensible. Yet it does not tell us much about the way evil operates. On the surface at least, the unsuccessful serial killer and ideologue seem quite different. The former is preoccupied with plotting other people's deaths, the latter with saving the world. The frustrated serial killer fails to realize his aim, while the ideologue may well succeed in creating a totalitarian system and in ushering in a new "golden age." Is it possible to identify shared traits or dimensions in those "evil" modes of thinking or imaginings that retard the thriving of human beings?

The next section examines three different images or modes of self-construal—the avenger, the expert and the reformer. I have chosen these three mode-types because those individuals who understand themselves to be experts or reformers do not think that they are doing anything wrong when they use their expertise or initiate reforms. On the contrary, they believe that they are acting justly and accomplishing a great good. The business ethics literature to date has focused on individuals who break the law and do so knowingly. We need to expand our investigation into evil in the business world, by considering this second class of people who do evil, while maintaining or believing that they are innocent of any wrongdoing.

Three Evil Types

The Avenger

Management theorists who study evil in the workplace have identified four sources of evil: (1) greed, lust, and ambition; (2) egotism and revenge; (3) ideology; and (4) sadism understood as delighting in hurting others. Most
attention has been devoted to the first, second and fourth causes. Consequently, theorists have described an evil or immoral imagination as one that values the suffering of others as an end in itself (which would not seem to apply in the case of ideological evil). Although these theorists do not tend to delve deeply into the nature of evil, they are aware that evil may be present, even if no one (apart from perhaps the imaginer) is harmed. Someone who fantasizes about revenge may nevertheless be said to have an evil or immoral imagination if she values the suffering of others as an end in itself, regardless of whether her fantasies come to fruition. These fantasies might even lead to beneficial outcomes (e.g., the vengeful employee may work especially hard to show up and, thereby get revenge on, his or her supervisor) and still be evil, a point consistent with the last definition I offered in the previous section.

My interest here is the image or figuring entertained by the wrongdoer. Studies of revenge provide insight into this figuring. The figuring may be quite rich, reflecting a fair amount of attention and concern:

Vengeful individuals may contemplate how they would like another to suffer or be ridiculed, and part of the exercise involves representing not just how the victim will look, but what the victim will feel, when he or she experiences the revenge. Planned, deliberate cruelty can be just as demanding on a person’s emotional, cognitive, and imaginative powers as virtue.

As I have argued elsewhere, even the vicious may exhibit a great deal of empathy. Vengeful employees are no exception. They may be able to enter into the feelings of their planned victims quite well. They certainly can imaginatively project harms and benefits likely to result from their revenge. If we characterize the morally good imagination as “an ability to imaginatively discern various possibilities within a given situation and to envision the potential help and harm that are likely to result from a given action,” then the vengeful do not differ that much from the virtuous.

We must say more about the content or form of the evil imagination if we are to distinguish it from ethically good imagination. What, if anything, is special about evil images of the vengeful? These images represent the avengers as afflicting their victims, making these parties suffer even unto death. Yet Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the others who plotted the assassination of Hitler necessarily imagined Hitler’s death. They would not have been able to plan an assassination without doing so, but most people
would hesitate to condemn these would-be assassins as evil. Prosecutors who seek the death penalty similarly imagine the demise of the people they seek to convict for having committed capital crimes. While the death penalty may itself be evil, the fact that there is such a division of opinion on the morality of the death penalty should make us think twice before accusing prosecutors of exercising an evil imagination.

Does, then, the difference between the ethically good and the evil imagination lie in the imaginer's attitude toward the suffering of fellow human beings? There is no evidence that Bonhoeffer and his co-conspirators gleefully or joyfully planned Hitler's assassination. The planning was sober and gut-wrenching. Vengeful people, by contrast, take delight in the thought of their victims' suffering and in the plotting of their revenge. In this respect, the avenger differs from the thoughtful state prosecutor. Prosecutors may seek the death penalty because the law obliges them to do so. Their office or role mandates that they undertake this course of action. In some cases, prosecutors may be personally opposed to capital punishment yet nonetheless seek it with a burdened heart. Those employees who seek revenge and take the law into their own hands are not, however, acting in accordance with a role-based duty. Making another suffer does not burden but rather gladdens the heart of the avenging individual.

Moreover, Bonhoeffer acted to secure justice. Hitler and the Germans he commanded were killing millions of innocent people. Assassinating Hitler may well have seemed the only way to stop—or, at least, slow—the murderous German juggernaut. Bonhoeffer and his associates considered other courses. Contrast this thoughtfulness with the mindset of those who seek revenge. Revenge-seeking employees dwell on some perceived slight by a manager or co-worker. Studies have shown that violent workers often exhibit "a disgruntled attitude regarding perceived injustices in the workplace." The thought of the insult and injustice gnaws at the person. The obsessive return to the supposed harm increases the sense of being wronged. Unlike Bonhoeffer and his associates, vengeful individuals do not explore alternative ways of addressing their grievance. Unlike state prosecutors and district attorneys, they do not struggle to characterize the precise nature of an injury, the circumstances surrounding the crime, and the penalty appropriate for those convicted of this type of injury. Desiring revenge, they return again and again to the magnitude of the harm they supposedly suffered; their sense that they have suffered a great injustice becomes the locus of their attention. They proceed purely subjectively,
emotionally and in an obsessively compulsive fashion, identifying themselves with the retaliation they plot. As one of Shakespeare's characters puts it, "I am revenge."

Vengeful employees are not interested in exploring how to rectify any perceived injustice. They simply want to "get even," a formulation which reveals the dynamics at work. Because the aggrieved, embittered person's imagination keeps inflating the perceived injustice, there is no way to objectively assess the magnitude of the injustice and the type of response that would be commensurate or "even" with the magnitude. The vengeful person simply uses the mantra of "getting even" as a way of avoiding having to stop and carefully specify the exact nature of the injury or the precise character of an appropriate remedy for the supposed wrong.

To paraphrase Bishop Desmond Tutu: vengeful employees do not have the courage of their convictions but rather they possess the conviction of their pumped-up, overwrought courage. Aristotle observes that we commit those wrongs that are suited to our character:

The ambitious man does wrong for sake of honor, the quick-tempered from anger, the lover of victory for the sake of victory...the stupid man because he has misguided notions of right and wrong, the shameless man because he does not mind what people think of him.

It is the "embittered man" who wrongs "for the sake of revenge."11 While embittered individuals may not consciously desire to be wronged, they often are on the lookout for a perceived insult. Venting their spleen gives them pleasure. Our habits shape our character in such a way that we take pleasure in some things and pain in others. Revenge originates in anger at a perceived insult, and embittered individuals who are angry at the world find revenge pleasant. If they fail to get their revenge, they are pained.12

As the injury becomes ever greater in the mind of the revenge-seeker, the target of the revenge appears "hostile, malevolent, or sinister."13 It is not merely that the co-worker or manager did evil. The targeted individual is seen as being evil. Vengeful persons do not stop at hating the sin; they hate the sinner as well. As Seabright and Schminke insightfully note, this demonizing dehumanizes the co-worker, creating psychological distance between avenger and victim. Even if the relationship was once close, dehumanization serves to redefine the relationship, making it easier for avengers to do their dirty work.14
I would go even further: self-styled avenging angels use the breach of the relationship to add fuel to the fire. Truly good friends cut each other some slack. Since they have a history together, the history serves as a brake on the tendency to demonize one another. A friend reasons, "My co-worker/friend could not possibly have intended me injury. I must have misunderstood what has happened. I will take up the matter with my friend." In the case of revenge, subjectivity triumphs. The avenger does not want to get at the facts; he or she wants to get even. The avenger reasons, "My co-worker/friend should never have done me this harm. The harm is especially great because I never would have expected such injustice from one whom I trusted for all of these years. Therefore, my so-called friend is a hypocrite (traitor, monster, etc.) who deserves to suffer at my hand." Past intimacy functions as an accelerator, not as a brake, because the avenger has already chosen, or at least committed himself or herself to, the act of revenge. Reasoning does not serve to illumine the meaning of past actions or circumstances with a view to improving choice but only to marshal "facts" in the service of rationalizing an already imagined and chosen act. By plotting revenge, the agent gives shape to or formalizes a new moral order in which retributive "justice" is the only possible response.

What makes the revenger so trigger-happy? Revenge appears to have its roots in pride. Those who seek revenge are angry, and anger may be defined as an impulse, accompanied by pain, to a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight directed without justification towards what concerns oneself or towards what concerns one's friends.

We feel slights because we esteem ourselves and our loved ones. To provoke revenge, an insult need not be "conspicuous" to others. It is sufficient if we perceive the insult. Yet pride is tricky. If we are prickly, we will discern insults when none is intended. Indeed, an obsession with our honor easily translates into a hypersensitivity or a morbid obsession with our status or reputation. It does not take much to set off a prickly person.

In addition, the vengeful person's imagination creates an excuse for his or her retaliation. The vengeful imagine themselves to be agents of justice who are entitled to exact punishment for the injury they believe they have suffered. Creatively casting themselves as heroes in their private psychodramas, they feel especially justified in exacting revenge because society sanctions punishment of wrongdoers. It is true that we collectively
recognize the need for and desirability of retributive justice and of punishment. Society, though, has not authorized vengeful persons to be agents of justice. Avengers grant themselves this prerogative and confuse revenge with punishment in the process. Punishment is done for the sake of the party punished. We correct the child so that the child will acquire those habits conducive to a good and satisfying life. The parent takes no joy in punishing the child. Indeed, the father or mother may find it painful to punish. Still, parents do so because they know that the child benefits. Those who enact revenge do not have the good of their victims in mind. They care only for themselves, seeking to discharge their bitterness and to gain the pleasure that arises when their anger attains its goal of making another person suffer. Such anger is sweeter "by far than the honeycomb dripping with its sweetness, and spreads through the hearts of men."18

Here we encounter something of a paradox: although avenging parties care only about their pleasure and, in this respect, are thoroughly selfish, their anger can be so all consuming—it can spread through their hearts—that they lose themselves in the pleasure of the vengeful moment. This loss of self helps to account for why workplace violence so often results in several deaths and usually involves a gun.19 It is easier to shoot than to stab people. Guns enable vengeful employees to indulge the delight they feel in venting their anger. Workers angry with their supervisors or co-workers will shoot indiscriminately. If revenge were identical with just punishment, the action would be more targeted. We do not intentionally or knowingly punish the innocent but only those who have committed some wrong. Vengeful parties simply use an alleged wrong as a pretext for distancing themselves from their victims and for giving themselves a license to kill. The revenge is so sweet that workplace killers frequently will kill themselves rather than be apprehended. They cannot bear to have anyone put a stop to their pleasure, so they kill themselves instead of facing a trial and incarceration.

The Expert

The business world is now full of experts. We have time and motion study experts, leadership experts, human relations experts, systems experts. Although these experts are accorded a great deal of respect, I would suggest that the way in which experts construe themselves is ethically problematic. We can begin to see what the problem is with this role if we ask: who is an expert?
The expert is someone who sets himself or herself a goal and then acts to attain that goal. Experts have knowledge or technical skill that they put in the service of attaining the goal they have given themselves. Although societies have long honored wise men and women, the expert is a relatively new type that arose in the West during the Victorian era. Although the expert has knowledge, this knowledge is not the same as classical knowledge or medieval scientia. Richard McKeon defines "scientia" as a "passion or perfection resulting from the union of something intelligible and an intellectual power."20 This union is possible only when things are known through their proper causes. Knowledge or the union of the intelligible with the intellectual power arises only when the object of study guides the inquirer’s or scientist’s investigation. The object of study regulates the acquisition and application of scientia. By contrast, the expert supplies the end or object of study. Experts become expert by acquiring an ability to repeatedly produce the outcome they prefer. That is why the term "expert" was first applied to marksmen who could successfully and repeatedly hit whatever target the marksman chose.21

Acquiring technical knowledge or expertise typically takes years of study and practice. Although experts may not earn much money, they expect to be respected and honored for their wealth of knowledge. As a result, they typically are very resistant to the idea of peer review. Experts contend that, when it comes to assessing the technical competence of a doctor or lawyer, their peers are the best judges. Only those who know the symptoms of diabetes will be able to say whether a doctor incompetently gave a clean bill of health to a patient who subsequently turned out to be diabetic. Only a lawyer who knows the resources available to attorneys will be able to assess whether a fellow practitioner negligently failed to use these resources on behalf of a client. Practices, though, have dimensions that go beyond the merely technical. Surely when it comes to evaluating these less technical matters, laypeople would make fine judges. So why then are experts so loath to allow laypeople on review boards?

Experts can and do use peer review as a way to avoid accountability for their action. Members of the good old boy (or good old girl) network may be reluctant to find against a peer. Who knows when the tables will turn and they will be at the mercy of the one they are now judging? Peers refuse to testify against each other in court or to break the code of silence to share with the injured patient what was said during the peer review of the incident.
Experts' focus on ends they give themselves can lead them to think that the end justifies the means. They tell themselves that their goal is noble or worthy and then use this nobility as a reason not to think overly much about the means they choose to employ. If it is good to save a life, then what harm is there in harvesting cells from aborted fetuses to use to benefit a dying patient? The expert often minimizes any harms arising from the choice of the means—e.g., the fetuses were dead anyway, so why not put their cells to good use? Sometimes experts will acknowledge harms, but they counter these harms by offering cost-benefit analyses. These analyses frequently are weighted in favor of those means necessary to attain the end, which the expert takes to be good beyond question. Since experts invent their goals or ends, they feel free to justify their actions without engaging in shared deliberations with anyone outside their area of expertise, including those who are supposedly being benefited by the choice of means.22

Here we encounter another paradox: although experts put their energy into achieving a goal they set for themselves, they often have little understanding of the goal. For example, business management experts have created an entirely new specialty—leadership studies. These leadership "experts" purport to know what makes a good leader and how to teach others to become such. So who, according to these experts, is a good leader? Leaders have a goal, direction, purpose or end.23 Without a goal, leading would be no different from wandering. But having a goal is not sufficient. The leader must be able to guide others in such a way that leaders and followers realize this goal. Thus, the current management literature typically defines a good business leader as anyone who efficiently achieves a set goal. A profit maximizer who increases productivity thus qualifies as a good leader. The problem is that profit maximizing may not, in fact, be a good goal. In the expertise model, efficiency supplants genuine effectiveness, understood as knowledgeably realizing a goal truly worth achieving.

Notice, too, how the expert model of leadership completely insulates the leader from criticism. For many years, leaders were thought of as visionaries who single-handedly hit upon ends and the best way to achieve these goals. It was not until relatively recently that leadership gurus realized that there were no leaders if there were no followers. The advent of the "servant leader" model, which suggested that the true leader must serve his or her followers, was considered a major breakthrough for leadership studies.24 It is telling, but not surprising, that for years leadership experts
never bothered to examine the conditions under which people would follow another's direction. The experts' focus is always on their goal and their ability to attain this goal. Little attention is paid to what other people contribute to an endeavor.

Leadership studies remain weak because the discipline fails to closely examine the conditions under which followers are loyal to leaders. A leader is not necessarily good just because he or she has followers. Surely we would want to consider when thoughtful people choose to be guided by a leader. Masses could follow a pied piper to their death, but it would not follow that the pied piper is a "good" leader. This sort of issue does not get raised by those experts who have endorsed (explicitly or implicitly) an expertise model for leadership, because their focus is not on the nature and meaning of the goal or end of governing but rather on ways to efficiently achieve whatever end the leader happens to select:

Managers themselves and most writers about management conceive of themselves as morally neutral characters whose skills enable them to devise the most efficient means of achieving whatever end is proposed. Whether a given manager is effective or not is on the dominant view a quite different question from that of the morality of the ends, which his effectiveness serves or fails to serve.25

Management theorists have looked at the methods employed by leaders. People can be led in a variety of ways—through persuasion, force, coercion, empowerment, or by means of example. Leadership experts—and this category includes those executives who fancy themselves good leaders—equate ethical leadership with use of the right means of guidance. Yet surely whether leadership truly is good depends on where we are being led.26 Experts' reluctance to look at the end is a direct consequence of the way in which they figure or imagine the role of the expert—the expert does not discover a naturally good end but rather posits a goal he or she finds worthwhile pursuing.

My quarrel is not with the experts' claim that some methods of exercising influence are better than others. I readily concede that leading through persuasion is objectively better than controlling people by means of force. What I do not concede is the expert leaders' and leadership experts' claim that a leader is "good" as long as he or she refrains from coercing followers and uses techniques of persuasion and empowerment.
Are leaders "good" even if they persuade their followers to adopt a course of action that is unjust, criminal or deadly? For experts, the exact character of the destination is irrelevant. All that matters is that the goals and means are "autonomously chosen." Expert leaders and leadership experts never bother to ask what the good is and whether the leader loves the good.27

Since, by definition, "expert" doctors, lawyers or business leaders create ends or goals, they inevitably fail to see that these ends exist in a hierarchy. Technical knowledge and an obsession with information supplant wisdom. Wisdom begins in the understanding that there is what Gabriel Marcel terms "a hierarchy of ways of living." In this hierarchy, some satisfactions are "higher" and more genuine than others.28 Belief in and understanding of this hierarchy enables us to order our desires and wants. We can take the measure of what is most worthy of being pursued and then act with moderation to realize this goal. With the rise of expertise, excess displaces moderation. For experts, their self-selected goals are the most important; they will pursue these goals with a vengeance. It is not uncommon to hear lawyers claim that they will be "immoderate in their zeal" to exonerate their clients or doctors proclaim that "everything possible" must be done to save their patients. No wonder that many people in society think attorneys are shady characters and that patients flock to hospices in order to avoid end-of-life treatments more akin to torture than to therapy! "The moment an excess . . . is regarded as a good, we are outside wisdom properly so called" because "ne quid nimis" ("nothing too much") is "a constant of universal wisdom."

Pride is a vice of experts as well as of vengeful souls. Experts cast themselves as heroes or saviors. The health of the patient ceases to be the end of medicine when doctors declare that "immortality is the goal of medicine." Clients and others who are dependent on the self-styled experts have good cause to worry. The heroic doctor who has no understanding of the hierarchy of life's goods will not stop to ask the patient whether the patient wants some treatment. The doctor reasons, "Of course, the patient must want this procedure. It conduces to health/immortality. That is the greatest good (because I have declared it so)." Maybe the patient does not want a treatment that might leave her comatose. Being conscious enough to spend the last moments of her life lovingly chatting with her family may well be a higher satisfaction than striving to prolong a life that eventually must end anyway. While the client may not legitimately dictate terms of service to the expert, clients certainly should be able to get a hearing when
it comes to deciding among human goods. By displacing wisdom in favor of technical knowledge, the figure of the expert silences the voice of both wisdom and of those affected by this expertise.

As the expert’s self-posed goals take the place of genuine goods, desire satisfaction substitutes for true worth. What desire wants most is to be gratified as soon as possible. A nation of experts values instantaneity above all. We clamor for quicker transportation and communication without bothering to ask whether we have anything worth saying or any place worth going to. Our business executives concentrate on short-term results instead of developing long-term sound strategies; they demand increasingly quick turnaround on projects. Wisdom, which requires patience and years of experience, is shunted to the side. It is small wonder, then, that our instantaneous culture worships youth and discards the elderly who are the ones most likely to have learned wisdom.

The Reformer

The reformer is a third type often encountered in business and politics. A corporate board brings in a new CEO to fix the problems the predecessor either caused or failed to solve. The reformer usually claims to know exactly what must be done to solve the company’s problems. The replacement CEO establishes a goal, such as increasing profits or return on assets, improving quality, or consolidating operations, and then sets about achieving it. Since the reformers’ focus is on achieving this goal, they almost always have a very instrumental outlook akin to that of experts. Like vengeful employees, they see their “good” end as justifying the means. Reformers do not understand Mahatma Gandhi’s insight that “the means are the ends in progress.”

They agree with Lenin that “you must break a few eggs to make an omelette.” Like vengeful individuals, reformers tend to dehumanize those who may suffer as a result of the reformer’s deeds—the citizens of the Soviet Union were mere "eggs" to be cracked and then discarded. In the case of business, CEOs rely on euphemisms to redescribe the means they have chosen in order to hide what they are doing. Firings have become "layoffs." The new term makes it sound as if the workers may be called back to work, but, for the most part, callbacks have been rare during the last two decades of massive firings in America. Some euphemisms are utterly bizarre. Many years ago Harper’s magazine published a list of common synonyms for firing—these included "let go," "decimate," and—my
favorite—"exterminate." *Newsweek* reported that "corporations had . . . used the following euphemisms during the recent downsizing craze: 'release of resources' (Bank of America); 'career change opportunity' (Clifford of Vermont); 'rightsizing the bank' (Harris Bank of Chicago); 'strengthening global effectiveness' (Proctor & Gamble); [and] 'normal payroll adjustment' (Wal-Mart)." For its part, "Xerox announced 'involuntary force reductions,' while at Digital Equipment the process was described as 'involuntary methodologies.' Tandem Computers did 'focused reductions.' And a while ago Sun Oil Company said they were 'managing down their staff resources.'"

The massive "layoffs" of the 1980s were the result of "re-engineering," another instrumentalizing word designed to disguise the fact that employees were losing their jobs. In order to avoid responsibility, executives adopt language that minimizes the extent of their responsibility. The "firm" initiates layoffs, and the "firm" takes action to improve the bottom line. Sometimes this tendency of management to separate itself and corporate employees from the firm become so extreme as to be comical.

A recent winning entry for the Dilbert award came from Microsoft. Microsoft executives declared that "as of tomorrow, employees will be able to access the building using individual security card. Pictures will be taken next Wednesday and employees will receive their cards in two weeks." This mindlessness results from reforming managers divorcing the "corporation" from the people who constitute the corporation. To put the point differently: the executives have put doctrine (in this case, the reform plan and new rules) above people. The elevation of doctrine above individuals is, along with milieu control and the loading of language, one of the documented techniques used by brainwashers.

Firing people or initiating change is not an evil act. Sometimes executives may have to fire employees as part of corporate reorganizations needed to preserve the firm as a viable enterprise; some changes are for the better. The evil lies rather in the reformers' dissembling, which works to help them evade responsibility and to prevent employees and outsiders from asking tough questions about the reformers' actions. The reformers may not intend to dissemble; they may not even do so consciously. Nevertheless, their mind-set operates in a manner that may be deemed "evil" because it does not conduce to human thriving.

Reformers demand that employees "get with the program" and "get totally behind management." The incoming executive wants complete
"alignment." This type of talk should raise a red flag. Groupthink is a perfect case of complete "alignment," which leads to problems because it is not a form of thinking at all. It is mindlessness masquerading as consensus. In addition, as Gabriel Marcel astutely notes, all talk about "commitment" to a cause should be viewed with suspicion. When reformers command employees to create a new corporate order, they substitute the creation of values for recognition of objective goods. Such a move dislodges wisdom and intellectual piety, which always respects the past as a source of learning, in favor of innovation. Reformers see no need to learn from their predecessors because they are certain that the latter did not know how to manage a corporation. If an employee dares to raise a question or to suggest that a proposed reform may be problematic, he or she is demonized for failing to be a "team player" (i.e., "an aligned employee").

Conclusion

What, then, if anything do these three corporate types have in common that would justify us in calling the type, or the actions of someone of this type, "evil"? Since every individual is always more than a type, or even an array of types, we should be wary of calling any particular person "evil." These types, though, do share numerous troublesome traits. These traits include: the substitution of a subjective object of desire for an objective good and the use of strategies—distancing, dehumanizing, dissembling—that make it easier to realize this desire. The strategies function to undermine any disagreement by refusing to grant objectors a hearing. We are told that "A layperson is too ignorant to understand what an expert does" or "My coworker who has betrayed me is an animal and thus can have nothing to say to me." These strategies function to silence opposition by preventing observers from discerning what is going on—e.g., "we are not firing anyone; we are simply rightsizing the firm." In all of these cases, the strategies serve to absolve the agent from any responsibility for his or her actions and to prevent the agent from engaging in self-scrutiny. Using these strategies, agents cast themselves as ethical heroes who have no need for introspection because their actions are unquestionably noble or just.

These shared traits or behaviors are evil not because those who employ them intend harm. Nor are they evil because they produce harm. We can imagine a case in which we see through executives' linguistic dissembling and successfully intervene to prevent harm from occurring. The above trait-behaviors are evil because they displace the quest for wisdom from the
center of our lives. Instead of seeking the truth and the good, we strive to satisfy whatever desire happens to strike us as attractive at the time, and we take steps to keep anyone else from interfering with our strivings. Octavio Paz is correct: "Neither stars nor atoms, nor plants nor animals know evil. The universe is innocent, even when it sinks a continent or explodes a galaxy. Evil is human, exclusively human."36

Notes
10. Seabright and Schminke, *op cit*.
13. Seabright and Schminke, *op cit*.
15. This observation explains why most workplace violence occurs among people who know each other. "The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) reported that employees murdered over 100 bosses and co-workers in 1997 . . . . Workplace violence is the leading
cause of death for women in the workplace and the second leading cause of
death for men. According to Northwestern National Life Insurance Com-
pany, 2,500 workers per 100,000 have been physically attacked on the job.
44% of workplace attacks were committed by customers or clients; . . . 20% by co-workers, 7% by bosses, [and] 3% by former employees." See work-
18. Greek proverb quoted approvingly by Aristotle in his Rhetoric.
19. "Homicide was the leading occupational risk for those working in
sales or as supervisors and proprietors, police, detectives, taxicab drivers
and cashiers. Eighty percent of victims were shot to death; 8.6 percent were
e1103_01.html.
20. Richard P. McKeon, ed., Selections from Medieval Philosophers,
legitimation of Professional Authority," American Behavioral Scientist,
v.38, no. 7 (June/July 1995): 990-1002.
22. For examples of such behavior, see Daryl Koehn, "The Ethics of
Biobusiness, Technology and Genetic Engineering," Bulletin of Science and
Technology, October, 1999.
23. Ron Duska and Joe DesJardins, "Aristotelian Leadership and
25. Alasdair Maclntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of
27. Duska and DesJardins write that "discerning proper goals and
cleverness in achieving them are still only two-thirds of the story with
prudence. The third and final aspect of prudence is being attracted to the
proper goal, or, as Plato would put it, ‘[having a] love of the good.’ In
contrast to the merely clever leader, the prudent ethical leader will have a
love for the good, and that good will involve the well-being of all stake-
holders. The ethical leader will know how to achieve efficiency while
meeting the just claims of all stakeholders. The prudent leader will look for win-win situations, which may not always be possible [to achieve]."

30. Ibid.
33. The Dilbert Management Awards winning entries are at http://www.holyzoo.com/humor/news_etc/X0027_Dilbert_management_a.html.
35. Marcel, p. 48.