IS EVIL ACTION QUALITATIVELY DISTINCT FROM ORDINARY WRONGDOING?

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Adam Morton, Stephen de Wijze, Hillel Steiner, and Eve Garrard have defended the view that evil action is qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing. By this, they do not mean that evil actions feel different to ordinary wrongs, but that they have motives or effects that are not possessed to any degree by ordinary wrongs. Despite their professed intentions, Morton and de Wijze both offer accounts of evil action that fail to identify a clear qualitative difference between evil and ordinary wrongdoing. In contrast, both Steiner’s and Garrard’s accounts of evil do point to qualitative distinctions between kinds of action, but it is implausible that either account correctly characterizes evil. The most plausible accounts maintain that evil actions have a necessary connection to extreme harms, and this suggests that evil is not qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing.

I. Qualitatively Distinct Evil

The status of the concept of evil is under dispute. Some people think that it is a useless concept that has no proper place within contemporary morality [Clendinnen 1998: 104], while others argue for its re-examination and revival [Neiman 2003: 2 – 3; Card 2002: 3 – 4; Morton 2004: 2 – 6]. Clearly, the question of whether we ought to use the concept of evil depends on its content. If evil means that which is extremely wrong or bad, then it is uncontroversial that many actions and many people count as evil. It is plausible that some evil-revivalists, including Claudia Card and Susan Neiman, use the concept of evil in roughly this way [Russell 2007]. However, it is not clear that the everyday meaning of evil is just that which is extremely wrong or bad. In recent discussions of evil action, Stephen de Wijze, Hillel Steiner, and Eve Garrard have claimed that evil actions are not simply more wrong or more harmful than ordinary wrong actions, but that evil constitutes a different kind of wrongdoing.¹ They suggest that evil action

¹Some recent discussions of evil are focused on evil persons or evil character rather than evil action; for instance, Daniel Haybron [2002]. There might well be close connections between evil actions and evil people, but the nature of these connections is not clear. Many contributors to recent discussions of evil give conceptual priority to actions and derive claims regarding the evil people from prior claims about the actions those people are disposed to perform. For instance, Card claims that evil actions can be performed by people who are not evil, but that people count as evil through possessing a marked disposition to perform evil actions [2002: 21]. This paper is focused on accounts of evil action, leaving open the question of the relation between evil action and evil persons.
is qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing. In his recent book, *On Evil*, Adam Morton does not explicitly claim that evil action is qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing, but he puts forwards an account of evil that bears close similarities to those advocated by de Wijze, Steiner, and Garrard.

The claim that evil action is qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing seems intuitively appealing, and deserves to be evaluated. Before such an evaluation, though, we must get a clear grasp on the notion of a qualitative difference between two classes of action. According to one possible reading, a qualitative difference is a felt or experienced difference. In many cases it feels like something to perform an action, to contemplate or observe an action, and to be acted on. Thus one kind of action could be described as being qualitatively distinct from another kind in that performing, contemplating, observing, or receiving actions of the first kind feels different to performing, contemplating, observing, or receiving actions of the second kind. If this is what they mean by a qualitative difference, de Wijze, Steiner, and Garrard would be claiming that evil action feels different to ordinary wrongdoing.

Comments made by de Wijze and Morton suggest that the contemplation and the suffering of evil actions does feel different to the contemplation and the suffering of ordinary wrongs. For instance, de Wijze writes:

> Evil, in a different way from merely wrongful actions, leaves behind a moral residue which, if it is possible to remove, requires a special ritual of purification. The horror, the disgust and incomprehension evoked by evil suggests a qualitative difference, something that distinguishes it from wrongful or even very wrongful acts.  

[2002: 213]

Morton makes a similar claim:

> We have a visceral revulsion from extremely evil acts. The revulsion is most vivid when the acts involve physical violence, but it extends to other acts produced by similar patterns of motivation, even if they do not have the same emotional immediacy. Evil acts have a quality that in Ancient times would have made us fear that the Gods might send a plague in reprisal, rather than simply making us despair at the incapacities of mere mortals to manage their lives together.  

[2004: 13]

The claim that evil action feels different to ordinary wrongdoing is relatively uncontentious. Indeed, it is a claim that could be endorsed by people who think that evil actions are simply very harmful wrongs. It is plausible that contemplating or suffering any very harmful wrong would feel different to contemplating or suffering an ordinary wrong. However, when de Wijze, Steiner, and Garrard claim that evil action is qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing, they contrast their own accounts with the view that evil action is merely very harmful wrongdoing. This suggests that they
take a qualitative difference between actions to be something other than a difference in how those actions feel.

When de Wijze, Steiner, and Garrard appeal to a qualitative difference between types of action, they draw a distinction between qualitative differences and quantitative differences. For instance, Steiner notes that some people use evil as a ‘wrong intensifier’, where the intensification consists of a mere increase in the severity of the properties that are possessed by ordinary wrongs. The correct view, according to Steiner, is that evil acts are distinguished from ordinary wrongs through the presence of an extra quality that is completely absent in the performance of ordinary wrongs, just as aggravated assault is distinguished from ordinary assault via the addition of an intent to murder, or via the use of a dangerous weapon [2002: 184]. Garrard agrees, claiming that

there is a qualitative, and not merely quantitative, difference between evil acts and other wrongful ones; evil acts are not just very bad or wrongful acts, but rather ones possessing some specially horrific quality.

De Wijze claims that evil is not necessarily based on the magnitude of the effects of actions, but rather in terms of one or another qualitative difference from merely bad or very bad acts [2002: 211–12]. Morton makes the similar claims that ‘not all seriously wrong actions should be counted as evil’, and that the label ‘evil’ tells us something about the distinctive kind of motive that produced the action [2004: 30, 64].

The first reading of ‘qualitative’, which suggests that qualitative differences are felt differences, does not square with these claims that evil action is qualitatively rather than quantitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing. We can imagine two actions that are identical except that the second is more painful than the first. If qualitative differences were merely felt differences, then these two actions would be qualitatively distinct. However, the difference in the feel of these actions is a quantitative difference. Both actions share the quality of being painful, but the second action has a much greater quantity of that quality. Since de Wijze, Steiner, and Garrard wish to contrast qualitative difference with quantitative difference, we ought to read them as claiming that evil action is non-quantitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing. They believe that evil actions differ from ordinary wrongs in virtue of possessing some particular property or properties not possessed to any degree by ordinary wrongs.

Which properties might be possessed by evil actions but not at all by ordinary wrongs? It is plausible that the properties of actions that are relevant to their moral status include both the effects of those actions and the psychological states, such as motives and intentions, that produce or accompany those actions. Let us consider two actions, A1 and A2, and let us suppose that, in respect to its morally relevant properties, A1 is merely quantitatively distinct from A2. Thus, if A1 is partially motivated by fear, then A2 is also partially motivated by fear, but might be motivated by fear that is more or less intense than that which produced A1. Similarly, if A1
inflicts pain, then A2 will also inflict pain, but might inflict more or less pain than A1, and might inflict pain on more or fewer people than A1. According to the general view put forward by de Wijze, Steiner, and Garrard, it must be the case that either A1 and A2 are both evil actions, or that neither A1 and A2 are evil actions, since the differences between A1 and A2 are quantitative.

In contrast, let us imagine that a third action, A3, is qualitatively distinct from A1 and A2 in respect to its morally relevant properties. For instance, A3 might be the product of a motive—say, malice—that was wholly absent in the cases of A1 and A2. Alternatively, A3 might have an effect—say, that of killing a person—that A1 and A2 did not have to any degree at all. According to the general view put forward by de Wijze, Steiner, and Garrard, it is possible that A1 and A2 are evil while A3 is not, or vice versa, because A3 is not merely quantitatively but qualitatively distinct from A1 and A2.

There remain potential ambiguities and problems with this distinction between qualitative and quantitative differences between actions. None-theless, the distinction is clear enough to allow us to test the general thesis that evil action is qualitatively rather than quantitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing, and to evaluate the respective accounts of that qualitative difference offered by Morton, de Wijze, Steiner, and Garrard.

II. Morton’s Barrier Theory of Evil

Firstly, let us consider Adam Morton’s so-called barrier theory of evil, which he sets out in his book On Evil. Morton begins by suggesting that only culpable wrongs could count as evil actions, and then sets out the following definition:

A person’s act is evil when it results from a strategy or learned procedure which allows that person’s deliberations over the choice of actions not to be inhibited by barriers against considering harming or humiliating others that ought to have been in place.

[2004: 57]

Morton’s definition points to two psychological properties, the conjunction of which, he suggests, are possessed by evil acts but not by other culpable actions.

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5 One problem is that of specifying the grain of motives and effects. For instance, consider an action that is motivated by an excessive desire for money and another that is motivated by an excessive desire for food. If we make fine-grained distinctions between motives, these two actions are qualitatively distinct, but if we classify motives more broadly we would say that both actions are motivated by greed, and that, with respect to their motives, the actions are not qualitatively distinct. Another problem concerns complex qualities of actions, such as the property of being motivated more by fear than by pride. We can imagine two outwardly identical actions motivated by different combinations of fear and pride. These actions seem to be merely quantitatively distinct, yet it could be that one possesses the complex quality of being motivated more by fear than by pride, and the other action lacks this quality altogether.

6 Morton claims that wrong actions performed out of negligence are not evil, so long as the negligence was not reckless and persistent. He also claims that wrong actions performed out of a combination of good motives and ignorance are not evil [2004: 10 – 11]. These are standard conditions for sorting culpable from non-culpable wrongs.
wrongs. The first is that evil acts are the result of a psychological strategy or learned procedure. Morton gives some indication immediately after he offers his definition of evil, claiming that ‘an isolated act of anger... will not be evil, because it does not result from a process that the person uses regularly’ [2004: 57]. This suggests that evil acts can flow only from a stable character trait or process of thought that regularly and non-accidentally produces such acts.

Yet Morton’s subsequent claims are incompatible with this view. He goes on to say that, while evil people must be disposed regularly to perform evil acts, it is ‘important to keep the acts and the people separate, because anyone can do an evil act’, including a person who is not evil [2004: 65]. If Morton believes that someone who usually has good motives can slip up and perform an evil act, then he thinks that the so-called strategy that produces an evil act need not be stable or regular after all. Moreover, as Morton makes clear, the so-called strategy need not be intended by the evildoer as a means by which to overcome inhibitions against harming others. Such a strategy, on Morton’s view, is present in psychopaths and sociopaths who simply lack such inhibitions [2004: 66]. Thus the evildoer need not be aware that others are being harmed, nor that harming others is wrong. The so-called strategy need not be acquired in any specific way, either. It could be the product of ‘violentization’, or of cultural indoctrination, or of self-deception, or, presumably, of any biological processes that produce psychopathy or sociopathy [2004: 66].

At first glance, Morton’s claim that acts are evil only if they are performed from a strategy or learned procedure looks as if it will distinguish evils from ordinary wrongs, but Morton’s construal of strategies or learned procedures is so broad that the claim rules out nothing. All ordinary culpable wrongs are performed from what Morton thinks of as a strategy or learned procedure, so this condition provides no reason for thinking that evil is qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing.

Perhaps the real distinction between evil and ordinary wrongdoing is contained in the second component of Morton’s definition: that evil acts are those that fail to be inhibited by deliberative ‘barriers against considering harming or humiliating others that ought to have been in place’ [2004: 57]. This looks like a property that could be possessed by evil acts but not by ordinary wrongs, an appearance that is bolstered by Morton’s discussion of psychological research into a violence-inhibiting mechanism that is an ‘inbuilt piece of mental machinery’ which responds to signs of distress by suppressing impulses to perform violent actions [2004: 42]. If some wrong actions are caused by the breaching of this barrier, but other wrong actions are not, then Morton could claim that this qualitative difference is the underlying difference between evil and ordinary wrongdoing.

Yet Morton’s own application of his barrier theory suggests that, on his view, no culpable wrong that inflicts significant harm fails to count as evil. As he points out, evil acts ‘need not involve physical violence’ [2004: 13, cf. 60], nor need they involve the violation of an actual psychological barrier that is present in the agent. Morton discusses violent sociopaths, who are
simply unable to detect suffering in others, and psychopaths, who are aware of suffering and of moral rules against harming others but seem not to care about violating those rules. Both violent sociopaths and psychopaths count as evil agents who perform evil acts, according to Morton, despite the fact that they have no psychological barriers which they must overcome in order to harm others [2004: 66]. Morton’s definition of evil is built to accommodate this fact. He claims evil acts are those that violate psychological barriers that ought to be in place, not barriers that actually are in place. But, if the ‘ought’ in his definition is a moral ‘ought’, then it is true that there ought to be psychological barriers against performing all wrongs. In that case, Morton’s definition would imply that every culpable wrong action counts as evil.

Morton aims to show that evil is different from ordinary wrongdoing, and that the label ‘evil’ does more than dramatize a sense of disapproval since the label is meant to be psychologically informative [2004: 13, 64]. Yet the psychological conditions Morton imposes on evil action are so broad as to be completely uninformative. While Morton does go on to impose some limits on what can count as an evil action, he does not draw a qualitative distinction between evils and ordinary wrongs.

III. De Wijze’s Disjunctive Account of Evil

The structure of Morton’s argument bears some similarities to that offered by Stephen de Wijze. As we have seen, de Wijze claims that evil is qualitatively different from ordinary wrongs, even from extremely harmful ordinary wrongs. He puts forward an account of evil which is intended to identify this quality. Yet de Wijze fails to identify either a clear qualitative psychological difference between evil actions and ordinary wrongs or a clear qualitative difference between the effects of evil actions and those of ordinary wrongs.

According to de Wijze, an act is evil if it is a wrongful action that meets at least one of the following three conditions:

A There is a deliberate violation of persons with the intention to dehumanise (that is, deny basic respect and dignity to) those powerless to retaliate.

B The action or project will gratuitously inflict, or bring about, one or more of ‘the Great Harms’ to sentient beings with the relevant moral standing.

[4] Another possibility is that the ‘ought’ in question should be read as a biological functional ‘ought’, such as that in the claim ‘The kidneys ought to filter the blood’. Such an account would be very complex, and, since Morton does not even begin to discuss these complexities, it is very likely that he intends the ‘ought’ to be moral.

[5] Morton goes on to argue that some quantitatively extreme wrongs are not evil acts, since they inflict a series of only minor harms on a very large number of people. Thus Morton suggests that evil actions must ‘involve’ significant harms, such as ‘death, suffering and humiliation’ [2004: 61]. Since many ordinary, non-evil wrongs inflict small amounts of suffering and humiliation, and since these actions are merely quantitatively distinct from evil actions as described by Morton, his final position does not imply that evil actions are qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongs.
C The action or project (or professed morality) seeks to annihilate the ‘moral landscape’.

[2002: 218]

By ‘the Great Harms’, de Wijze means humiliation and denigration [2002: 217], as well as ‘great physical suffering, illness, starvation, death, destruction of home or habitat, and the misery of continual and unrelenting terror and harassment’ [2002: 219]. By the ‘moral landscape’, de Wijze means those prerequisite values needed for any civilised attempt to manage conflict and to establish a minimal level of respect and dignity between persons … [and those values] which seek to protect the weak from the strong and prevent a world where needless pain, suffering and death are seen as preferable to joy, happiness and life.

[2002: 221]

It is not entirely clear what de Wijze means by an action that ‘seeks to annihilate’ the moral landscape, but his model for such actions are those performed by participants in the Nazi regime [2002: 221]. In accordance with Arendt’s famous claims about the Nazi war criminal Eichmann [Arendt 2006: 252], de Wijze allows that such actions can be evil even if they are not intended by their agents to be harmful, or morally wrong, or to destroy our commitment to morality. De Wijze seems to believe that such actions are evil because they either contribute directly towards undermining the moral landscape, or make an indirect contribution to a project which, if successful, would undermine the moral landscape.6

It is immediately apparent that de Wijze’s account of evil action is radically disjunctive. Indeed, it appears that each of the three conditions is designed to capture one of three common yet diverse paradigms of evil action: maliciously disrespectful treatment of humans, gratuitous physical harm of humans and animals, and participation in the Nazi regime. One danger of such a disjunctive account is that it might fail to show what these diverse examples have in common, and hence why each counts as evil. For our current purposes, though, the question is whether de Wijze’s account conforms with his claim that there is a genuinely qualitative difference between evil actions and ordinary wrongs.

Firstly, let us consider whether de Wijze distinguishes evil action from ordinary wrongdoing by identifying a qualitative difference in the respective psychologies of evildoers and mere wrongdoers. De Wijze suggests that Condition A ‘illuminates the qualitative difference’ between evil and mere wrongdoing by pointing to motives that are not present to any degree in many ordinary wrongs [2002: 218]. In that it takes gratuitous infliction of the Great Harms to be evil, Condition B also points to some psychological state that is not present to any degree in wrongs that are not inflicted gratuitously.

6De Wijze allows the contribution that evil actions make to evil projects to be quite indirect. For instance, an unwillingness to intervene in an attempt to save people from an evil regime counts as an evil action [2002: 221].
Yet neither Condition A, nor Condition B, nor the disjunction of A or B, are taken by de Wijze to be necessary conditions for evil action. Actions might be evil on Condition C despite the fact that the evildoers ‘never intended either to dehumanise and degrade others (Condition A) or take part in or condone the infliction of ‘The Great Harms’. . . (Condition B)’ [2002: 221]. Thus, on de Wijze’s account, there turns out to be no qualitatively distinct motive or set of motives that produces evil actions but not ordinary wrongs.

Secondly, let us consider whether de Wijze distinguishes evil action from ordinary wrongdoing by identifying a qualitative rather than quantitative difference in the respective effects of evil actions and ordinary wrongs. Again, Condition A appears to identify such a difference. De Wijze suggests that dehumanizing harms are evil only when directed against those who are powerless to retaliate [2002: 219]. Yet Condition B allows that other acts would count as evil because they constitute gratuitous infliction of one of the so-called Great Harms—including humiliation and denigration—on people who are able to retaliate.7 De Wijze fails to explain why wrongful infliction of the so-called dehumanizing harms would be evil only when directed against people who are incapable of retaliation, whereas wrongful and gratuitous infliction of humiliation and denigration would be evil regardless of the victims’ capacity for retaliation. Indeed, in light of Condition C, it turns out that the infliction of dehumanizing harms against people who are capable of retaliation does count as evil, so long as those harms are inflicted by actions that seek to annihilate the moral landscape, in de Wijze’s technical sense. In the end, de Wijze’s account implies that an action might be evil whether its victim is capable of retaliation or not.

Nor is it clear that, on de Wijze’s account, evil actions inflict a kind of harm that is qualitatively distinct from those harms inflicted via ordinary wrongs. The list of harms covered by de Wijze’s Conditions A and B is very broad. It includes dehumanizing harms that deny basic respect and dignity to persons, and the Great Harms: humiliation, denigration, ‘great physical suffering, illness, starvation, death, destruction of home or habitat and the misery of continual and unrelenting terror and harassment’ [2002: 219]. Admittedly, some wrongfully inflicted harms appear to be excluded from de Wijze’s list. A wrong action that gratuitously inflicts a very small amount of physical suffering will not count as evil on Conditions A and B. Nor, perhaps, will an action that is intentionally disrespectful but is not sufficiently damaging as to count as a dehumanizing act, or as a ‘Great’ act of humiliation or denigration. Yet these lesser harms appear to be merely quantitatively different from some of the harms covered by Conditions A and B. They are merely less painful, or less disrespectful wrongs, not a qualitatively distinct kind of wrong.

However, it is Condition C that presents the real obstacle to identifying a qualitative difference in the respective harms inflicted by evil actions and by ordinary wrongs. Condition C specifies neither the nature nor the severity of

7De Wijze includes humans in the category of sentient beings with the relevant moral standing. For example, see his comment on the Nazis’ infliction of ‘The Great Harms’ on the Jewish people [2002: 221].
the harms that are inflicted by evil actions. Actions are evil so long as they are wrong and they seek to annihilate the moral landscape. On de Wijze’s account, wrong actions which inflict very minor harms might be evil nonetheless, so long as they directly contribute to an undermining of morality, or indirectly contribute to a project that, if successful, would undermine morality.

In distinguishing between evil action and ordinary wrongdoing, de Wijze’s disjunctive account of evil does not identify a clear qualitative difference in the psychological states that accompany evil actions, nor in the kinds of harm that are inflicted by evil actions. The general problem is that the distinctive motives and harms that are included in Conditions A and B are absent in Condition C. According to Conditions A and B, evil actions are either deliberately aimed at robbing humans of their dignity, or deliberately and gratuitously aimed at causing emotional or physical distress. Yet, according to Condition C, actions can be evil regardless of the psychology of the evildoer, so long as they are actions that contribute directly or indirectly to an undermining of the values that protect human dignity and protect humans and animals from gratuitously inflicted distress. De Wijze might respond to this challenge either by taking back his claim that there is a qualitative rather than quantitative difference between evil action and ordinary wrongdoing, or by explaining in more detail the sense in which, on his account, the difference really is qualitative.

However, de Wijze’s account faces a deeper problem concerning the ambiguity of Condition C. A broad reading of the phrase ‘seeks to annihilate the moral landscape’ suggests that any action that meets Conditions A or B will also meet Condition C, because all actions that deliberately dehumanize or gratuitously inflict extreme harm also contribute towards an undermining of morality. In most cases, their contribution is small, and the moral landscape is not actually annihilated, but these actions make a contribution nonetheless. Perhaps they also can be conceived of as being part of a general project that, if successful, would undermine morality. As we have seen, many actions that lack the requisite motives to count as evil on Conditions A and B do count as evil on Condition C. Thus the broad reading of the phrase ‘seeks to annihilate the moral landscape’ would render Conditions A and B superfluous in de Wijze’s account of evil. In this case, evil actions are simply those wrong actions that contribute to an undermining of morality, and it is misleading to include any of the distinctive motives of some evildoers in an account of evil action.8

It is more likely, though, that de Wijze would prefer a narrow reading of Condition C, according to which not all dehumanizing and extremely harmful wrongs seek to annihilate the moral landscape. For instance, he might argue that only wrong actions that contribute to a specific and clearly distinguished project directed against morality count as evil on Condition C.

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8Philosophers who are strongly influenced by Hannah Arendt’s claims about the banality of evil are likely to agree that Conditions A and B are superfluous to an account of evil. For instance, Claudia Card claims that evils are ‘foreseeable intolerable harms produced by culpable wrongdoing’. According to Card, ‘the nature and severity of the harms, rather than the perpetrators’ psychological states, distinguish evils from ordinary wrongs’ [2002: 3].
and thus that Conditions A and B are required to capture the many evils that occur independently of such a project. If he prefers this narrow reading of Condition C, de Wijze must tell us how to recognize such evil projects. For instance, must they be political? Must they involve many participants? Must they achieve significant success in undermining morality? Must they undermine all of morality, or a significant portion of morality, or merely some important moral values? In addition to characterizing evil projects, de Wijze must explain why, in the absence of such a project, only people who act from certain motives count as evil, whereas, in the presence of such a project, those distinctive motives are not necessary conditions for evil action. Without such an explanation, the shift from one set of evaluative standards to the other seems arbitrary.

These problems are evident in de Wijze’s use of his own account of evil to sort evils from ordinary wrongs. De Wijze draws an example from *King Lear*, claiming that Edmund’s gratuitous order that Cordelia be put to death is an evil act because it meets Condition A, but that the obedient officer, who carries out the order through fear of dismissal, performs an action that is terribly wrong but not evil. Yet on de Wijze’s account, the actions of a non-malicious Nazi bureaucrat are evil in virtue of meeting Condition C; that is, contributing to a destruction of the moral landscape. How can de Wijze claim that the obedient officer who knowingly puts an innocent person to death is not similarly contributing to such a destruction? Both are voluntary participants in political systems which carry out unjust murders, and both crucially contribute to these murders. One political system is more effective than the other in undermining morality, but this is not the fault of either the obedient officer or the Nazi bureaucrat. Why should this difference fundamentally alter the grounds on which their actions might count as evil?

Similar objections can be raised against other examples discussed by de Wijze. For instance, de Wijze claims that fox-hunting and bull-fighting count as evil if the animals harmed have the relevant moral standing, and if the harms are inflicted gratuitously [2002: 229]. Yet de Wijze fails to note that bull-fighting and fox-hunting might well be activities that seek to annihilate the moral landscape, in that they undermine the values that ‘protect the weak from the strong and prevent a world where needless pain, suffering and death are seen as preferable to joy, happiness and life’ [2002: 221]. In this case, bull-fighting and fox-hunting would be evil activities regardless of whether the bull-fighters and fox-hunters inflict harms gratuitously. Similarly, de Wijze suggests that female circumcision is wrong but not evil, because it is not performed with an intent to dehumanize the victims, nor does it seek to obliterate the moral landscape [2002: 229 and note 64]. Yet female circumcision is often described as the product of a general world-view which successfully undermines the rights of women, in which case it would count as evil on Condition C, regardless of any lack of intent to dehumanize. Before we can apply de Wijze’s account of evil, we need clearer criteria for applying Condition C. Even if we had such criteria, we would also need an explanation of why the motives of the wrongdoer are of crucial moral importance in some settings, but can be rendered irrelevant.
by the existence of broader projects over which the wrongdoer has no control.

The advantage of de Wijze’s disjunctive account of evil is that it includes the paradigms of both malicious evil and banal bureaucratic evil. The disadvantage of the disjunctive account is that these two paradigms prompt deeply incompatible sets of conditions according to which actions count as evil, the first of which focus on the motives of the wrongdoer, and second of which ignore those motives completely. If he had claimed that evil actions must meet either Condition A or Condition B, de Wijze could well have argued that evil acts are qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongs. As it stands, de Wijze has failed to identify a clear qualitative difference between evil action and ordinary wrongdoing. Moreover, the account that he has offered either contains superfluous elements or licenses a seemingly arbitrary shift in evaluative standards as we shift our focus from actions that are part of a project to actions that are not.

IV. Steiner’s Sadist Account of Evil

Not all of the philosophers who claim that evil is qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing give accounts as broad as those offered by Morton and de Wijze. Hillel Steiner and Eve Garrard both claim that evil acts possess a certain psychological property that is not possessed by many extreme wrongs. According to Steiner, ‘[e]vil acts are wrong acts that are pleasurable for their doers’ [2002: 189]. It is not clear from Steiner’s presentation of his account whether evil acts are supposed to be wrong acts which are pleasurable to the agent to some degree, or pleasurable to the agent on the whole, or pleasurable and not at all unpleasant to the agent. Nor is it clear whether the agent can take pleasure in any feature of the evil act, or must take pleasure in a wrong-making feature of the act, or in the fact that the act is wrong. Perhaps the most plausible version of this view is that evil actions are those wrong actions in which the agent takes some degree of pleasure in either the wrongness or a wrong-making feature of the act. On this view, ordinary wrongs are those wrong actions in which the agent takes no pleasure in either the wrongness or the wrong-making features of the act.

Steiner’s account of evil does focus on a clear qualitative distinction between two classes of action, but is it really the distinction between evils and ordinary wrongs? If Steiner’s view is correct, then there are no evil actions in which the agent takes no pleasure at all. Is this plausible? It seems that Steiner allows that an agent can deliberately perform an act in which she takes no pleasure.9 There are several ways in which a deliberate action can fail to be pleasurable. For instance, an action can be the product of coercion, and be performed by the agent against her own wishes. In such cases, the conditions that make the action unpleasant usually render the

9If it were the case that every deliberate action were one in which the agent takes pleasure, in the relevant sense, then Steiner’s account would imply that all deliberate actions that are wrong would count as evil. This is an implausible claim, and does not appear to be endorsed by Steiner himself.
agent non-culpable. Another way an action can fail to be pleasurable, though, is for it to be performed against many of the agent’s own desires, but out of conscience or duty. As far as Steiner’s view of evil is concerned, it does not matter whether we take acting out of duty to be acting out of a desire to uphold duty, or as acting out of a motivational state that is not a desire. All that matters is that an agent can act out of duty without taking pleasure in the action. Such purely conscientious and wholly unpleasant actions certainly seem possible. Thus, Steiner’s account implies that wholly unpleasant wrong actions that are performed purely out of conscience—in this case, out of a misguided conscience—cannot count as evil.

In this respect, Steiner’s account of evil is deeply counterintuitive. Some of what seem to many people to be the clearest examples of evil actions were thoroughly unpleasant to the agents who performed them, but were performed out of misguided conscience or duty. Jonathan Bennett points out that Himmler’s description of his own murderous treatment of the Jews was often couched in such terms. For instance, Himmler “described himself as caught in “the old tragic conflict between will and obligation”” [Bennett 1994: 300]. If purely conscientious and wholly unpleasant evil action is possible, then Steiner’s account of evil must be mistaken.

Steiner’s account is also implausible in that it counts as evil every wrong action in which the agent takes pleasure. In support of his view, Steiner asks us to consider two Nazi doctors, both of whom perform extremely wrong actions in their medical research, and only one of whom takes great pleasure in doing so. Steiner suggests that the doctor who enjoys his research thereby performs actions that are more evil than those performed by his colleague, who finds the research thoroughly unpleasant [2002: 190]. If Steiner’s suggestion is correct, then this example indicates that actions can be more evil than they otherwise would be in virtue of the evil-doers’ pleasure. However, Steiner’s view is not merely that pleasure in wrongdoing can make an act more evil than it was, but that evil acts are wrong acts in which the agent takes pleasure. To test this view we must also consider trivial, virtually harmless wrong actions in which the wrongdoer takes great pleasure. Shoplifting is wrong, and mildly insulting a bus driver is wrong. Taking great pleasure in either of these actions might well make them worse actions, but it is implausible that it would render either action evil. When people lapse into utter horror and despair in the face of evil actions and call for us to rid the world of evil, the ecstatic shoplifter is not their target.

Contrary to Steiner’s view, ordinary, non-evil wrongs can be actions in which the agent takes pleasure, and terribly evil actions can be actions in which the agent takes no pleasure. In light of these objections, we could revise Steiner’s account, such that evil actions are those extremely harmful wrong actions in which the agent takes pleasure. This would still imply that purely conscientious evil action was impossible and that purely conscientious Nazis did not do evil, but it would allow Steiner to say that the ecstatic shoplifter does not do evil. The problem with this move, from Steiner’s point of view, is that it implies that there is no qualitatively distinct psychological property possessed by all and only evil actions. Steiner takes it as a basic desideratum of an account of evil that it depict evil acts as qualitatively
rather than quantitatively distinct from non-evil wrongs [2002: 188]. The fact that respect for this view renders Steiner’s account deeply counter-intuitive suggests that the view is false. Indeed, in a footnote in which he discusses minor wrongs, Steiner appears to concede as much:

[O]ur disinclination to see joyriders and [computer] hackers as evil is based on an impressionistic statistical judgment that the wrong they do is minor; that is, where we have reason to revise that judgment upwards, the disinclination would, I conjecture, diminish.

[2002: 193]

Evil does appear to differ from many ordinary wrongs simply in virtue of the extremity of the harm inflicted by the wrongdoer. If this is the case, then we ought to reject Steiner’s account of evil.

V. Garrard’s Silencing Account of Evil

Eve Garrard, like Steiner, claims that all and only evil acts possess a psychological property that is not possessed to any degree by mere ordinary wrongs. According to Garrard’s first formulation of her account, an evil action is a wrong action in which the agent silences any moral considerations against performing that action. Garrard claims that a moral consideration has been silenced by an agent when the agent is aware of the consideration, but does not take it to have any moral weight. Thus, a consideration of which the agent remains ignorant is not a silenced consideration, although both of these kinds of consideration fail to feature in that agent’s deliberation [1998: 49–53]. Non-evil wrong acts, Garrard claims, are those in which the moral considerations that count conclusively against the action are recognized as having some weight, but are undervalued by the deliberating agent, and hence outweighed by other considerations in the process of deliberation. In contrast, the ‘evil act is done by one for whom (at least some of) the considerations that tell against his committing this wrongful act are silenced altogether’ [1998: 53–4].

However, Garrard notes that this first formulation of her account would implausibly allow very trivial wrong actions to count as evil, so long as the agent silenced the considerations against them. We have already encountered this problem in our examination of Steiner’s account of evil. As we have seen, this problem could be avoided simply by stipulating that the wrong in question must be a quantitatively extreme wrong in order to count as evil. For instance, Garrard could maintain that an evil act is an extremely harmful wrong act in which the agent silences the considerations which count conclusively against performing that action.

Although Garrard does not want to count trivial wrongs as evil, she, like Steiner, refuses to modify her account by adding the condition that evil actions must be extremely harmful. On the contrary, Garrard claims that there are evil acts that are not extremely harmful:
The most obvious example of this is the case of the Iraqis during the occupation of Kuwait who, having shot a young boy, demanded money from the boy’s family to pay for the bullet. Here the principal suffering was caused by the killing; but it is the charging for the bullet that strikes most people as evil. Another such example is the sadistic voyeur, who chooses to observe, with intense relish, the sadistic acts of another. Here nothing is added to the sum of suffering by his voyeuristic behaviour; nonetheless we might wish to call it evil. Finally consider the person who, with gloating enjoyment, slowly tortures a cat. In the scale of the world’s sufferings it barely registers, nonetheless it can plausibly be called evil.

[2002: 327]

Garrard’s examples are significant, but her interpretation of their significance is contentious. It is plausible that two of the examples—the soldiers asking for money for the bullet, and the torturing of the cat—are extremely harmful actions. Granted, asking for money for the bullet is not as harmful as shooting the boy, but it is extremely psychologically damaging to the family of the victim nonetheless. The harm produced in the case of cat torture is, as Garrard says, ‘miniscule, compared to the huge paradigm cases such as the Holocaust or slavery’ [1998: 45], but so too is the harm produced by the torture of a single person, which plausibly counts as extremely harmful. Thus neither of these examples support the view that there are evil acts that are not extremely harmful.

The sadistic voyeur, though, does not perform an extremely harmful action. Compared to the actions performed by the sadistic Iraqis and the cat torturer, it is less clear that the sadistic voyeur’s actions count as evil, although they certainly are extremely perverse and vicious. Let us suppose, though, that we share Garrard’s belief that the sadistic voyeur’s actions are evil. The appropriate response to this example is not to conclude that evil action has no necessary connection to extreme harm. After all, it is deeply implausible that another sadistic voyeur who chooses to observe, with intense relish, the performance of only trivial wrongs such as the insulting of bus drivers thereby performs evil actions. What Garrard’s example reveals, perhaps, is that the enjoyment of extremely harmful actions counts as an evil act, even when such enjoyment is not additionally harmful itself.

In light of this example we might claim that evil acts are wrongful acts that are either extremely harmful, or are connected in certain ways to extreme harms, and that acts of appreciation or enjoyment of extreme harms are so connected. If we accept this view we can rule out the possibility of trivial evils, since an act of appreciation of a great harm does not seem to be trivial. Although Garrard herself does not take this option, it fits neatly with the examples she discusses and with her claim that not all evil actions are themselves extremely harmful.

However, the view that evil actions are wrong acts that are either extremely harmful or are connected in certain ways to extreme harms does not fit neatly with Garrard’s claim that evil action is qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing. For instance, there is a merely quantitative
difference between the sadistic enjoyment of another person’s act of torture and the sadistic enjoyment of another person’s act of inflicting mild pain. If the first is evil and the second is not, some evil acts are merely quantitatively distinct from ordinary wrongs. Since she is committed to the view that evil is qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing, it is no surprise that Garrard attempts to rule out the possibility of trivial evils by appealing to a purportedly qualitative psychological difference between evils and ordinary wrongs, rather than by adding a necessary connection to extreme harms. With this goal in mind, Garrard adds two further conditions to her initial account of evil action.

The first additional condition concerns what Garrard calls ‘metaphysical silencers’, by which she means considerations for action which should silence competing considerations for action. On this version of her account, Garrard claims that evil actions are those in which the moral considerations against the action which are silenced by the agent are themselves considerations that should silence the considerations for which the agent acts [1998: 54]. In performing an evil action the agent psychologically silences reasons that are themselves metaphysical silencers. Since it does not seem merely trivially wrong to ignore these powerful metaphysical silencers, it looks like this move will allow Garrard to rule out the possibility of trivial evils.

Garrard’s appeal to metaphysical silencers is rhetorically neat, but problematic. As Garrard points out, considerations that in some contexts should be silenced provide good reasons for action in other contexts. Thus, it cannot be that evil actions are those performed on the basis of reasons that always should be silenced. Garrard responds to this problem by adding to her account a second condition, which recognizes the context-sensitivity of metaphysical silencers. According to the final version of Garrard’s account,

an act is evil if it is wrongful, and if the agent silences the reasons against doing the act, which reasons are themselves metaphysical silencers, and where the agent’s reasons for doing the act are members of the class of considerations which are in this case metaphysically silenced.

[1998: 55]

Unfortunately, this final version of Garrard’s account still fails to rule out the possibility of trivial evils. Consider again a case of shoplifting performed out of greed by someone who is aware of the moral consideration of the owner’s right to his merchandise, but who gives no deliberative weight to this right. In this case, the owner’s rights should silence the shoplifter’s considerations of greedy self-interest, but, in fact, the shoplifter’s greed psychologically silences the owner’s rights. The action counts as evil on Garrard’s account. Yet, clearly, the action is not evil. Arguably, it is not evil because it is a trivial wrong. The difference between this kind of shoplifting and genuinely evil acts appears not to be a qualitative difference in the motives of the wrongdoers, but a quantitative difference in the harm involved in the wrong act.
While Garrard’s account of evil does identify a qualitative psychological difference between two classes of action, it is implausible that her distinction corresponds to the distinction between evil action and ordinary wrongdoing. She draws the notion of silencing from John McDowell, who uses it in a neo-Aristotelian account of virtue [McDowell 1978: 31–42]. The difference between the virtuous and the continent agent, Aristotle tells us, is that the continent agent must overcome bad desires in order to act rightly, whereas the virtuous agent has no bad desires to overcome [Aristotle 1985: 1146a10]. Those potential bad desires do not even feature as reasons to be outweighed in the deliberation of the virtuous person. Garrard takes this notion of deliberative silence and applies it to the case of wrong actions. It is true that some wrong actions are the product of the deliberative outweighing of the reasons that actually count conclusively against those actions, whereas other wrong actions are the product of deliberation in which those reasons are not given any weight at all. But this is not the distinction between ordinary wrongdoing and evil. It is closer to the distinction between incontinence and vice.10 As neo-Aristotelians would claim, there can be actions that are vicious, but of trivial importance. Let us consider two trivially harmful acts of impatience that are identical in their expression and their effects, the first of which is a vicious act, performed by a person who never considers the reasons against acting in this way, and the second of which is closer to being incontinent, in that the agent considers but outweighs the reasons that count conclusively against the action. It is implausible that the first of these actions is evil, while the second is merely wrong. Rather, both are trivial wrongs.

The fact that Garrard’s distinction does not correspond to the real distinction between evil and ordinary wrongdoing is further evident in her proffered examples of evil actions and merely wrong actions. As we have seen, Garrard suggests that the sadistic Iraqi soldiers, the sadistic voyeur and the cat torturer all do evil. If we were employing Garrard’s account of evil, then we would not know whether these people do evil unless we know that they have completely silenced the moral considerations that count conclusively against the actions that they actually perform. Garrard does not explicitly discuss whether this is the case, nor is it clear that she even considers the question. In many cases of, say, sadistic cat torture, it is plausible that the torturer is well aware of the moral considerations against his actions, gives them some deliberative weight, but fails to realize that these considerations should have completely silenced any competing considerations in favour of the torture. If Garrard’s own account is correct, such cat torturers do not do evil at all. In these cases, at least, it seems that Garrard’s intuitions about evil are being guided by something much closer to Steiner’s sadistic account of evil than by her own silencing account.

10Garrard’s distinction is not quite equivalent to that between Aristotelian vice and incontinence. The incontinent man acts against his rational judgment as to what is best, whereas Garrard’s analogous nonevil wrongdoer outweighs considerations against the wrong action. Garrard’s non-evil wrongdoer need not have judged that the action in question was wrong. Incontinence requires a very strong and philosophically puzzling kind of psychological conflict within the deliberating agent, whereas Garrard’s analogous category of non-evil wrongdoing simply requires that the agent recognize that there are some reasons for and some reasons against the wrong action.
Garrard’s account implies that evil actions are never wrong actions in which the agent considered and outweighed the moral considerations which counted conclusively against those actions. No matter how extreme the wrong, or how deliberate and malicious the action, it will not count as evil unless the agent gave no weight at all to the reasons which counted against it. Garrard admits that this approach seems deeply counterintuitive to many people [1998: 56]. But in defence of her view she points out that several Nazi war criminals, who clearly performed evil actions, describe themselves as giving no moral weight whatsoever to the suffering of the people whom they murdered [1998: 59]. Yet this is not the kind of evidence that Garrard needs. People who think that evil action is merely extremely harmful wrongdoing will agree that these Nazis performed evil actions.

In order to support her view, Garrard needs to focus on cases in which, say, Nazi war criminals performed horribly wrong actions, the performance of which required them to overcome some degree of internal moral conflict. If her theory is correct, the actions of these Nazis would not strike us as evil, yet the actions of their colleagues who suffered no such conflict would strike us as evil. As we have seen, it seems that Himmler suffered such psychological conflict. Bennett says of Himmler,

> Although his policies ran against the human grain to a horrible degree, he did not sandpaper down his emotional surfaces so that there was no grain there, allowing his actions to slide along smoothly and easily. He did, after all, bear his hideous burden . . ., [suffering] a variety of nervous and physical disabilities, including nausea and stomach convulsions.

[1994: 300]

Perhaps this internal conflict was not a moral conflict, and Himmler merely felt squeamish about doing what we thought was right. Yet it is plausible that Himmler was aware of the moral claims of his victims, but severely undervalued those claims, overriding them for what he thought was the greater good of Germany. It is far from clear that evidence of this internal moral conflict leads us to judge that, while some Nazis might have performed evil actions, Himmler did not.

VI. More Plausible Accounts of Evil Action

As we have seen, Morton and de Wijze aim to show that evil is qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing, but offer theories that do not clearly identify a qualitative difference in either the motives or the effects of evil actions. In contrast, Garrard and Steiner give accounts of evil which, if plausible, would show that evil is qualitatively rather than quantitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing. Yet, as we have seen, neither account is convincing. There are many trivially wrong, non-evil acts that share the psychological features identified by Steiner and Garrard, and there are many evil actions that fail to possess those psychological features.
Given that these accounts of evil fail, what are the other options for a theory of evil action? One possibility is to claim that evil actions are simply wrong actions that are extremely harmful, regardless of the psychology of the evildoer, and regardless of the kinds of harm inflicted. Such an account is attractive in its simplicity, but it would imply that unsuccessful attempts to inflict extreme harm are not evil, that the sadistic voyeur does not do evil, and that someone who willingly made a small contribution to the Nazi regime did not do evil. If we wish to capture those cases, we might prefer to define evil actions as culpably wrong actions that have a certain kind of connection to extreme harms, in that they either produce extreme harms, are intended to produce extreme harms, contribute to extreme harms, or are acts of appreciation of extreme harms. In many ways, this is an attractive account of evil. It is psychologically thin, in that it does not place restrictions on the motives of evildoers, but it also manages to rule out the possibility of trivial evils. Significantly, though, this account implies that evil action is not qualitatively but merely quantitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing.

Some people do not share the intuition that thoughtless bureaucrats who inflict great harm without intending to do so thereby perform evil action. Perhaps evil actions necessarily are malicious actions, performed out of a desire to harm others. Perhaps, instead, evil actions necessarily are defiant actions, performed despite the agents’ knowledge that they are wrong. Thus, some people argue that many terrorist actions are not evil because the terrorists are not motivated by malice, or because the terrorists mistakenly believe that what they are doing is morally right [Russell 2007]. If we share these intuitions, we might prefer a psychologically thick account of evil, according to which evil actions can flow only from certain motives.

However, those who prefer a psychologically thick account should not suppose that evil is qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing. It is implausible that the motives which some people argue are necessary for evil action are also sufficient for evil action, since those same motives can also produce actions that are trivially wrong. For instance, people can mildly insult bus drivers out of malice and can shoplift out of a defiant desire to do what is morally wrong, but neither of these actions are evil. Even if we prefer a psychologically thick account of evil action, we should maintain a necessary connection between evil acts and extreme harms, a connection that implies that evil action is not qualitatively distinct from ordinary wrongdoing.  

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