The Apparent Banality of Evil:  
The Relationship between Evil Acts and Evil Character

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Sadistic torture causing serious harm, brutal murders committed by serial killers, and the Nazi extermination of the Jews are all obvious examples of evil acts. Similarly, Adolf Hitler, Ted Bundy, and Iago are infamous examples of evil characters. Typically, evildoing is evidence of (or is perhaps thought to be constitutive of) evil character, and evil characters often have a propensity to do evil. But are evil acts done exclusively, or even primarily, by evil characters? Some philosophers, social psychologists and sociologists have argued that often it is the ordinary person, engaging in ordinary behavior, who is responsible for some of the most heinous and extraordinary forms of evil. For instance, Hannah Arendt, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, describes Adolf Eichmann, who was responsible for organizing the transportation of millions of Jews to the Nazi concentration and extermination camps, as a “terrifyingly normal” man who, rather than being driven by evil or sadistic motives, had a conscience and a strong sense of duty.¹

In this essay, I discuss the connection between evil acts and evil characters. The central question I address is: can ordinary people habitually cause evil, or can only people with evil characters cause evil on a regular basis? In other words, can evil of the sort perpetrated by the Nazi functionaries really be banal? Arendt aside, most philosophers claim that anyone who habitually causes evil is an evil character (see, e.g., recent work by Laurence Thomas and John Kekes).² I argue that it is at least conceptually possible for ordinary people without evil characters to regularly cause evil, however, I contest Arendt’s claim that Eichmann’s evil falls under this category. I begin by developing a plausible account of evil acts and evil character.

I. Evil Acts

My account of evil takes its inspiration from W. D. Ross’s theory of vice in his *The Right and the Good*. According to Ross, vicious characters are those characters from which vicious actions spring and vicious actions are those actions that spring from certain sorts of desires. For instance, three types of desires that lead to vicious actions are the desire to do what is wrong, the desire to bring into being some bad state of affairs, and the desire to inflict pain on another.³

Similarly, I contend that certain desires are often fundamental to evil. However, for evil, the desires must have a different, more malignant charac-
ter. For instance, it isn’t sufficient to desire to bring into being just any bad state of affairs, since evil crucially involves someone else’s harm. For example, it wouldn’t be evil to desire our own harm or to desire the admiring contemplation of ugly pieces of art, which some, such as G. E. Moore, believe are objectively bad states of affairs.\(^4\)

However, it isn’t sufficient for evil to simply desire someone else’s harm either, for we reserve the term “evil” for only quite serious, or significant, harms. For example, while a light pinch on the arm or an act of petty thievery is harmful, it is hardly evil. According to John Kekes, to be evil, the harm must be so serious that it “interferes with the functioning of a person as a full-fledged agent.”\(^5\) To fully address the extent to which Kekes is right about this we would have to consider what it is to be a full-fledged human agent, a topic which is beyond the purview of this paper.\(^6\) However, it does seem that Kekes has gone too far here, for a resilient victim might be able to function quite adequately as a human being even after sustaining a very serious, maliciously intended injury. In any case, Kekes is surely on the right track. For an act to be evil it must have a certain weightiness to it. This weightiness comes primarily from the magnitude of the harm desired.

So according to the Ross-inspired account I am developing, a certain sort of motivation is necessary for evil. That is, the evildoer must desire other people’s significant harm. In his *Vessels of Evil*, Laurence Thomas agrees that a certain sort of motivation is necessary for evil, but he characterizes this motivation quite differently. For Thomas, evil acts must follow from what he calls “a deadening of moral sensibilities” and not from understandable conditions.\(^7\) By “a deadening of moral sensibilities” Thomas means that the evildoer, unlike normal moral agents, is not motivated to refrain from acting by the apprehension that her act will be extremely harmful to others. Thomas contrasts acts that result from a deadening of moral sensibilities with crimes of passion, in which a person is provoked by another person’s words or actions to cause him harm.\(^8\) What makes a crime of passion not evil is that we believe that anyone in the same situation might do the same, and thus, the act is understandable under the circumstances. An evil act, on the other hand, is not motivated by understandable conditions, but by a morally reprehensible or foul character, that is, one that is not motivated to abstain from acting because she knows it will cause another serious harm.

So for Thomas, the sort of motivational disposition necessary for evil is the lack of a desire that our victim be spared significant harm. This seems correct, for evildoing requires that we are at least indifferent enough to our victim’s well-being to desire the manifestation of our heinous plans, which, as I have mentioned above, must involve our victim’s significant harm. We cannot do evil if our desire for our victim’s harm is outweighed by our desire for her well-being. Conflicting desires of this sort (where the desire that others not be seriously harmed dominates) are commonplace in the lives of people who never do evil. Evil acts occur only when desires for our victim’s significant harm win out.

Thus, while the Ross-inspired account I have been developing says that evil crucially involves desires for someone else’s significant harm, Thomas claims that the lack of a desire that our victim be spared significant suffering
best captures the motivational disposition of the evildoer. The Ross-inspired view fails because it wouldn’t be evil to desire someone else’s significant harm if we also had a stronger desire that she not be harmed. In these cases we have what I will call an effective desire that someone else not be significantly harmed, since in the absence of cowardice or other inhibiting factors, we would tend to act in ways that didn’t promote her significant harm given this combination of desires.

However, Thomas’s view of the motivational disposition underlying evil-doing also fails because it explains only why the evildoer is not inhibited from causing harm; it does not explain why the evildoer causes harm. Thus, in addition to the lack of a desire that our victim be spared significant harm, we must have a desire either for her significant harm or for some object or state of affairs that is inconsistent with her being spared serious harm. I call combinations of desires for other people’s significant harm or for objects or states of affairs inconsistent with other people’s being spared serious harm, together with the lack of a desire that they not be significantly harmed, e-desire sets. I contend that e-desire sets are constitutive of the motivation necessary for evil.

However, we are in need of at least three further qualifications, or clarifications, to the concept of an e-desire set. First, e-desire sets need not contain absolutely no desire that our victim be spared significant harm. It is sufficient that our desire that she be spared significant harm is so inappropriately weak that our desire for her harm (or for something inconsistent with her being spared serious harm) is an effective desire. For example, we may act evilly from a very strong desire to feel dominant over another person through torture, although we may, at the same time, regret that our victim must feel so much pain to satisfy our desire.

Second, the motive or reason for our desire for our victim’s significant harm (or for something inconsistent with her being spared serious harm) must be unworthy given the seriousness of the harm. For instance, we might desire someone else’s significant harm for our own pleasure, for entertainment value, or because it makes us look or feel dominant. These reasons are unworthy given the harm caused, and thus, if they are the basis for our desires for our victim’s significant harm, they may be part of an e-desire set. However, if we desire someone else’s significant harm to save many others from significant harm, our desire for her harm could not be part of an e-desire set.

Third, in cases in which the desire is not directly for another person’s harm but for something that is inconsistent with another person’s being spared serious harm, the act is evil only if the harm is very serious and the object or state of affairs desired adds little to our, or to anyone else’s, well-being by comparison. For example, imagine that a businessperson is having an apartment building destroyed at 2 p.m., and at 1:55 p.m. he receives a phone call that there are a few elderly couples still living in the building. However, the businessperson has an important appointment at 2 p.m. and was planning to go downstairs for an ice cream sandwich prior to the meeting. He cannot both call off the bulldozer and get his ice cream sandwich in time for the meeting. If he decides to go for the ice cream sandwich rather than making
the call to save the seniors, I think we would call his act evil even though he does not desire the seniors’ harm. However, his act would not be evil if there was not such a great variance between the seriousness of the seniors’ harm (i.e., a terrible death) and the businessperson’s potential loss (i.e., the ice cream sandwich) from making the phone call. For if the elderly couples were not in the building at 2 P.M. and stood only to lose their possessions and the businessperson stood to lose his business and become personally bankrupt (which is of course unlikely, yet possible) if he didn’t make a call to the bank at 1:55 P.M. rather than calling off the demolition crew, we might still think his act was selfish, but certainly not evil.

Thus far I have argued that in order to do evil we must either have an effective desire for someone else’s significant harm for an unworthy goal, or else have an effective desire for some unworthy object or state of affairs which is inconsistent with someone else’s being spared serious harm. I will now argue that while e-desire sets are necessary, they are not sufficient for acting evilly. For example, sometimes we are too cowardly to carry out our evil plans and thus never form the intention to carry them out. In these cases we fail to do evil for two reasons. First, we fail to do evil because we fail to form the intention to cause or witness someone else’s significant harm. If we desire someone else’s significant harm but never try to satisfy this desire, we don’t succeed in performing an evil act. Nor do we perform an evil act if we desire someone else’s significant harm and then accidentally cause that harm. To be evil an act must be the intentional action of a moral agent. Otherwise we are not connected to the harm in the right way.

Second, the coward fails at evil because he hasn’t caused or witnessed genuine harm. Evil hasn’t been done until someone else gets hurt. Courageous potential evildoers can fail in this way as well. For instance, even if I have the malicious intention to cause you serious harm by sticking you with needles, I have failed to do evil if what I think is you is a robot duplicate or if every time I attempt to stick you with needles I trip or someone stops me. In these cases I have attempted to do evil but have failed. However, my failed attempt may still be indicative of an evil character, for surely incompetence or cowardice does not make characters any better. Before turning to evil character and its relationship to evil acts, I will first sum up the account of evil acts I have developed thus far: we act evilly when we intentionally cause or witness someone else’s significant, real harm, from an e-desire set.

II. Evil Character

As I have mentioned above, a person can have an evil character even if he is too cowardly or incompetent to succeed at committing an evil act. To have a certain type of character is to have certain characteristics or dispositions which define characters of that type. In other words, to be inclined to do certain things, to treat others in a particular way, to react in a particular way to certain situations and/or to have certain thoughts and desires. Different sorts of dispositions or characteristics are the defining feature for different sorts of characters. For instance, people with honest characters must be inclined to tell the truth. Having an honest character also involves the
absence of effective desires to deceive. To have a cowardly character is simply to be unable to overcome fear in situations in which it is expected that we should. Someone with a cowardly character will also be undependable in situations in which courage is required, and she will shrink from enterprises requiring her to set aside her fear. What is more, to have a character of a particular type we must have a consistent propensity to manifest the defining disposition(s) or characteristic(s). For we wouldn’t call someone cowardly if she generally displayed courage but happened to be particularly afraid of an insect on one occasion. Nor would we call someone honest who generally told lies but on occasion told the truth.

According to Colin McGinn in *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, to have an evil character is to feel pleasure in the face of other people’s pain and to feel pain in the face of other people’s pleasure. Initially this seems like a plausible view of evil character, since when we imagine an evil character causing or witnessing harm, we also imagine him taking pleasure in the harm. Furthermore, it seems that the more pleasure an evildoer gets from his victim’s pain, the worse is his character. Thomas also believes that feeling pleasure in the face of other people’s pain is essential to evil character. He adds that evil characters must also act from feelings of hostility toward their victim.

While I concede that evil characters might often feel pleasure in their victims’ pain, pain in other people’s pleasure, and hostility toward their victims, none of these feelings (or any other feeling for that matter) is necessary for evil. To see this we need only consider the moral status of agents who have a consistent propensity to cause intentional, significant harm to others from e-desire sets but are so indifferent to the well-being of others that in harming them they feel very little at all. For example, if I run down a pedestrian with my car not because I feel hostile toward her or angry and not because I will take delight in her harm, but simply because I am profoundly indifferent to her well-being and she is sort of in the way, I am still acting evilly.

So it isn’t necessary for evilness of character that we experience feelings like pleasure in other people’s pain, pain in other people’s pleasure, or hostility toward our victims. I will now argue that experiencing these sorts of feelings isn’t sufficient for evil either. Imagine that I happen along an alleyway and come across a particularly violent assault. To my surprise I take pleasure in witnessing the victim’s pain. I am horrified that I feel this way but I just can’t help myself. I am just so constituted that I take pleasure in other people’s pain. Perhaps the origin of my condition is genetic or perhaps it is due to unconscious conflicts formed through experience. In any case, if I had no prior desire to witness harm, I am disgusted with myself for having taking pleasure in harm, and I have no desire to witness harm in the future, it is too harsh to call me evil. It would be like blaming me for my patellar reflex. So it seems that we should not be judged evil simply for being so constituted to take pleasure in other people’s pain. However, anyone who is so constituted fits McGinn’s criteria for evilness of character: he feels pleasure in other people’s pain and pain in other people’s pleasure. But while we might say that such a person’s character is flawed in this respect, this flaw is surely not enough for evilness of character. Without accompanying effective desires for
our victims’ harm or for something inconsistent with their being spared serious harm, we are not connected to their harm in the way required for evil. Thus, McGinn’s account of evil character fails on two accounts: first by contending that certain types of feelings are necessary and sufficient for evil when they are not, and second by failing to recognize that certain types of desires together with the lack of other desires are necessary for evil.

I contend that e-desire sets are the defining characteristic of evil character. Those who have these desire sets will also be inclined to carry out their despicable plans and take pleasure in the fruition of these plans. However, they may not do so. Their evil plans may be spoiled by their own cowardice or incompetence or by other inhibiting factors, and they may not derive pleasure from accomplishing their despicable deeds. Thus, it seems that all that is required for evilness of character is a consistent propensity for e-desire sets.

III. The Relationship between Evil Acts and Evil Character

We are now in a position to discuss the relationship between evil acts and evil characters. The first question to address is: do only evil characters commit evil acts, or can ordinary people also do evil? According to the account of evil acts and evil character developed above, others besides those with evil characters can do evil. Successfully acting on an e-desire set once, or even on occasion, isn’t enough for evilness of character. To have an evil character we must have a consistent propensity for e-desire sets, and so people without evil characters can commit evil acts on occasion. This seems correct, for most of us can remember times when we, or friends of ours, have acted despicably, and it would be immodest to believe that we are not capable of acting similarly in the future. We are rightly appalled by our capacity to have the sort of intentions and desires involved in acting evilly, yet it would be too harsh to call us evil for a few transgressions of moral decency.

However, Arendt and social psychologists such as Leo Katz and Stanley Milgram go even further. They claim, or imply, not only that ordinary people without evil characters can commit evil acts on occasion, but that ordinary people can cause evil on a regular basis. For instance, according to this view, during the Nazi era, functionaries such as Adolf Eichmann, who were no different from ordinary people in other countries except for their extraordinary circumstances, routinely committed acts of evil. If this is correct, it seems that something is wrong with the account of evil acts and characters developed above. For if evil acts require e-desire sets, then anyone who habitually causes evil also habitually has e-desire sets. And since I have argued that all that is required for evilness of character is a consistent propensity for e-desire sets, I must say that anyone who habitually causes evil is an evil character.

Thus on the account of evil acts and evil character developed above, either Eichmann and the other Nazi functionaries didn’t commit evil, or else they had evil characters despite their banal appearance. Toward the end of this paper I will argue that it is very likely that Eichmann and the other Nazi functionaries did have evil characters. However, the question I want to address here is whether it is possible for ordinary people who do not have evil characters to habitually cause evil, whether or not the evil of Eichmann...
and the other Nazi functionaries falls into this category. I will argue that it is possible (i.e., that ordinary people can cause evil on a regular basis), however, doing so will require a slight change to my account of evil character.

Kekes explains the apparent banality of evil by drawing a distinction between two types of evil character.24 Evil characters who cause evil autonomously such as Hitler and Bundy he calls moral monsters, while evil characters who cause evil nonautonomously such as Eichmann and well-meaning yet heartlessly stern parents he calls moral idiots. Moral idiots act nonautonomously, not because they have been forced or haven’t chosen their actions, but because they fail to understand the significance of the choices and actions they choose freely and because they fail to reasonably evaluate their actions in comparison with other actions available to them. Kekes believes the inclination to call Eichmann and the other Nazi functionaries “ordinary” and to call their evil “banal” follows from the prevalence of what he calls choice morality.25 According to choice morality we can blame or condemn only people who choose their actions autonomously. Since moral idiots do not choose their actions autonomously, they cannot be condemned and thus are not evil. However, Kekes thinks we should resist the allure of choice morality, for if we don’t, we will be unable to truly face the evil within us and in others, making us helpless to prevent the preponderance of evil acts.26 For Kekes moral idiots cause evil because their vices, which they acquire nonautonomously, dominate their virtues, and nothing more is required for evilness of character than habitually causing evil for this reason.

In many respects I agree with Kekes’s analysis of the apparent banality of evil.27 It does seem that what drives the intuition that Eichmann and the other Nazi functionaries were ordinary people is that they were clouded by Hitler’s propaganda and so didn’t fully understand the significance of the actions they choose freely. If they didn’t believe that what they were doing was beyond reproach, they at least believed that it was permitted and for the best in the long run. I also agree with Kekes that acting nonautonomously in this sense (i.e., being morally idiotic) is not sufficient to preclude us from being evil characters. However, I will argue, contra Kekes, that some moral idiots who habitually cause evil do not have evil characters. Characters of this sort form a special class of moral idiots.

To incorporate Kekes’s concept of the moral idiot into the analysis of evil I have been developing, we can say that moral idiots intentionally cause other people significant, real harm from a desire for a goal they believe morally justifies the harm. However, their goal does not morally justify the harm. Their acts are evil because they intentionally cause significant harm to others for an unworthy goal. But sometimes it is reasonable to think that a goal is worthy of significant harm when it is not. If so, it is too harsh to call those who cause this harm evil. It is reasonable to think that a goal is worthy if, given the best scientific and sociological considerations available, it would seem to someone who had sufficient cognitive and deliberative powers that the goal was worthy.28 In addition, we must also make allowances for people who have acquired false initial beliefs from their parents or from others as children that have led to their incorrect view about the worthiness of certain goals. If these children grow up and are not presented with experiences or new information
which, upon critical examination, would (or should) make them question the plausibility of their initial beliefs, there is no reason to expect them to change their views. However, if they are presented with experiences or information which should make them change their views, depending on the nature of the experience(s) or information, they ought to change their views within a reasonable amount of time provided they have the requisite cognitive and deliberative capacities. If they don’t change their views after being presented with the relevant experiences or information, it is no longer defensible for them to believe that they are justified in significantly harming others for these goals, and thus their evil actions are indicative of an evil character.

Consider, for example, an Austrian born in the early 1900s who grew up in a community in which he had very little contact with Jews. He had been told for as long as he could remember that Jews are inherently evil, that they are infecting the human species with bad blood, that they secretly plot against other ethnic groups, and that they are responsible for his family’s financial hardships and for a sickness in the soul of his countrymen. Just to make the point even more forcefully, he might have been told in addition that Jews have no souls and are like vampires preying on the living. Imagine further that these initial beliefs were corroborated at school, by his friends, in newspapers, and by respected members of his community. Without his ever being confronted with good contrary evidence, we could not expect him to believe anything other than that the Jews are fundamentally different from the rest of humanity: that they are irredeemably evil and the scourge of humanity.

It is, however, unlikely that many Nazi functionaries were subjected to this kind of systematic indoctrination or even indoctrination systematic enough to make their false beliefs in the worthiness of the final solution (i.e., the Holocaust) defensible. Eichmann, in particular, had had close personal relationships with a number of Jews, including a Jewish mistress and a Jewish friend in Linz. Thus, he had more than enough experience with Jews to draw the conclusion that they are in general just like other human beings in all morally important respects. In fact, Eichmann claims that he really didn’t believe the Nazis’ justification for the final solution, and furthermore, that he had no desire to be properly informed. So Eichmann clearly doesn’t qualify as someone who had a defensible belief that his heinous actions were morally justified. For not only did the information and experiences available to him indicate that the goals of the Nazis did not morally justify the harm they caused, he was unwilling even to consider whether they did.

Thus, while it is possible for evil to be banal, Eichmann’s evil was not of this variety. Just the same, Eichmann is more aptly classified as a moral idiot than as a moral monster. He contributed to the horrendous harm of the Holocaust because he believed he was required to carry out the orders of his superiors and because he failed to think autonomously about the morality of his actions. He didn’t understand the significance of the choices and actions he choose freely, and he failed to reasonably evaluate his actions in comparison with other actions available to him. His failure to do so was not defensible, which makes him evil. So Kekes is right that Eichmann was evil even though he acted nonautonomously. However, I think he is wrong to claim
that the difference between Eichmann and Hitler lies in the distinction between moral idiocy and moral monstrousness. For more than Eichmann, Hitler believed the Holocaust was justified and that it was his duty to make it happen.\textsuperscript{35} He was a moral idiot, not a moral monster like Bundy or Iago. However, like Eichmann’s, Hitler’s belief that the final solution was justified was indefensible. Although Hitler grew up in Austria, which was more anti-Semitic than Germany, he was generally resistant to the middle-class values with which he was raised, and his family frowned upon anti-Semitism.\textsuperscript{36} Thus, Hitler did not receive the sort of systematic indoctrination into anti-Semitism that would make his belief in the worthiness of the Holocaust defensible. Both Hitler and Eichmann had effective desires to cause great harm to Jews for unworthy goals, and their belief that their goals justified the harm was indefensible. Hence, they were both moral idiots with evil characters.

This is not to say that Hitler was no more evil than Eichmann, but rather that the difference between Hitler and Eichmann was not one of kind, but one of degree. Hitler is far more despicable than Eichmann because of the more active role he played in bringing about the Holocaust. His role as the chief perpetrator of the Holocaust is uncontroversial. In his official role as Fuhrer and Reich Chancellor of Germany in 1941, according to David Jones in \textit{Moral Responsibility in the Holocaust}, “Hitler decided to implement an official policy of genocide regarding all Jews and Gypsies in Germany and German-occupied Europe.”\textsuperscript{37} Eichmann, on the other hand, was more in favor of forced emigration as a solution to the Jewish question. But even then, he claims not to have been anti-Semitic and not to have believed in the Nazis’ reasons for their anti-Semitism, and thus he would never have given the order to forcibly emigrate or exterminate the Jews if he had been in a position to do so.\textsuperscript{38} Eichmann \textit{merely} used his organizational aptitude to implement Hitler’s orders effectively. Furthermore, as Jones has argued, it seems that Hitler “almost single-handedly used his powers of agency to subvert his own moral development to become one of the worst perpetrators of evil in human history.”\textsuperscript{39} Unable to face up to his own failures as an artist, the defeat of Germany in World War I, and the social and economic problems of his adopted country (Germany), Hitler used the Jews as a scapegoat. He lived a virtual fantasy, sheltering his self-esteem from the reality that he was not the Nietzschean hero he wanted to be. Through means of self-deception he constructed an identity of himself as a great artist, soldier, and political leader whose duty was to rid Germany of the mythical Jew and unite all Germanic people into one strong German nation.\textsuperscript{40} Thus, part of the hideousness of Hitler’s character is the active role he played in becoming the sort of person who believed the Holocaust was justified and who was able to carry his despicable plan to fruition. Hitler, like Eichmann, may have been a moral idiot, but he was a moral idiot of monstrous proportions; this is what accounts for our judging them differently.

\section*{IV. Conclusion}

In sum, evil acts consist in intentionally causing or witnessing significant, real harm, from what I have called e-desire sets. E-desire sets consist in the
absence of an adequately strong desire that our victim be spared significant suffering together with either a desire to witness or cause someone else’s significant or serious harm for an unworthy goal, or else a desire for some unworthy object or state of affairs that is inconsistent with another person’s being spared serious harm. Evil character, on the other hand, is mostly just a matter of having a consistent propensity for e-desire sets. However, reflection on the apparent banality of evil shows that we need to amend this account of evil character.

Following Kekes, I have distinguished between two types of evil characters: moral monsters and moral idiots. Moral monsters are the more basic type of evil character: they simply have a consistent propensity to desire other people’s significant, real harm for an unworthy goal such as their own pleasure or entertainment value. Moral idiots also have a consistent propensity to desire other people’s significant, real harm for an unworthy goal. However, unlike moral monsters, they believe the goal for which they desire the harm morally justifies the harm. But their goal does not justify the harm, and thus, they have a consistent propensity for e-desire sets. Thus, like moral monsters, moral idiots are, by and large, evil characters. However, there is a special class of moral idiots who have a consistent propensity for e-desire sets but who are not evil characters. They are not evil characters because their belief that their goal justifies their victims’ harm is defensible, and so it would be too harsh to judge them as evil. A belief that a goal justifies a harm is defensible iff given the best scientific and sociological considerations available, it would seem to someone who had sufficient cognitive and deliberative powers that the goal was worthy. In addition we cannot expect false initial beliefs acquired in childhood to change without new, reliable information or experiences to the contrary.

Thus according to my revised account, evil character consists in having a consistent propensity for e-desire sets, except in cases in which we have a defensible yet false belief that the goal for which we desire another person’s harm morally justifies the harm. When characters of this sort (flawed yet not evil) regularly cause evil, it makes sense to call the evil banal.

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Notes


2 This is not to say that most philosophers agree about what counts as evil. I thank an anonymous reviewer for the *Journal of Social Philosophy* for pointing out that Kantians in particular would require that evildoers act autonomously, while consequentialists would tend to deny this requirement.

3 W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1930), 155–56, 163.


Samantha Brennan has suggested that if Kekes is right, acts that involve harming many people to a relatively minor extent could not be evil. I haven’t decided whether this result amounts to a weakness or a strength in Kekes’s account.


Ibid.

Notice that the Ross-inspired account developed here is not the same as Ross’s account. Ross is talking only about desires from which actions spring, in other words, those desires that win out.


By “having a desire for someone else’s significant harm” I mean having a desire to cause or witness that harm.

It should be noted that this feature of e-desire sets is controversial. See, for example, Eve Garrard’s “The Nature of Evil,” *Philosophical Explorations* 1, no. 1 (1998): 43–60. According to Garrard an act is evil only if the evildoer does not take the victim’s harm into consideration at all when deciding how to act. See also Daniel M. Haybron’s “Consistency of Character and the Character of Evil,” in *Earth’s Abominations: Philosophical Studies of Evil*, ed. Daniel M. Haybron, Value Inquiry Book Series (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002). Haybron argues that evil characters must be utterly lacking in any motives or sentiments of moral worth. It seems to me that the all-or-nothing approach taken by Garrard and Haybron makes the range of evil acts and evil characters too narrow. Evil doers need not be psychopaths, they need only lack an appropriate concern for their victim.

By saying that evil doers must desire other people’s significant harm for an unworthy goal, I mean they must desire what is, in fact, other people’s significant harm, whether or not they are aware that the harm is significant or that the goal is unworthy.

I will not offer an account here of what makes a reason or a goal worthy or unworthy. I assume that the examples I have used are not controversial.

If the reader questions whether acts of witnessing harm can be evil, imagine that I hang out with a group of sadistic torturers so that I can witness and take pleasure in other people’s serious harm. In these cases I think we would say that my act of witnessing harm was evil.


I am like Leontius, of whom Plato writes. *Plato’s Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1974), Book IV, 439e–440a, 103–104. Leontius is angry and disgusted with himself to find that he has an impulse to take pleasure in the sight of corpses. For Plato the case of Leontius shows that the spirited part of us (i.e., our courage, anger, etc.) is distinct from the appetitive part (i.e., from our animal impulses). I will not comment here on whether Plato is right about this. I think the case of Leontius shows that we are not inclined to blame someone for his impulsive feelings.

The reader may have noticed that, for simplicity’s sake, I didn’t specify in the thought experiment above that I am also so constituted as to be pained by other people’s pleasure. Thus, one could argue that I am not an evil character on McGinn’s account. However, this can be easily remedied. We can add that I am also biologically constructed to feel pain in the face of other people’s pleasure so that I would be pained if
I happened upon someone else experiencing pleasure as well. The point is, being biologically constructed to experience a particular feeling or feelings in certain situations isn’t enough for evilness of character.

22 For instance, they might feel that their attempts at evil, even when successful, are never good enough. Or else, as I mentioned above, they might be so indifferent to their victims’ well-being that they feel little from causing them harm.


26 Ibid., 3–10, 47–49.

27 This is not to say that I agree with much else in Kekes’s account of evil acts and evil character. Kekes’s account of evil character fails largely because it relies on an implausible account of evil acts. For Kekes, a character is evil in virtue of being a regular source of evil. Evil acts consist in causing serious, morally unjustified harm to other human beings. As I have already mentioned, I agree that to be evil the harm must be serious, however, Kekes’s notion of morally unjustified harm fails to capture the other requirements for evil. By morally unjustified harm Kekes means a harm that is avoidable, undeserved, and not the best way of preventing a greater harm. The central problem with characterizing evil this way is that our doing evil becomes largely a matter of circumstances external to us and quite possibly beyond our control. Consider first Kekes’s condition that the harm must be undeserved. Rather than being a requirement for evil, this condition seems to be completely irrelevant to the evilness of an act. Imagine a case in which a victim deserves serious harm, say for instance, because he is a serial killer, but in which the perpetrator of his harm is really not concerned that the serial killer gets his just reward, but rather, she simply desires to take pleasure in causing someone else serious harm. I think in cases like these causing serious harm is evil even though the victim might deserve the harm. It might be objected that no human ever deserves serious harm and so neither would the serial killer. But if so, it is superfluous to say that the harm must be undeserved to be evil.

It is also possible to inflict serious avoidable harm on an undeserving person without doing evil. For example, a dutiful prison warden or an executioner may cause a person serious harm that she does not deserve because she has been wrongfully convicted. If the warden or executioner is ignorant of her victim’s innocence, we would not say that she is evil for causing undeserved harm, for she had no malicious intent or despicable desire.

Kekes’s requirement that evil acts not be the best way to prevent greater harm is also neither necessary nor sufficient for evil. For instance, we might have good reason to believe that greater harm is being prevented by our harming someone when it is not. In these cases, it would be too harsh to call our act evil, for we have no despicable desire or intent. We have just miscalculated the relative amounts of harm. In other cases, an agent might, in fact, prevent greater harm by harming another yet cause the harm from a despicable desire for that harm and not because it is the lesser of two “evils.” In these cases it seems clear that the act might still be evil even though greater harm has been averted.


29 If they do not have the capacity to draw the appropriate inferences, they are not evil characters.


32 For instance that they can have good will toward others and the capacity for love, fear, and pain.
Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 33. The Nazis’ justification for the final solution included the assertion that the Jews were responsible for the embarrassment of the Treaty of Versailles and for unemployment in Germany.

Ibid., 25, 33.


Ibid., 127.


Ibid., 130–40.