Chapter One

Terrorism, Torture and the Problems of Evil

Speaking of the Devil

This is a book about evil. More precisely, it is a book about human evil, and its central question is whether there can be a secular conception of evil, whether that idea can tell us anything about the human condition, explain anything about what human beings do, in the absence of its more familiar territory of the supernatural and the demonic. In seeking to understand human evil it asks the question whether evil exists at all, and one possible answer I take very seriously is that it does not. That this is a book about something that may not exist is, of course, a puzzle, and it may be more accurate to say that this is a book about the idea of evil, for that undeniably exists and has for thousands of years. But still, in the end this is not simply an exploration of the history or coherence of an idea, although that is clearly an important aspect of what follows. It is primarily concerned with the metaphysical problem of the existence of evil in the world. Although the first aspect is perhaps the most complex, this second metaphysical aspect is the deepest and most urgent, especially during what are troubled days for the ‘civilised’ world. After the horrific destruction of the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001, carried out by the al-Qa’ida group, the leadership of the United States of America has identified an ‘axis of evil’ and has launched military attacks on, at the time of writing, two independent nation states, Afghanistan and Iraq, and overthrown their governments in the name of destroying that axis. Iran, Cuba and Syria remain on the list. They have been supported in this to varying degrees by other nations, such as the United Kingdom, partners who have been more reluctant to employ the discourse of evil to justify their participation, but who are now deeply engaged in what is a global ‘war on terror’,...
which is escalating horrifically each day. But the United States’ leadership has created a new understanding of the global order, in which the world is divided into good and evil, something international relations theorists would not have thought possible only a few years ago.

However, at the same time as the United States is engaged in this global struggle against the forces of evil, something deeply disturbing has happened. In May 2004, the press and television began to show pictures taken by American forces of their own people engaged in ritual and humiliating violence against Iraqi prisoners held in Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad, some of them smiling broadly, showing their clean white teeth in their bright young faces as they performed unspeakable acts against helpless, powerless human beings. Most horrifying of all, it was as though these pictures were taken as holiday snaps, with the same smiles and poses as you would see of a young person at the beach in California, except instead of them leaning against a surfboard they were leaning against a pile of naked, bound prisoners. Looking at them induced a deep nausea, as do the details of the allegations against American and British personnel, and raised the question, how is this possible? This led to a traumatic re-evaluation in the United States of what it believed it was doing, with sombre sessions of senate committees trying to understand how these events happened, and expressing deep shame that they did. The realisation is that evil may be within as well as in the world outside. Evil is something to be feared, and historically, we shall see, it is the enemy within who has been seen as representing the most intense evil of all – the enemy who looks just like us, talks like us, and is just like us. This is one of the traditional guises of the Devil, who is at his most dangerous when he appears not as a serpent or a demon, but as an ordinary person, passing among us undetected.

Speaking of the Devil, one curiosity is the extent to which he features in this book. I am, after all, a devout atheist and an analytical philosopher by training. As I researched the book, I found myself spending more and more time examining the figure of Satan, but I always thought this was a distraction, and that the vast pile of notes about him would be set aside when it came to writing the final work. But once I began writing, I found that I could not get away from him. What was meant to be one section about his place in the scheme of things grew into half a chapter, and then into a whole chapter. There are, of course, large parts of the book where I escape him, but he returns in the end, like a
long delayed punch-line. Not that this book is intended as a joke. The point, of course, as everyone knows, is that the Devil is in the detail, and the more I examined the detail of evil, the more I sensed his presence – not a supernatural presence, but a political one. In a sense, this is a political philosophy of Satan. Others do, doubtless, sense a deeper presence. Images of the Devil’s face can allegedly be seen in the patterns of smoke issuing from the burning World Trade Center after the September 11th attack, images that have not been manipulated. One came from CNN’s film coverage, the other from a reputable freelance photographer, Mark D. Phillips. This is an instance of pareidolia, the predisposition to see faces within vague and unformed patterns. What this Devil in the smoke symbolises is, as always, ambiguous. Some have seen it as representing the diabolical nature of the attack, others as evidence that the Twin Towers were Satan’s headquarters on earth.

Primarily, though, this is a book about human evil, and its central question is whether there can be a secular conception of evil, a conception we can use without the framework of supernatural powers. As we proceed, we will see that there are a number of different conceptions that are candidates, one of which is of pure or absolute evil. This is the most troubling understanding of what it is to be evil. We can understand, to an extent, why people do terrible things to other people in order to achieve some recognisable human end, such as the pursuit of power, or wealth, or popularity, or, very often, the greater good of the community or even humanity; but this is a kind of ‘impure’ evil, evil outcomes mixed with immoral intentions, or at least mundane intentions, or perhaps even good intentions. But pure evil includes not only the evil of outcomes, but the evil of intentions – it is the pursuit of the suffering and destruction of others for its own sake, and this verges on the incomprehensible, to such an extent that many thinkers have argued that mere human beings are incapable of it. Human agents can only be evil in the impure sense, while pure evil, if it exists at all, belongs to the supernatural. And so if we reject the supernatural, then it seems we must reject the reality of pure evil. However, the central question is whether it is true that human agents are incapable of pure evil, in the face of all the damning historical evidence to the contrary. Many of these seemingly evil acts can be understood as provoked by anger or ignorance or even misguided hope, but some stand out as unspeakable and incomprehensible. If such evil exists, the challenge is to make it comprehensible, and
one way of doing this is to explore the figure of Satan, because one other common description of this pure or absolute evil is that it is diabolical. Diabolical evil has an obvious historical and conceptual connection with Satan in western thought, and one way in which diabolical evil can act as an explanation for the terrible things people do is that the Devil is acting through them to bring about his purposes. From a secular perspective, this explanation can play no role here. But it is still worth examining Satan's character, because if diabolical evil is a human possibility, although this does not necessarily imply the existence of Satan or other demonic powers, it does seem to imply that human beings can be like him. He is, in a perverted sense, a role model. And so even though this investigation remains secular throughout, Satan is a central figure.

The Borderlands of Humanity

Whenever I suggest that evil may not exist, that it may be a concept that belongs in fiction and mythology rather than in any description of reality, those listening become fervent in their belief that it does really exist, and that it is an accurate description of what happens. Even a degree of philosophical doubt provokes this response. One example given to me in such a conversation was of a woman who had been deserted by her husband, who then entered a relationship with another woman, a mother of two children. The deserted woman, one night, set fire to the house where the woman and children slept, killing them all. This, I was told, was a demonstration of the existence of evil; there was no other way to describe what happened. This may be right, but if we do describe this event as evil we need to be careful about what we are doing, and one problem with the idea of evil is the carelessness with which it is used. Evil is always something asserted with confidence, with determination, never with an uncertain shrug of the shoulders, never with philosophical doubt. Descriptions can take different forms and, although about the same event, can describe different things about it. If we describe this event as evil, is this a description of the suffering of the mother and children and the pain and terror they may have suffered? Or is it a description of the senseless loss of valuable human life? If either of these descriptions is meant, then it shouldn't matter what caused the fire that killed them; a natural event like a lightning strike could have caused something
that was evil. But although the idea of natural evil is one with a
long tradition, I don’t think this is what people mean in this kind
of case. There is a clear distinction made between natural and
human evil, destruction caused by nature and destruction caused
by human agency, and here there is a human agent – the woman
who started the fire is an essential part of the description. Perhaps
it’s that children are involved that makes it especially shocking,
and gives the certainty that this is an evil event. But again I don’t
believe that this is decisive here. In the conversation I was having
it was clear that what was being described was the woman who
caused the fire, and that what made this event evil was her sheer
malignity; that it was a deliberate act with the intention to destroy
three innocent lives is central to our understanding of it. But then
the question becomes, what is it about this woman that we are
describing?

The problem I’m getting at here is whether the description is
meant as an explanation for what happened. Obviously not all
descriptions are explanations, but some are, and so a description
such as ‘grass is green’ can become ‘because grass is green’ when
it is the answer to some kind of ‘why?’ question, rather than sim-
ply asking what colour grass is. And so ‘she was evil’ can become
‘because she was evil’ when it is the answer to the question, ‘why
did she do it?’ The description is now an explanation – she per-
formed this terrible act because she was evil. It is difficult to see
how any description of this woman as evil can avoid being this
kind of explanation for what happened, but then we are faced
with the problem of how this is an explanation. To avoid this
problem we could only employ the word ‘evil’ in a description
of another level, of the whole state of affairs, in which case it is
just an extreme way of describing terrible events. But I don’t be-
lieve this is what people take the word ‘evil’ to mean when they
use it in this kind of description, and there are plenty of other
words that work well enough when describing terrible states of
affairs – ‘evil’ brings with it another dimension, that of agency.
The concept is supposed to be some kind of explanation for cer-
tain kinds of agency, and the question I am raising here is what
sort of explanation is it? What exactly is being described and how
does this description work as an explanation of anything? My sus-
picion, which I intend to develop into an argument as the book
progresses, is that it only works as an explanation at a mythologi-
cal level, and it only works here if we suppose there is some other
force at work other than the woman in question, either some kind
of force that chooses to work through her, or some kind of narrative force, a story unfolding in which she is simply a character playing a specific and prescribed role. In either case, she does not act on her own initiative. If we do not believe in the existence of these forces, then there is no explanation here at all, and the concept of evil has no role to play in a secular understanding of human behaviour.

There is an alternative answer, but it goes against the philosophical tradition concerning what human beings are like. According to that tradition, humans are capable of doing terrible things to others, but not in a diabolical sense, not for the sake of doing terrible things to others. Earlier I made the distinction between the pure conception of evil, an absolute malevolence which is diabolical and pursues the destruction of others for its own sake, and an impure conception, the pursuit of the harm of others for some other goal such as power, wealth, comradeship, or the collective good. What matters is the motivation. According to the tradition, human beings are only capable of this lesser, merely human evil, not the pure, diabolical kind; human freedom is constrained and it reaches its ultimate limit here. The human figure who pursues the destruction of others for its own sake is a fictional or mythological figure, but does not exist in reality. And so the woman in the example above was not driven by pure malevolence, but by some other factor such as despair or anger in the extreme. This means that, to an extent, we can understand what she did, because we know what it is to be in despair or angry in the extreme – she is not beyond human comprehension. The consequences she intends to bring about are so terrible that we can describe them as evil, and so we can say that she has evil intentions, but this is still primarily a description of the state of affairs she intends to bring about, not a description of her. What we do not understand is what it is like to be absolutely evil, to set out to destroy others purely for its own sake. Here it is not only that she intends to bring about evil consequences, and so not merely that she has evil intentions in this sense, but that her motivation is itself evil – she is evil. Such an agent would be beyond human understanding.

Now, it may be that the impure conception of evil is all we need in order to account for the terrible things people do to other people, but then there is something missing from our description of the woman who destroyed the mother and her children, and ‘because she was evil’ cannot be an answer, or at least not a complete
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one. We can use the idea of evil to describe her intentions, but this is, in the end, a description of the consequences rather than her, and there is now the further question of why she was evil, of how she came to have these intentions? The answer here might be, ‘because she was in extreme despair’, but then doesn’t the concept of evil become redundant here? The question, ‘why did she do it?’ can be directly answered with ‘because she was in extreme despair’. The idea of evil doesn’t seem to add anything to our understanding of her, or if it does, it seems to be some kind of mythological added factor that we can do without in our account. And so the philosophical conception of impure, merely human evil has a built-in tendency towards the redundancy of the concept. All it seems to describe in the end are the consequences of her actions, the states of affairs she brings about, and that is not, I think, the intention behind its use. It is meant as part of an explanation of why she did what she did, not merely a description of the consequence of what she did. But if it is merely a description of states of affairs in the world, then this, too, has a tendency towards redundancy, because there seem to be other, more coherent descriptions of states of affairs in the world. The only way in which the description of states of affairs in the world as evil makes any sense at all is because of the connection between those events and agency, but once we move towards the explanation of that agency, the concept of evil becomes obscure, difficult, and, in the end, deeply unhelpful. Perhaps we can retain the concept as the expression of an attitude towards the act, describing it as evil in order to condemn it, but this is not a metaphysical theory of evil anymore, and there is nothing left in the world which the concept describes. According to the metaphysical possibilities we are exploring, the word ‘evil’ must be part of a description of the actual world, and not something about our attitude to the world. And, crucially, the part of the world it describes is human agency. The puzzle we are left with is how it describes/explains anything to do with human agency.

The alternative answer I hinted at above, however, moves beyond the traditional understanding of human nature and allows that human beings can be purely evil. If we make this move then the idea of evil can play a full role in an explanation of human action. ‘She did it because she was evil’ is a complete description with nothing missing, and I think it is this kind of explanation people believe they are offering when they use the word. But whether or not humans have the capacity for pure evil, whether the
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The concept of evil can ever act as a complete explanation for what some people do, is a deeply divisive and urgent question. We seem to believe that there is a level of immorality, of depravity, which removes people from the ‘merely’ immoral into the realm of evil; and here again there is another level, between the ‘merely’ human evil, and pure evil of the radical kind. C. S. Lewis expresses this in his comedic but deeply serious character of Screwtape in *The Screwtape Letters*, the high-ranking demon who gives advice to his naive nephew Wormwood, and who, in his toast at the annual dinner of the Tempters’ Training College for Young Devils, complains bitterly of the thin quality of the human souls they have to dine on. ‘Oh to get one’s teeth again into a Farinata, a Henry VIII, or even a Hitler! There was real crackling there; something to crunch; a rage, an egotism, a cruelty only just less robust than our own. It put up a delicious resistance to being devoured. It warmed your innards when you’d got it down’ (Lewis 2002: 188).

He then complains of the little people on offer at the feast: a municipal authority figure who took bribes, ‘a grubby little nonentity who had drifted into corruption . . .’; the lukewarm adulterers, ‘who blundered or trickled into the wrong beds in automatic response to sexy advertisements . . .’; the trade unionist who ‘quite unknowingly, worked for bloodshed, famine, and the extinction of liberty’ (Lewis 2002: 189). All these insipid characters, Lewis seems to think, belong in hell, punished for eternity in dreadful ways for their lukewarm deeds alongside a Hitler, but still there was something ‘special’ about a Hitler. Is there a genuine distinction here between the pure, radical evil of such a figure, and the blundering or even unknowing deeds of Lewis’ other inhabitants of hell?

The danger, however, with the notion that evil can be a complete explanation is that it closes off all possibility of understanding. If we seek to understand the social, psychological, historical conditions that act as the background for horrific acts, the notion of pure evil may disappear – indeed the idea of evil may disappear in its entirety. In 1993 two boys, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, both aged ten, were tried in the United Kingdom for the murder of James Bulger, aged two. They beat him with bricks and iron bars on a railway siding, leaving his body lying across the tracks to make it look like an accident. Writing in *The Guardian* newspaper on 2 February 2003, after Thompson and Venables were released from serving their sentences, Blake Morrison comments on the media frenzy that surrounded the killing, of the demonisation
of the two boys as ‘child-monsters’. But it was not just the media who deployed the language of evil. The trial judge in his sentencing also used the word to describe them, and the Prime Minister of the day, John Major, pronounced that, ‘We must condemn a little more, and understand a little less.’ Morrison observes that in this atmosphere ‘Thompson and Venables lost the right to be seen as children, or even as human,’ and, ‘The word used about them stopped all arguments. They were evil.’ The alternative view, which struggled for expression at the time, was that they were damaged – that they each had an appalling history, that, if understood, could act as a more coherent explanation for what happened. The challenge, however, for this alternative view, is that there may be many other children who emerge from a similar appalling history who do not kill. Richard J. Bernstein points out that however much we use the social disciplines and psychology to account for a person’s actions through their background, training, education, character and circumstances, this ‘never adds up to a complete explanation of why individuals make the choices they do. There is always a gap, a “black hole”, in our accounts’ (Bernstein 2002: 235). One attraction of the idea of evil is that it can fill that hole. The problem remains, however, that the concept of evil itself may be a black hole, a gap, and so all we have is the illusion of closure.

This is an exploration of the borderlands of humanity, a study of what it is to be a human being, but also of what it is not to be. The people who will form much of the subject matter for the arguments in this book have done things which ‘normal’ human beings find unthinkable, unspeakable; they have crossed the border from the human into the inhuman. And yet in making that judgement about them we must be supremely confident about where that border lies, and the very fact that they can cross it at all surely shows that this confidence has a fragile basis. For these are inhuman/humans – they are people who are much like you and me, and that they are capable of such dreadful acts raises the possibility that you and I are capable of them too. The young Americans in the images of torture in Iraq, we learned from their families and neighbours and friends, were just ordinary people, not monsters. Some people who do dreadful things are clearly mentally disturbed or under extreme circumstances. These people were not mentally ill, but were they operating under extreme pressure? They were not under the extreme situation of the combat zone, but they were in an alien country doing a difficult job, and there is evidence
that they were under pressure from superior officers to help gain intelligence results and that they were encouraged to pursue degrading treatment of prisoners as a method of getting those results. As the prosecution of seven guards at Abu Ghraib began in June 2004, the United States government was anxious to dispel such notions, and released secret papers to show that the kind of treatment that took place there was not condoned. However, Rupert Cornwell reported, in *The Independent* newspaper on 23 June 2004, what those documents also revealed was that harsh treatment, which included stripping prisoners, placing them in hoods and using dogs to terrify them, had been approved for some months, although these measures were officially revoked in April 2003. And the documents failed to dispel the suspicion that the government ‘tacitly condoned’ the use of tougher techniques that did amount to torture. The pressure on those involved at Abu Ghraib was to make interrogation more ‘productive’, and there was a background assumption that if information could be obtained that averted an attack, torture was justifiable. This, it was argued, led to the ‘anything goes’ approach at the Abu Ghraib prison. Cornwell reports that senior members of al-Qa’ida in custody were threatened with shooting or drowning under secret rules approved by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Justice Department. Guy Womack, attorney for one of the accused, told the media as the trial progressed that although there were no specific orders to handle prisoners in the manner they did, the personnel were following orders they believed to be lawful. ‘Under the environment as it existed at Abu Ghraib, it appeared to be lawful’. And when the unit of which his client was a member arrived at the prison the activities were already ongoing (CNN, 21 June 2004). Given this background, we can begin to understand why those people prosecuted for their actions in Abu Ghraib may have believed they were doing their duty. This suspicion gained ground in May 2005, when one of the key figures being prosecuted, Lynndie England, had her guilty plea to seven charges rejected by the military judge hearing her case. The guilty plea had been entered after negotiations with the prosecution in the hope of receiving a lighter sentence, but the judge argued that the testimony entered on her behalf as mitigation in order to reduce her sentence implied her innocence, and he entered a not-guilty plea on her behalf (news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4514839.stm). Private England had argued during earlier hearings that she had been following orders. Four British soldiers were courtmartialed
on similar charges. The incidents took place at an aid depot near Basra shortly after the end of the Iraq war, after ‘trophy’ photographs were discovered (The Independent, 24 February 2005). During the courtmartial it was claimed ‘that the men were scapegoats to hide a culture of brutality which had “infected” the camp with the connivance of senior officers.’

However, we return here to Bernstein’s problematic black hole, that in any such situation people at some point make a choice whether to perform such actions or to refuse them. Under extreme circumstances it may be that refusal could have drastic consequences, but there is no evidence here that the American or British personnel under investigation would have suffered dreadful consequences if they had refused to participate in the humiliation and torture of prisoners. And so we need to understand why, given the unspeakable nature of the actions, those involved made the choice to carry them out. All the factors I’ve outlined that made up the background of pressure or condonment can only go so far as an explanation. This is where the concept of evil begins to take on its explanatory power: there is nothing that can explain why these people did what they did, no mental disease, no extreme circumstances, except that they were evil. Perhaps they managed to conceal their evil nature from their family, friends and neighbours, but then perhaps the capacity for this kind of evil lies in all of us, waiting for the right circumstances to emerge. Here the circumstances seem to be the power to do anything they wanted to the Iraqis under their supervision, together with a view of their prisoners that reduced them to objects for sport, not human beings at all. It may be that this capacity – to suspend or set aside our knowledge that others are human beings and so entitled to our protection and respect, and to see them instead as objects for pleasure, subjects of power – is human evil in the absolute sense. But this is only the appearance of a solution to the problems of evil, because the question now is why anybody would seek to set aside this knowledge, to take part in such a knowing self-deception. In some cases we may want to say that these people have made a genuine mistake, that they have been so conditioned, brainwashed, to the extent that they cannot be held responsible for what they do. But in other cases it may be very difficult to make out that they have made a mistake and Abu Ghraib may be one of those cases – the evidence may point to a deliberate choosing to suspend knowledge of the humanity of others, and it is this deliberate, free act which lies at the centre of the idea of
absolute evil. Such agents do terrible things to others, not through madness or necessity or mistake, but because they have freely, rationally, deliberately chosen to do them. Such a choice, according to the philosophical tradition, is impossible, but the evidence of its possibility confronts us every day. In The Independent newspaper on 7 June 2004, there is the story of gangs in Afghanistan who are kidnapping children, and killing them in order to extract their organs to sell them. Even though I wish to deny its reality, the spectre of diabolical evil as a basic human capacity keeps confronting me.

**Possibilities of Evil**

It confronted others too. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, in his *Psycho-pathia Sexualis*, first published in 1886, examined terrible cases of sexual perversion and violence. One of the most shocking case studies is that of Gilles de Rais, the fifteenth-century Marshall of France who fought alongside Joan of Arc, and who was responsible for the torture and murder of perhaps 800 children (Benedette 1971). Krafft-Ebing tells of Rais’ history of ‘mutilation and murder’, and, as a professor of psychiatry at the University of Vienna, is confident that ‘Satisfactory proof of Rais’ insanity has been given’ (Frayling 1991: 391). But it is not clear what that evidence is beyond the nature of the acts Rais committed, and elsewhere Krafft-Ebing’s scientific confidence slips, as he describes him as ‘the inhuman wretch’, and ‘the monster’ (Frayling 1991: 390). These throwaway descriptions hint at the view that Rais is not a human agent at all, but something other than human, capable of actions no human could ever contemplate. Here are two very different understandings of evil at work within the same text, an enlightened, scientific view of human psychology, and a radically disturbing view of human beings as monsters. In another aside Krafft-Ebing describes the Marquis de Sade as a ‘sexual monster’ (Frayling 1991: 394), and takes great satisfaction from the fact that he died in an asylum for the insane, in, no doubt, sordid and extremely miserable conditions. As we have seen, while the scientific approach seeks to understand, the opposing view seeks to condemn. This contest needs to be resolved, and the purpose of this book is to resolve it one way or the other. Although it may seem to be a contest between two opposing viewpoints of human evil, one denying its possibility, the
other asserting it, in fact we can distinguish between four different positions.

*The monstrous conception*

The first secular possibility is that human agents are capable of pure evil, such that evil is a complete explanation for what they do. But here, to complicate the possibilities, there are still two options. The first I will call the monstrous conception, that some humans can freely and rationally choose to make others suffer purely because this is what they want to do and for no other end, but these people have crossed the border beyond humanity. According to the monstrous conception, these are monsters in human shape, human/inhumans, or inhuman/humans, who are willing to inflict suffering on others purely for its own sake, capable of pure evil precisely because of their monstrosity. The important point about this conception is that these monsters constitute a distinct class, different from the rest of humanity, with a different *nature* – they are not like you and me. This conception of evil is a powerful vision and we can see that power in the world of fiction. Both heroes and villains take on superhuman powers and even the most traditional monster like the vampire and the werewolf continue to live on in our imaginations, filled with malevolence towards us.

Although it may be tempting to describe the monstrous conception of evil as primitive, in fact it has its sources in modernity. Of course it does have obvious connections with pre-modern thought and David Pocock, in an anthropological study of evil, points out that this conception of the inhuman/human is precisely how evil persons were understood in ‘primitive’ societies, a ‘belief in creatures who are and are not human beings, at once within and beyond the limits of humanity’ (Pocock 1985: 48); someone who is ‘paradoxically, not human’ (Pocock 1985: 49). The motives of the truly evil person are therefore beyond understanding, incomprehensible to normal human beings, and it is precisely the inability to explain that leads to the use of the concept of evil (Pocock 1985: 49), as though the idea of evil itself provides a full explanation. However, if the motives and actions cannot be understood, they cannot be judged. Pocock says: ‘the evil act itself is beyond the comprehension of human justice’ (Pocock 1985: 52). However, another element of the oldest philosophies of evil is that of ambiguity. In ancient Greek thought, for example, we find the ‘daimon’,
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a force or energy between God and humanity (Flint 1999: 280). These are in-between creatures, a mixture of the human and the divine, and they are ambivalent between being helpful and being harmful. They are a mixture of divine powers and human emotions and this combination makes them extremely dangerous, but none of them are purely evil or purely good. The monster which emerges in modern fiction is something else, for here we have pure evil, not some powerful, unpredictable force which we can, if we are careful, exploit for beneficial purposes, but a figure of pure malevolence who wants nothing other than our extreme suffering and destruction and who very often can only be resisted at the very last moment with extreme effort and massive cost, or, in Gothic tales with horrific twists, not resisted at all. Another aspect of the ancient view is that the ‘daimons’ are agents of more divine forces, capable of carrying messages between heaven and earth, for example. The modern monster has no message for us, is an independent agent, pursuing nothing other than our destruction. Or, if she or he does carry a message, it takes the form of metaphor.

The problem which undermines the credibility of the monstrous conception of evil is how to explain why certain human beings have a radically different nature to other human beings — how they can be inhuman/humans. This is not so much of a problem for fictional representations, as the nature of characters is often simply given without any attempt at explanation, and in mythologies it is given by the character’s fundamental role in the narrative: certain characters are evil because this is their narrative function. However, quite often in fiction and mythology the presence of the evil character is explained in terms of a two- (or more) world model — the evil monster came from another world, and in order to explain their presence in our world all we have to do is describe their journey; as we have no understanding of their world, there is no requirement to explain their nature. This model is most obvious in science-fiction narratives of alien invasion, always highly potent and popular. But the two-world model can appear in horror narratives as well. In the enormously popular American television series Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Buffy and her comrades protect the Californian town of Sunnydale — and the rest of the world — from vampires and other evil monsters. Sunnydale is a site for evil activity because it is built on a ‘hellmouth’, a gateway between our world and a demon dimension. Although some of the monsters Buffy encounters spend their time in our world, the worst enter from that demon dimension, and often her
struggle is an apocalyptic one, to prevent her evil enemies from
opening the gateway, collapsing the boundary between the human
and demon worlds, and so destroying humanity.

But although the monstrous conception of evil, with or with-
out the two-world dimension, has its obvious home in fiction and
mythology, a recurring theme of this book will be how often this
fictional portrayal of evil agency, this particular myth of evil, is
employed as a real-world description of specific groups and in-
dividuals. The popular media are quick to identify murderers,
rapists and others as monsters. The problem is, of course, that
these people, because of their monstrosity, are more or less than
human and, like all monsters, are extremely dangerous and de-
serve little more than to be eliminated. They are not, after all,
genuine human beings. Worse, if the authorities do not eliminate
them, then ordinary people will mobilise to do it. In August 2000
the News of the World newspaper in the United Kingdom began a
campaign to identify convicted paedophiles following the murder
of an eight-year-old girl. As a result of the identification of these
people as monsters, campaigns of intimidation and violence were
carried out by ‘concerned’ members of the public to drive them
out of their communities, if not to kill them. One commentator
described these campaigns as a witch craze.

The pure conception

The pure conception of evil shares the basic characteristics of the
monstrous conception in its understanding of evil, that human
agents have the capacity to freely choose to pursue as a project
the destruction of others for its own sake. Once more, evil is a
complete explanation for human action. But there is one radical
difference, that according to this understanding, there is no sharp
boundary between humans and monsters – the capacity for pure
evil lies in all human agents without distinction. Those who com-
mits such acts are not monsters, not inhuman/humans, but are all
too human. It is not that they exist beyond the boundaries of hu-
manity, but that we have put the border in the wrong place. We
use the monstrous conception of evil in its traditional form to
hide not from monsters, but from ourselves. At the heart of the
pure theory of evil is a conception of human freedom, a radical
freedom, the freedom to choose any possibility, however awful.
Joan Copjec describes evil as ‘uniquely the product of a free hu-
manity’ (Copjec 1996a: xi). If we assert the possibility of free will
against the determinism of social and psychological forces, then one possibility has to be to choose to pursue the destruction of others for its own sake. How can philosophers of freedom deny this possibility?

**The impure conception**

But deny it they do, and this leads us to the third secular possibility, the conception of evil developed within modern moral philosophy, which I described above as impure. This philosophical conception rejects absolute evil as a human possibility. Normal human agents cannot be evil in the pure sense of willing the suffering of others for its own sake. However, they are capable of the impure form of evil, a merely human evil, which is the causing of suffering to others for some other human end, such as power, wealth, security, or the greater collective good. Colin McGinn is one contemporary writer who makes this distinction, between what he calls pure evil and instrumental evil. Pure evil is ‘malice for its own sake, not as a means to achieving some other goal’, while instrumental evil occurs in cases ‘in which a person does something to harm another in order to reap some benefit, as with violent theft or fraud or some such: here the pain of the other is not the goal of the act, only a necessary (and perhaps regretted) means towards achieving something else’ (McGinn 1997: 63). According to the philosophical conception, the evil person is now someone who is willing to make others suffer in order to achieve his or her goal, but the goal is distinct from the suffering. This is the conception of evil we find in a tradition of moral theory which includes the deeply pessimistic Thomas Hobbes, who, although he never expects much from his fellow human beings, nevertheless says, ‘that any man should take pleasure in other mens great harms, without other end of his own, I do not conceive it possible’ (Hobbes 1985: 126). It also includes the sceptical David Hume, who makes the point that mere indifference to virtue is not sufficient for evil. ‘A creature, absolutely malicious and spiteful, were there any such in nature, must be worse than indifferent to the images of vice and virtue. All his sentiments must be inverted, and directly opposite to those, which prevail in the human species’ (Hume 1975: 226). This, observes Hume, is to make the truly evil person someone inhuman, and this is an impossibility. ‘Absolute, unprovoked, disinterested malice has never perhaps place in any human breast’ (Hume 1975: 227). And most
importantly, it includes Immanuel Kant, the most influential and important thinker who denies the possibility of pure evil in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. But it is precisely Kant who provides the most radical theory of human freedom as unconstrained by the phenomenal world of our experiences, and the puzzle here is how we can hold that human agents are radically free to choose any possibility except this one. Is the limit Kant and others impose upon human freedom merely the expression of wishful thinking?

**The psychological conception**

The final secular possibility is to reject the existence of evil as a human capacity altogether and shift attention from human freedom to the human condition. According to the psychological conception, where humans commit what we are describing as evil acts there must be an explanation which does not involve them freely and rationally choosing to do them. Instead, a proper explanation will rely on empirical causes, to do with their social or psychological history, or the physiological state of their brain, or the extreme circumstances under which they are forced to act. To put it crudely, this is explanation through madness or necessity. If madness, then those humans’ means/ends reasoning has broken down due to a loss of contact with reality, so that they pursue what may be perfectly reasonable ends through means which make sense to them but which are out of all proportion to those ends. For example they may want peace and quiet so they can read a book undisturbed in their garden, and so they shoot dead everyone who lives on their street. I include here compulsive behaviours, by people who have been so socially conditioned through their social or psychological history that we no longer hold them morally responsible for their actions in any real sense, although this is to enter into the borderlands of the debate about mental health and moral responsibility. But there are always borderlands rather than clear-cut boundaries. If the explanation is through necessity, then they have been forced to pursue normal human ends through extreme means because their immediate circumstances have closed off all other options for them. More than this, the human ends that are being pursued through these extreme means are ends which no normal human being should be expected to give up, or at least it is arguable whether they cannot be given up. To pursue a normal but mundane human end through extreme means on the basis that no
other less extreme means were available – there is no other way to achieve peace in the garden other than slaughtering the neighbour- hood – would again be to enter the realms of insanity. A proper example of the necessity explanation would be a crew lost at sea in a lifeboat with no supplies and no immediate prospect of rescue who kill and eat one of their members to survive. What they did is arguably morally understandable. Again, there are borderlands here. Is the occupation of one’s nation state by a foreign army an example of such extreme circumstances that one has no choice but to pursue horrific and brutal acts of resistance? Here we enter the ‘war on terror’ from both perspectives. What is crucial for the madness/necessity explanation is that freedom or rationality of choice have been removed. Either mental illness has made rational choice impossible or circumstances have made free choice impossible. What is ruled out is that human agents can freely and rationally choose to do such things simply because they want to.

I will look at all these possibilities in later chapters. The aim is to discover whether the idea of evil has any place in a secular understanding of humanity, or whether it is an irredeemably religious or supernatural or mythological concept. The fundamental problem is one of explanation, and whether the concept of evil can play any constructive or useful role in explaining human action. Is ‘because she was evil’ ever an explanation, even a partial one? On the other hand, if we abandon the concept of evil altogether, as the psychological conception insists we must, is there not a huge gap in our understanding of humanity? In the end, is a world view without the concept of evil one that can make any sense to us? Are none of the examples of grotesquely violent and cruel behaviour committed by humans against other humans evidence that there is such a thing as evil? And we must remember Bernstein’s critical challenge to the psychological conception, of the gap it leaves in our accounts, and that the attraction of the idea of evil is that it can fill that gap. When we are asking why the American guards in the Iraqi jail inflicted gross suffering upon their victims while others in the identical situation chose not to, then ‘because they were evil’ completes our accounts of them, and tells us everything we need to know.

However, in defence of the psychological conception, we can ask whether the ‘black hole’ has genuinely been filled, whether we have, instead, fallen back into mythology. ‘Because they were evil’ presents the illusion of understanding, and we may have failed to understand anything if we resort to it. Indeed, the ‘black-hole’
problem afflicts even the most traditional understandings of evil. If we submit the Devil to any detailed examination to try to understand why he afflicts humanity, ‘because he is evil’, paradoxically, fails spectacularly to explain anything about him and his motivations. Having said this, though, the psychological conception, although it may give us the correct understanding of the metaphysics of evil – its radical non-existence – does fail to supply any sort of account of why the idea of evil has such a powerful grasp on our imaginations, such that, even though we see it belongs within a dream, we constantly confuse that dream for reality. This account has to be a central component of the rejection of evil as myth. One possibility is to explore our own psyches, to try to discover what we are so scared of. Here we move beyond the psychological to the psychoanalytic, a journey into the unconscious to find the true form of the supernatural monsters that haunt us. One place where the unconscious can be explored, of course, is the world of fiction, where these monsters, demonic and human, are the stuff of everyday experience. Another possibility is to understand the concept of evil as a disciplinary discourse that regulates an oppressive sense of the human, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault. The third possibility is to understand evil against the background of mythology, such that each time we describe someone as evil we are placing them within a mythological narrative, giving them a specific role to play in a world history. Evil, in this sense, is the grandest of grand narratives.

Behind the question of the meanings of evil lies a more fundamental one, of the meaning of humanity, for each conception of evil has as its partner a conception of what it means to be human. If we discover the need for a new conception of evil, we will also discover the need for a new model of the human as the accepted borders between humanity and inhumanity collapse. This has enormous implications for moral and political philosophy, because at their foundation is a conception of the limits of the human, and the idea of evil both reinforces those limits and disrupts them. It also has profound implications for those cases where people do transgress those limits and our capacity to judge and punish them. On the one hand, judgement is impossible and punishment may itself be inhumane. On the other hand, perhaps such judgements have to be made and punishment owed as retribution for what has been done, precisely in order to maintain the boundaries of the human. We may have to accept that some of the most dreadful acts in our history have been freely chosen by rational agents.
This possibility haunts us at the level of our community and our individuality. It haunts us at the level of the community because of the deep dilemmas we face when it comes to the treatment of the disturbingly many people who transgress their humanity. It haunts us at the level of our individuality because at stake here is our own humanity and our own insecurity about who we are and what we are capable and incapable of doing. Bearing witness to the dreadful things so many people have done to so many others confronts us with the possibility that we have the capacity to do the same or worse. It may be that one possible meaning for the concept of evil is that we use it to hide from ourselves.

On Philosophical History

I will make two final points before I close this first chapter. First, my previous work has been on political theory and immigration (Cole 2000). It is worth noting the connections between that work and this current project. In that book I argued that the borders and boundaries peoples draw in order to identify themselves as distinct from others are imaginary and have no real basis. The point there was to argue that those borders and boundaries could play no legitimate role in any genuinely ethical view of what it is to be a member of a community. Here the boundary is that of humanity but the problem is the same, that if this boundary is imaginary then we have no genuinely ethical view of what it is to be human. The idea of evil is supposed to play a role in marking out that boundary, but what I have argued here and will continue to argue throughout the book is that in fact it undermines it drastically, because what we will discover is that the enemy is always within – the one fact we cannot escape is that if pure evil does genuinely exist in the world, it is human beings who put it there. We may be able to shore up the border by declaring all such human beings to be deviant monsters, or insane or helpless against overwhelming circumstances, and so not really evil at all, or not really human. But then all such defences may fail, and, in Judith Halberstam’s terms, the attempt to ‘make the human a refuge from monstrosity’ may be futile (Halberstam 1995: 188).

The second and final point is that I use the idea of philosophical history to propose a method of tracing the possible meanings of evil and drawing on a range of sources from different fields. I take the idea of philosophical history from Jonathan Rée (Rée 2000).
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This is to approach evil as a phenomenon, and, says Rée, ‘to treat something as a phenomenon means approaching it not as an object, but as a topic or theme: a great onion, as you might picture it, made of nothing but layer upon layer of more or less intelligent experiences – a topic of human perceptions, weighed down by history, saturated with memories, fears and desires; a theme of love, hatred, obsession and fascination; in short a hubbub of conflicting interpretations, accessible only through the multiple obliquities of a philosophical history’ (Rée 2000: 7). A philosophical history will ‘devote itself to metaphysical notions that have infiltrated ordinary common sense and become real forces in the world, guiding our individual choices and even determining the destiny of whole groups or classes...’ (Rée 2000: 382). The concept of evil seems an ideal subject for such a method, to be treated as a ‘metaphysical notion that has infiltrated common sense’, and a concept that has become a real force in the world. At the end of such a history we may be in a position to judge whether the concept of evil has a legitimate role to play in a philosophy of humanity.

Conclusion

Although I have identified four possible secular conceptions of evil, in the end I believe the contest is between the pure conception of evil and the psychological rejection of it, and of the two my preference is for the psychological rejection. I do not supply any decisive philosophical refutations of the pure conception, but rather supply moral, political and psychological reasons why we should reject it. It is, I believe, a highly dangerous and inhumane discourse and we are better off without it. In Chapter 3 I look at the philosophical, impure conception of evil, and show why it is incoherent, and one might assume that once this is done the book would take the form of a debate between the pure and psychological views. However, although I have already dismissed the monstrous conception of evil, we will find that we encounter it over and over again because, as in Krafft-Ebing’s text, it keeps erupting into view at certain crucial points.

And so the book is not simply a debate between the pure and psychological conceptions, but is also a record of the ways in which the monstrous conception keeps rising up and dominating the field. We will confront it in Chapter 4 when we study the historical phenomena of the witch trials of Europe and North
America of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the vampire epidemics that swept through eastern Europe in the eighteenth century. It was this myth of monstrous evil that was mobilised to attack ‘witches’, and to persuade people to obey religious authorities in order to be protected from the living dead that were rising from their graves. In Chapter 5 I pose the question, what are we scared of? What is it that enables authorities – religious or political – to exploit our fears and insecurities so effectively? I look at psychoanalytic accounts, such as those of Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva, approaching them through the presence of evil in fictional form in film, television and literature. Here, again, it is fear of evil monsters, often invaders from another world, that keeps recurring as a theme.

One of the enduring images in fiction is the evil child, for children in their innocence are especially terrifying, and in Chapter 6 I examine the demonisation of children in reality, looking at the case of the killers of James Bulger and how they were treated both culturally and legally. Here the psychological conception directly battles against the myth of evil monsters, as I argue against the view that children who kill cannot be ‘real’ children, but are monsters in disguise. Chapter 7 returns to philosophical argument to examine the idea of ‘character’, and whether it makes sense to talk of ‘evil’ characters. John Kekes argues that we must use the concept of evil to condemn such characters, and I examine his views in detail. But once more, we find the monstrous conception lurking beneath the narrative, in that if we can identify people with evil character, we must condemn them, shun them, and deny the possibility of redemption. Chapter 8 confronts the Holocaust, the most difficult challenge for anybody who wishes to deny that the concept of evil has any useful role to play in describing human agency. Nevertheless I argue that the idea of evil fails to help us to understand how such events happen, and so I question its importance even here. It is the monstrous conception of evil that is at work once more, in the anti-Semitism that drove the Nazi leadership and its supporters in their conviction that the Jewish people were a demonic enemy bent on the destruction of Germany and human civilisation in general. But we also find it in the portrayal of the Nazi leadership and those who participated in the Holocaust – they could not be ‘ordinary’ Germans, but had to be some kind of demonic presence.

Finally, in Chapter 9 I look at 21st-century mythologies, such as that of global terrorism, where once more we find ourselves
confronted by a demonic enemy with supernatural powers devoted to our destruction. The myth of monstrous evil will not go away, and what we have to understand is the extent to which political communities are constituted by fear of imaginary monsters. And so, while I intended to write a philosophical treatment of the concept of evil, a detached, dispassionate study, I found myself facing a profoundly un-philosophical creature, and instead have written what is, for the most part, an enraged polemic against that monster. I conclude that the idea of evil is not a philosophical concept, certainly not a psychological one, and not even a religious one. It is a mythological concept that has a role to play in grand narratives of world history. To describe someone as evil is not to say anything about them, but is to place them as victims of a narrative force, as characters in a story in which they play a specific and prescribed role. In Chapter 2 I look at the history of the idea of Satan, and argue that this history shows that the figure of the Devil has always played a political role in mobilising a community through fear of the evil enemy, and that this enemy is usually to be found within the community, in the figure who appears to be one of us, but who is a monster in disguise. In the concluding chapter I return to this theme, and argue that Satan is only a coherent figure in the context of a mythology – outside of that mythology both Satan and the idea of evil make no sense. In the absence of any mythological grand narrative of world history, we should abandon the idea of evil.