satisfaction” of seeing the criminal suffer as much as, or more than, his victim did. If the speaker proceeds to help himself to a portion of such satisfaction, then his action, especially if it harms a third party, is immoral. So we have a conceptual scheme in which mental sickness can logically coexist with moral condemnation of the sick person provided that the sickness is predicated on desires only, the immorality applies to actions only, and neither applies directly to the person in abstraction from her traits and dispositions.

Pure Wickedness: Plain and Simple

Definitions and Examples

What leads people to speak of “evil, plain and simple,” “pure evil,” or “sheer wickedness”? Usually these phrases introduce a moralistic account of criminal wrongdoing, with emphasis on blame, guilt, and sin. People lose patience with the medical model, with unconvincing tests for exculpation, with expressions of sympathy for perpetrators, and with attempted elucidations of motives.

Primarily, however, the concern behind these terms is just what one would expect from the language used. “Evil” is no exactly a new word in English, but it is having an increased use these days in scholarly books, essays, lectures, and symposiums. The increased interest in the subject is also easily explained. The twentieth century, may it rest in peace, was the period of the Holocaust and the Stalinist mass murders, and there are still alive many thousands of people who have lived through all of that, just as we have lived through similar atrocities on a smaller scale.

Our strong tendency, I think, is to reserve the word “evil” for wrongdoing and harm causing that we cannot understand. The realm of evil is not that of the petty criminal, the nasty cheat, nor even the raving madman. It is where the sane and responsible wrongdoer produces huge amounts of harm with no gain in it for himself or anyone else. The apparent evil person is one whose conduct not only shocks and angers us but also puzzles us. “How could such a thing have happened?” is often our first question in response to evil, and before we begin to search for an answer, we fear that no explanation is possible, a kind of pessimism that did not exist when the Devil was always available for us to pin the rap on. Without the Devil, some writers fear, a strange moral complacency will take over the world, and the full horror of fiendish evil will not be properly appreciated. This nonchalant indifference to evil, some think, is itself a serious evil.

“Pure” evil requires exclusion. It is evil undiluted, two hundred proof, served in an old-fashioned shot glass and taken neat, without a chaser. It is all evil and nothing but evil, and its impact is unweakened as it ages.

When we examine the characters in history and in fiction who are the leading candidates for the status of sheer wickedness, we discover first a strange sort of serial criminal who seems to have no plausible motivation of sufficient strength to account for his peculiar habits. He performs his actions for no apparent reason. They are to the rest of us, therefore, incapable of being understood.

Sometimes sheerly wicked actions are done calmly, but often those cases are no less perplexing than those done from a peculiar, powerful passion. The passionate evil killer who murders without explicable motive elicits this query: “What on earth is he so excited about?” The motiveless but calm killer, on the other hand, if only because of his superficial resemblance to the rest of us, may strike us as an irreducible mystery, but his very calm in other cases may contribute to his sinister eeriness.

In a different context, the Victorian criminal court judge James Fitzjames Stephen described a “purely evil murder” in which “a man passing along a road sees a boy sitting on a bridge over a deep river, and out of mere wanton barbarity, calmly pushes him into it and so drowns him.” Imagine that the boy is a stranger to the man who assails him. He sits on the side of the bridge, his legs dangling toward the deep water below him, and his back turned toward the other pedestrians on the bridge. The wanton man walks purposefully up to his victim and without pause, calmly activates his “impulse.” (Of course, I elaborate Stephen’s example.) The victim never even gets to know who his executioner is, or in what worthy cause that person acts.

It might not be quite true to say that all killers of this bewildering sort appear to have “no reason” for doing what they do. When asked later by the police why he did it, such a killer might have replied, truthfully: “I don’t know. I never thought about the matter. I just felt like doing it, so I did.” We can tell him, of course, that that is no reason, but by then he might have shifted his ground just a bit. Now he might reply in a somewhat different way. “I don’t know,” he might say. “It must have seemed to me at the time that it would be fun to do.” This alternative response has the form of a “reason,” but not much of a reason. It suggests that the killer acted on hedonistic principles, and that his “reason” for killing the boy was that it seemed likely to give him pleasure (“fun”). But this is not exactly a comprehensible explanation. How could killing a child (of all things!) give the killer pleasure? Until we know that, his conduct is no more intelligible than that of the other confessed killer, who had no reason at all.

Most of those who read about serial killers in their newspapers will say that they cannot understand how the profileless killing of a stranger/child could appeal to anyone at all or move anyone to action. And they remain puzzled about this even after all the facts are in.

The puzzlement that is part of the natural response to evil is of the same kind, though more intense and disturbing, as that of a jealous lover, who says, “I cannot understand what she sees in him.” In both cases the speaker puts himself imaginatively in the other person’s shoes and finds that his experiences in those shoes are quite different from those of others. Killing chil-
dren has no more appeal to our imagination than it has influence on our motives, and one cannot easily conceive of any people being otherwise. If there are such people (and, alas, it appears that there are), then most of us cannot identify with them.

It is one thing to identify evils and quite another to understand or explain what we are saying when we pronounce a thing “evil.” Few of us have any hesitation in judging things evil, but most of us find it surprisingly difficult to explain what we are doing when we make and support such judgments. This is the dark corner where I hope to cast some light.

To begin with, "evil" is a term of negative appraisal. We all understand that we are not saying something nice about a person or her works when we call her “evil.” But evil is not the only such term. The English language is particularly bountiful in its provision of terms of negative appraisal. How does evil differ then from such terms as bad, wrong, ought not, and all the others?

I have suggested that at least one of the features that distinguish evil from other bad things is its capacity to generate puzzlement. When we examine the most atrocious crimes, we will often discover that the actor had no apparent motive or that he appeared to act in a way that we would call sick! sick! sick! (triple sick) and to do so for no apparent reason.

Moral atrocities are also sometimes called “pure evils” or “sheerly wicked” actions. Perhaps it is because evil typically causes puzzlement that pure evil, undiluted and disconnected from the actor’s goals and purposes, has an air of mystery about it. At any rate, pure evil might be distinguished from other evils by the puzzlement it produces by its motive or reason, or by the fact that it seems to have had no reason at all. A preliminary working definition, therefore, is that an evil act is wrongful behavior done for no intelligible reason.

Not all pure evils are actions, but when a state of affairs is deemed purely evil it is normally because of the character of the actions from which it follows or the actions to which it leads. So there is something basic about the idea of behavior or conduct. (One exception to this will be discussed in the section below on unsavory emotions.) A human action properly appraised as purely evil will be an instance of

1. wrongdoing.
2. moral blameworthiness for that wrongdoing.
3. considerable harm to a victim, and
4. the unintelligibility of the actor’s reasons or motives for her wrongdoing and for the elements that ground her moral blameworthiness.

Category 4 contains reference to the puzzlement and unintelligibility discussed above. If we consider unintelligibility to be not merely a typical element of evil, but an invariant element, then the following definition of “pure evil” is plausible:

Pure evil is wrongful behavior or its upshot, for which the actor is blameworthy, done for no intelligible reason, and which people understandably find extremely perplexing.

Abject Wickedness (Impulse Control Disorder)

The psychiatric writer Carl Goldberg has a perfectly typical example of pure evil. I quote:

After seventeen years of trying to reform Wesly Allen Dodd by conventional methods used to treat sex offenders, the state of Washington executed him. When he was arrested for the last time, in the fall of 1989, he confessed to stabbing to death an eleven-year-old boy and his ten-year-old brother and to killing a four-year-old after repeatedly raping him.

“I knew what I was doing.” Dodd said, adding that he killed the children because he enjoyed doing so and because he thought he could get away with it. “I knew I would get the death penalty if caught. I killed them anyway.”

Dodd’s case is different in some important ways from that of a philosophy professor I know, who teaches at a large midwestern university, but the professor’s story is also strikingly similar to Dodd’s in other ways. Here is that story in the professor’s own words:

In 1949 when I was twenty-two years old, a fellow student and I spent the summer studying Spanish in Mexico City. We rented rooms in a private home in a moderately prosperous middle-class neighborhood. The family with whom we stayed contained a father and mother, both of whom worked for the Mexican federal government, two teenage children, and an Indian maid and her out-of-wedlock three-year-old daughter, Luisa.

My American friend and I were very fond of Luisa, who was an extremely cute, lovable little thing. Because of her fondness for European-type sweet rolls (on sale next door at a neighborhood bakery), we called her “Pan Dulce.”

On most days before leaving for the university, either my friend or I or both found a few minutes to play with Luisa Pan Dulce. She especially enjoyed the game I played with her, in which I would grip her under the arms, throw her vertically up in the air and catch her as she came down.

The frightening episode occurred on a day when my friend had left early for his class. Luisa Pan Dulce and I were on a kind of mezzanine balcony that extended out over a tiled entrance parlor. I threw her up a few times as usual and then I “found myself” (it seemed as passive as that) holding her firmly by her wrists as she dangled over the tiled parlor one floor below. If I had dropped her, obviously she might have been seriously injured. She seemed to have perfect trust in me at first, but then I felt her body become
tense. She returned to silence from her squealing and giggling, and an unaccustomed look of alarm was on her face. Then it happened. My arms went weak and felt like jelly. My fingers were cold and sweaty. I began to tremble uncontrollably. I wondered if I was going to open up my hands and let her drop. I felt my fingers twitch. My arms felt weak and shaky from the wrists to the shoulders, and I was terrified. Then I pulled her up and gently set her down. I was so weary in the aftermath of an adrenaline surge that I lay on the floor for ten minutes.

For many years, I told this story to no one. There was, of course, nothing for me to be proud of in the story. But I had “wondered” about myself ever after, and I was, at the very least, puzzled and curious. One of the things that puzzled me, but also reassured me, was the singularity of the experience. Nothing like it had ever happened to me before, nothing like it was ever to happen again. It was absolutely unique.

About a dozen years later, when I was forty years old, I won a fellowship at the Center for Advanced Standing in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto, California. There I met social scientists of every sort. One of the fellows I befriended was a psychoanalyst. One day I told him about the episode with Luisa Pan Dulce, and asked whether he had any quick and easy explanation for it. He did.

First, he asked me if I had any siblings. “Yes,” I said, “I have a younger sister.”

“How old is she?”

“Twenty-two months younger than I am,” I replied.

“Was she a very attractive little girl?”

“Yes, she was always attractive, both as a little girl and as a bigger girl and an adult. My male playmates, and later, my high school friends, could not keep their eyes off her.”

“Did you have a very intense sibling rivalry with her?”

“Fierce.”

The psychoanalyst had other things to do, so that is where we left the story of Luisa Pan Dulce. A little bit of insight made my evil disposition, if there had been anything left of it to begin with, utterly disappear. I was able to talk about the matter in a relaxed way. I was no threat to anyone. There was just that one time in a lifetime of seventy years.

The philosopher in me, however, could not be so easily handled. What about that one time when I was a danger? No one will ever be able to convince me that I did not come close to inflicting serious injury on a three-year-old child, for no reason at all. My adrenaline surge, my fatigue, my rubber legs, my lanky fingers seemed inconsistent with any other story. My mind was not a conspirator, but my body (arms and fingers) almost failed me and injured her. And then I must wonder: how many persons who are very much like me in relevant psychological and moral respects, have found themselves murderers to their great surprise and confusion? “Why did you do it?” the authorities (I imagine) would ask. The only honest answer would be “I don’t know.”

An uneducated and inarticulate killer would probably not do even that well in answering this question.

The criminal who does not understand his own motives, who seems both to others and to himself to act for no reason, whose criminal actions are surprising even to himself and out of character in apparent defiance of his own principles, who acts neither to benefit himself nor to harm others, and in fact acts without profit to himself or to any others, is properly called “wicked,” but only if we invent a kind of wickedness to fit him. If he seriously regrets his episodes of wrongdoing, tries as hard as he can to prevent them (if only he knew how), and still fails to do so, he is abjectly miserable and helpless, as indeed the professor in the Pan Dulce case is abject and helpless. The professor feels as he would feel if he believed he was at the mercy of an unknown internal enemy, who can strike at any time. Above all, he does not wish to do what is wrong, and feels terrible if he learns that he has killed or injured someone. The professor in the story is wretched not because he pointlessly killed someone, but rather from the realization that he might have, indeed that he could have, done so.

The shock to his psyche may persist even in the case where his luck is good and no harm is done to the child, and even though he conquers his tendency, if he has one, to damage little girls, and never repeats. Imagining that his fingers did lose their hold, and Luisa did lose her life, we could say that he killed her, and that would become a memory he would have to live with forever in abject self-hatred. This is an extreme and unlikely case but a possible one.

Atrocious criminals like Jeffrey Dahmer often seem to be beyond any possibility of our understanding them. It is the fourth element in our definition of evil (the agent’s reason or motive) that is the source of our difficulty. We do not know his motive, so we cannot understand his action. Further, the motive appears either nonexistent or beyond the possibility of comprehension either by observers or by the agent himself. In the latter case, we can say that the agent is both wicked and abject.

Predicate for the adjectival modifiers “pure” and “sheer” is the mark of those writers who put forth evil as a rival to sickness or illness as their recommended rational response to atrocious crimes. They are likely to say such things as “Atrocity commiters are not necessarily sick. To so classify them lets them off the hook too easily.” We must insist that such people are pure evil, old-fashioned evil, “plain and simple.” A definition of “perfectly pure evil” could then expand it as follows: Perfectly pure evil is morally wrong and extremely harmful behavior, done without excuse or mitigation (hence blame-worthy), and mysteriously without intelligible motive.
The Devil and Inverse Utilitarianism

The Devil is still useful as an analytic model, even though he is irrelevant for other constructive moral purposes. If we want to understand what pure evil is, let us ask ourselves what a perfectly evil being would be like, a being who, but for his unlimited nature, is more or less human in his psychological makeup. Perhaps such a being would be a kind of maximizer in ethics. Just as God, perfectly good being, would, in his infinite benevolence, create as much happiness as possible in those affected by his actions, so the Devil, the purely evil being, would, in his infinite malevolence, create as much misery as possible in those affected by his actions. This might give us a start at understanding what we could mean by perfect evil and, through contrast, by perfect good. If Satan had the same power that his master has, and knew that he had such power, he might well aspire to do for misery what God has done (allegedly) for pleasure, namely, spread it far and wide. The satanic legends give us every reason to suppose that Satan would embrace his self-assigned duty to maximize pain.

One gets the impression that Jeremy Bentham did not have any personal experience with the diabolic sort of person among the philosophers and lawyers he knew in eighteenth-century Great Britain. Nevertheless, when he comes to “prove” his own “first principle” of ethics by eliminating all of the alternatives to it, one of the alternatives that he takes seriously enough to eliminate is one that would probably please a genuinely evil person. His own favorite theory, propounded in his Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789), he calls the “principle of utility” or the “happiness principle.” That principle imposes a moral duty on us to produce through our own voluntary actions and omissions as much happiness as possible. The position of the lover of evil that must be refuted (“eliminated”) if the happiness principle is to be “proved,” Bentham calls the “principle of asceticism” or the “unhappiness principle.” He defines it, in effect, as utilitarianism turned upside down, which requires us always to act in such a way as to create the largest balance of pain over pleasure in those affected by our actions.

Perhaps Satan himself, if he ever read philosophy, would endorse this kind of inverted theory, which justifies creation of as much misery all around as possible. I think, however, that we tend to reserve the term “ascetic” for actions deliberately performed for the purpose of creating pain for the actor. A truly diabolical inversion of the happiness principle would require that we promote the greatest possible balance of pain over pleasure in ourselves as well as in other people. But I do not think Satan is particularly eager to cause himself pain. He is no ascetic.

What sort of human being might it be who is utterly devoted to producing maximum pain all around? Some possible motives are familiar and intelligible. Perhaps he is a bitter, unforgiving person who wallows in his own frustrations, always blames them on others, and then moves toward a full misanthropy, through vengeance and spite. Perhaps he is not only paranoid but, even worse, poor at logic. The agents who have caused him harm in the past have included all kinds of human beings, white and black, male and female, and so on. Underlying their diversity, however, is one feature they all share in common: They are all human beings. Therefore our upside-down utilitarian will have us hate them one and all, and hate them equally. In that way one slides spitefully from egalitarianism to the impartial promotion of unhappiness in all those one encounters, which is what the inversion of Bentham’s happiness principle would require from us as our duty.

Does Satan himself acknowledge duties? Is he merely doing his duty to God when he produces harm to others? Or is he simply paranoid and spiteful? “If I cannot find happiness in myself,” he might say, “I will make damned sure [in the literal sense of “damned”] that no one else can find happiness either.” Satan as described by John Milton in Paradise Lost is not only a superhuman being (a fallen angel), he is also basically human by nature, if only because Milton meant to write a moral and psychological study of Satan based on the poet’s knowledge of human beings, the only species whose psychological nature is accessible to us.

Objectivity is actually one of the advantages of the utilitarian moral philosophy of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Everyone is to be treated equally with no partisanship and no arbitrary exceptions to basic commitments. Insofar as he has the time to deliberate in the face of a moral quandary, the utilitarian is required by his teachings to create the greatest possible balance of happiness over unhappiness or, if all of the acts open to him will have bad consequences for others, the smallest possible balance of unhappiness over happiness in all of those people who will be affected by his conduct. Satan, a thoughtful fellow of pure evil disposition, will be tempted in his own case to embrace (perhaps secretly) an “inverse utilitarianism” utilitarianism turned upside down, a view that requires everyone to act so as to maximize unhappiness and minimize happiness all around. In the ensuing calculations, no one would be favored over anyone else. “Everyone is to count as one and no one as more than one.”

The abundant pain and suffering throughout the world that would result if the Devil could persuade people conscientiously to inflict maximum pain, each on most of the others, would no doubt have a certain appeal to Satan, but in the end I think he would choose a system that permits his own self-preference. Everyone else should count as one, and only Satan should count as more than one. That would be a more diabolical moral principle, a description of it that seems to Satan to be high praise as he understands it.

In any event, I think that Satan is happier with a personal moral code that requires us to maximize pain for others while exempting ourselves from the requirements that we contribute to our own pain. Diabolic pain then is more than Benthamite utilitarianism turned upside down. The traditional utilitarian, a benevolent sort of person, is perfectly impartial in the way he seeks to
Luisa Pan Dulce, most of them would respond as follows: "The person we read about who injured the child was not the John Doe we have known and admired all these years. This terrible accident must be something that happened to that Professor Doe, not something that he did" (as Mr. Hyde was something that happened to Dr. Jekyll).

In any case, that action not only fails to fit in with the various components of his character, it positively conflicts with them. It is against everything he believes in. So the killer (if that is what he would have become) would forever more have no alternative but to wallow in his not-understood guilt, or else feel that his true self had been preempted by an alien resident within him who simply used his host’s true self as a place to hide.

It is difficult to avoid speaking in this context of distinctions between mixed and unmixed bad things, between intrinsic and extrinsic badness, or the Platonic formulas—“for its own sake” or “in itself.” The evil person will glory in what is in fact something bad. Such a person’s perversity gives us an element for another model of pure evil, to be examined in the next section. A person like that is evil if she values things that are bad in themselves, and values them because they are bad.

Other persons may also like to produce bad things but they are not evil persons unless they value those things for no other reasons than that they are bad. A bad person of another type might promote the same bad thing, but not because it is bad, but rather because it is a useful means to further ends, which may or may not be bad in themselves. Terrorist bombings, cruelty, ruthlessness, and the unscrupulous pursuit of worthwhile ends by the use of cruel means, in the absence of some extraordinary complication, are all examples of immensely harmful wrongdoings. The actions themselves are wrong, and the perverse and voluntary doing of those wrong acts precisely because they are seen to be wrong reflects blame on the character of the actor, and insofar as the actor is disposed generally to act in similar ways from similar motives, he is an evil person, though not necessarily a purely evil person. A purely evil person is interested in evil only as an end in itself.

The criminal who kills for no reason then should be distinguished from the unscrupulous or ruthless killer who takes another’s life as a means to one of his own goals and from the cold-blooded, businesslike criminal who kills on contract. All three of these types are wicked but only the first is sheerly wicked (purely evil).

Not everything that is "sheer" is some kind of evil. Some acts are sheeerly wicked, to be sure, but some give sheer pleasure. Others are sheer joy; some are moved by pure malice or sheer hatred. The chemistry of evil admixture is indeed odd. Any kind of thing that can mix with evil can only dilute it. But it is not obvious that diluted evil is less evil, only that it is less purely evil. At any rate, the Devil as usually interpreted before Milton prefers his poison straight. Anything else would be unsatanic.
Perverse Wickedness as Analyzed by Ronald Milo

The optimism and self-confidence that came with the modern scientific outlook on the world has weakened where people have come to regard nature as an enemy. Frustrated and inarticulate, the victims of calamities begin to listen respectfully to those who would abandon attempts at naturalistic explanation and speak of evil as itself a basic principle or ultimate kind of explanation. Evil is just there, waiting to be done, as accidents are often said to be “waiting to happen.” Pure unqualified evil, then, is thought to be part of the basic structure of the universe, and there is simply no explaining how it got there or how it can be removed. Of all the many confusions that have impaired our efforts to understand the fusion of moral and medical judgments, this one is, in my opinion, by far the worst.

“Pure evil,” as I use the term, corresponds closely to what Ronald Milo in his penetrating study, *Immorality*, calls “perverse wickedness.” This comes close to “desiring to do what is wrong as an end in itself,” which (Milo adds) “might be thought of as the most evil desire of all.” The perversely wicked person decides to do an act which he believes wrong in itself, whether or not it is also wrong for some other reason. He voluntarily chooses to do this act because moral wrongness appeals to him. But how, we might ask, can a person get such a positive thrill out of doing something of which he presumably disapproves (else he would not judge it to be “wrong”)? Perhaps he understands the meaning of words like “wrong” differently from the way we do.

To ordinary, nonwicked people, this description of the perversely wicked person makes very little sense. It implies that a person might choose to do something in circumstances even though, indeed precisely because, she strongly believes that doing it would be morally wrong. To see how difficult this kind of perversity is to understand, contrast it with various other choices that a person can make. She can choose not to do a thing in C because that would cause some other party, S, to suffer severe pain, and she believes that causing suffering in circumstances like C is wrong. But in her motivation she does not refrain from x because it is wrong, but rather because it causes pain to other people, and she values pain avoidance more than wrong avoidance. Even if she thought that doing x in C would not be wrong, she would choose not to do it, because it causes pain, and she regards not causing pain as even more important than not doing wrong. Even though wrongness and pain causing rarely, if ever, diverge, she would be prepared to opt for pain avoidance in preference to wrong avoidance, just in case they should ever diverge. And there may be no other ground of wrongness than the wrongness of unnecessary pain causing, to which she would give automatic priority over wrongness itself.

Because of these difficulties, the picture that emerges of the perversely wicked person is likely to seem incoherent. “It is tempting,” Milo adds, “to think that these [perverse desires] . . . are always symptomatic of some pathological condition,” which is a fancier way of saying that the perversely wicked person, for all her “plain evil,” is mentally ill, therefore not fully responsible for her conduct, therefore not unqualifiedly wicked at all. Once more, medical and moral judgments blend and merge.

The atrocious act to which the professor is tempted in the Pan Dulce story would be cruel, harmful, and blameworthy. It would also be morally wrong. Suppose that he does this act not because it has these negative features, but rather only because it is morally wrong. It may have the other negative features too, but it is only wrongfulness that appeals to him. He is tempted to drop the child only because he believes it would be morally wrong to do so.

There are possible paths out of this paradox. We could deny that people are necessarily expressing their disapproval or rejection of something when they pronounce it morally wrong. Or we could deny that when a person appears to do something that she believes to be wrong in itself, she is really exhibiting a desire to do the wrongful act for the sake of the attendant properties that make the act wrong, not from a desire to do something wrong for the sake of wrongness. For example, hurting another person might make an act wrong (any act as far as it involves this characteristic could plausibly be said to be of a kind that tends to be wrong). Nonetheless, one might inflict pain on another person because one likes causing others pain, not because one wants to do what is wrong.

A wicked person who is somewhat less perverse than the one who has enlivened our examples thus far may be a nasty fellow, cruel and sadistic, and his actions may often, incidentally, be morally wrong. In his position we might do the act because of some weakness in our moral makeup, not because we believe it to be morally wrong and we like wrongness. Most of us would either omit the action or do it despite our belief that it is morally wrong. The perversely wicked person will do it precisely because of its wrongness. In other examples he might do it despite its cruelty, its harmfulness, and its sadism, but because of its wrongness. How is it psychologically possible for a person to be so much in love with moral wrongness?

In a way, that question paraphrases John Milton’s similar effort to explain the legend of Satan in Milton’s monumental poetic work, *Paradise Lost* (1667). In the seventeenth century, the period of Shakespeare and the King James translations of the Bible, writers were greatly impressed by the poetic resources of the English language. The capacity of the language to promote the expression of difficult ideas was inspirational primarily to those storytellers who could illuminate the shadowy corners of human nature and reconstitute essentially human motives for the inner life and actions of humanlike beings. Traditional Christian theology slipped through the dramatic and poetic nets. Its subject matter was a being who lives outside of space and time, who is in every relevant respect unlimited and unchangeable. Unlike poetic drama, which tells stories about finite beings who change and grow, who act and are
acted upon, and who struggle and quarrel, traditional theology has no room for its central figure to move or grow. Ordinary human beings, as they exist in our experience, must be the models for the understanding of angels and demons as well as for comprehension of the Infinite God, whose actions must be made plausible, like any other actions, to those with the soundest understanding of human psychology (the only psychology to which we have extended access). But the poet's task is impossible if in addition to expressing his psychological insights, he must also garb in humanlike personality an infinite and unchangeable abstract entity. Yet that is what Milton tried to do.

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton retells the Christian story, dealing with God as if he were only first among equals, one humanoid character among the others in the drama. He tells of the fancied grievances of one of the angels (Satan), who becomes so disgruntled that he leads a rebellion in heaven against the ultimate and infinite authority himself.

Applying an essentially human psychology to a fallen angel, the poet portrays a being in as dramatic and frightening a situation as anyone has ever imagined. Satan must truly be crazy to take on such a formidable foe as God. But if he is crazy, he must have a mental defect that prevents him from functioning properly, and in our world, at least, such defects of reason are typically produced by what we call “mental illness.” Indeed the connection between irrationality and mental illness is so close that we take the former to be a reliable symptom of the latter. We also take mental illness to be an excuse for otherwise blameworthy actions. And now we are back, full circle, to our starting place. Even a rebellion against the ultimate source of all morality, arguably the gravest of all conceivable moral crimes, a treasonable betrayal of an infinitely good maker of moral commands, does not prevent us from sympathizing a bit with this archdemon. He has a human side! He struggles and suffers with his emotions, including some partially disreputable humanlike emotions, such as vanity and greed. However unwholesome such emotions may be, he has to struggle to remain loyal to them, and he also surprises us in places by experiencing tender sentiments of love and mercy as, for example, when he looks down from a celestial vantage point upon Eve, who is to be seduced in time by him in the garden of Eden. The archdemon’s character flaws do not long vanish from view; his selfishness and boastful pride remain dominant. But his prurient tenderness toward Eve and his occasional self-doubts give him a mixed character. As a leading Miltonian critic put it more than a half century ago, “Surely it is exactly because he is capable of such a lapse from evil that Satan is so deeply tragic.”

Confused as Satan is by his assigned and voluntary roles, and by conflicting sentiments and principles, he never loses his courage, and only rarely his dignity. Who can escape feeling at least a little sorry for him? C. S. Lewis can, that’s who. And so can his fellow critic, Charles Williams. Lewis finds Satan, as Milton depicts him, much too absurd to be a hero. After all, virtually the only things we can find to admire in his conduct, something resembling courage and integrity, are based on misconceptions which have the tinge of madness to them. He is determined to go down fighting against superior forces, and that sort of virtue he shares with some of the heroes of Shakespearean tragedy. But one cannot very well be a hero in a struggle against a being that one acknowledges to be infinitely powerful (that’s crazy!) and (even worse) a being that one acknowledges to be unerringly good. That is a declaration to one’s moral command giver that, although the commander is absolutely right in his side of their quarrel (and about everything else as well) and furthermore, he is so powerful that he is certain to put down any insurrection of lesser persones, nevertheless, Satan will struggle to do what he knows to be impossible (like Albert Camus’s Sisyphus, “a blind man eager to see, who knows that the night has no end, but does not abandon his struggle against the darkness”). Satan fights back. That of course is crazy. But insofar as we can find anything nice to say about Satan at all, it is that his errors, tactical and moral, are very human, familiar to us, who share with both the poet and his subject a human nature. Even a poet of Milton’s brilliance cannot succeed in making Satan both appealing and inhuman, a fiend or a ghoul.

If one can make any positive sort of mitigating statement at all about Satan, for example, that some of his character flaws render him human, all too human, in our eyes, then we can feel a little sorry for him, at least, and find that even his weaknesses are in some ways appealing. It is only because we recognize his humanity and share it with him as he were a brother that this is possible. One cannot be a “brother” to a subhuman beast or a superhuman fiend.

Satan’s “lapse” into virtue raises many more problems for our understanding of plain evil. When Satan does good, and admittedly that is very rare, he is acting, one might say, “out of character,” and similarly, when he has certain feelings of tenderness, sorrow, and even on occasion something like remorse, he is “feeling out of character.” Aristotle said that to be a good person on balance is to have deeply rooted dispositions (sometimes his word is “habits”) to act or feel in certain ways in certain circumstances. In this sense, Milton’s Satan is not a predominantly good person. His habitual responses are weak and unreliable. He is not rocklike in his virtue, but there are the germs of good habits in him, potentially capable of becoming stronger.

Even though a consensus among literary critics about Milton’s Satan may still be lacking, his case raises an important question for ethical theory. When a predominantly good person (a person much more reliably good than Milton’s Satan) acts out of character, does that deviation from his habitual path make his conduct better or worse? Does it mitigate or aggravate? If his usual way has been taken often, he can cite in his defense his own better behavior in similar circumstances. He can show that he did act out of character, which might show that he is basically a good person who on rare occasions goes astray, not some common hoodlum who is thoroughly reprehensible in his character, hence more deserving of blame and punishment. The prosecutor
might scold him by saying to him, "You have had every advantage and no excuse. You knew better, and yet you persisted in this foolish crime. You are a member of the respectable classes, not some helpless ignoramus. Shame on you!" To show that the wrongdoer departed from his usual praiseworthy ways then can be taken as aggravation. He knew better but acted worse anyway. Paradoxically, it can also be taken as mitigation. A good man uncharacteristically gone wrong should have his virtues as well as his flaws counted in the final appraisal of his desert.

I do not think there is any easy way to get a question like this answered. The language of morals unavoidably generates absurdities and incommensurabilities that sometimes can be resolved only by a kind of existential flip of a coin, as reason flees to a perch of impartiality. Neither is there any easy way to preserve pleasurable symmetries in our explications of moral concepts. It would be a mistake, I think, to expect tragic virtues to work the same way as tragic flaws, or all-good divinities to have emergent properties perfectly parallel to those of all-evil demons, or a mixture of various moral properties in a person to affect our judgment of that person in a way no different from judgments of him as wholly unmixed. Again we must ask: Why is pure evil worse than impure or mixed evil? Is mixing always diluting? The Devil does evil just "for the hell of it," that is, just because he, being evil, loves the thought of evil being done for its own sake. His nature is all wound up to do evil, and he enjoys discharging his native spring. As we declared in our governing metaphor, the Devil would like his evil neat or straight, drunk without dilution in an old-fashioned shot glass. But that may just be a matter of taste. There may be in existence not just one but a diverse plurality of devils. Some may practice inverse utilitarianism, being rational calculators out to maximize human suffering; some might be perversely wicked in Milo's sense; some might be wholly arbitrary devils who can give no reason at all for promoting what they themselves think of as evil, except perhaps the fact of its being evil, but that would be to take the position of the perversely wicked person. It comes close to being also the position of Milton's Satan, when in a spirit partly grim and partly resigned, he makes his famous acrostic: "Evil be thou my Good." Here Satan must suppress every last semblance of goodness in himself, squelch his tender feelings and his sense of honor, and then, motivated by anger, resentment, and vengeance, create suffering in other people and do other noncontroversial evils, just as if he really thought them to be goods. All of this in order to upset God's morally ordered universe and achieve a sop of revenge. At once, Satan really believes as a matter of genuine conviction that certain occurrences that are almost universally loathed and condemned as evil really are evil, and also that the best thing for him to do about it is to create and preserve as many of these genuine evils as possible. This, I submit, is close to being contradictory but not clearly and explicitly so. It is without question as morally complex a state of mind as it is possible to sustain. That it can be sustained at all is a tribute to the psychological strength of resentment and envy as motivators.

Let us reintroduce Milton's Satan. He is of course the very epitome of evil. And insofar as his evil ways seem self-serving, ideologically derived, or passionately and self-righteously motivated, there is no doubting their evil status. But Satan takes the production of evil to be his job; that is "what he is for." He likes his work and labors hard at it. Apparently he understands that his employment is the consequence of some special agreement made with God, and he expects God to live up to his end of it. What foolhardy arrogance! He is also somewhat offensively proud, vain, and boastful, likable only in those rare moments scattered thinly throughout Paradise Lost in which Satan is overcome by the great natural beauty of the world and the beauty of innocence in Adam and Eve before the Fall. These moments lead a sensitive reader to a new appreciation of the good in Satan, mixed though it be with his dutiful perfidies. We can add to G. R. Hamilton's point that it is in virtue of Satan's capability to elude from evil that he is so tragic, and that is also part of the reason Paradise Lost is so moving.

Satan is of course wicked, and we must not lose sight of that fact. But he is not simply wicked. Perhaps we can say that he is not stalky or sheerly wicked, though very wicked he is indeed. He is surely a candidate for the status of pervasively wicked, though he is not exactly what Professor Milo meant by that expressive label, as we shall see. Satan is also exceedingly odd, as indeed we might expect when we apply our human standards to a non-human, though humanoid, being. He may be odder even than Milo's conception of perverse wickedness requires.

In what way is Milton's Satan "pervasive"? He has the sincere conviction that certain kinds of behavior are morally wrong. About this, he does not change his mind. Nevertheless, he makes no effort to renounce such actions in his own conduct, nor to oppose and disapprove of them generally. Instead he loves doing wrong and not for any reason other than that it is wrong. This, I submit, really is pervasive—or worse. Some, perhaps most, moral philosophers recognize that this description of Satan flies in the face of their own view, often called "internalism," that it is a necessary condition of believing an act to be wrong that one have some con-attitude [unfavorable attitude] toward it. But Milton's Satan, as I have interpreted him, is not particularly "commissive" (negative) in his attitudes toward morally wrong acts. He loves moral wrongness, dedicates himself to it, because it is wrong, not for any incidental advantages it might have on a given occasion. So either internalism is mistaken or my interpretation of Milton's Satan is mistaken because it generates this incoherent picture. Perhaps I can be forgiven for preferring to believe that internalism is mistaken and that Milton's Satan is a very odd, but logically possible, sort of demon.

The word "pervasive" seems so right in application to Satan that I hate to
give it up. But Milo means something rather different when he uses the word. He contrasts two ways of deliberately doing what in fact is morally wrong without compunction or scruple: “(1) the agent himself believes that acts of this sort are right (either required or permitted morally), or (2) the actor believes that what he does is wrong, but does it nevertheless because he prefers the realization of some end to the avoidance of moral wrongdoing.” Milo calls the first of these “perversely wickedness” and the second “preferential wickedness.” The second label fits well; I have no quarrel with it. But I would find a different label for the first of these, reserving “perversely wickedness” for a third way of being wicked, not considered by Milo. The perversely wicked person in my proposed terminology would be (3) the actor who believes that what he is doing is wrong but does it nevertheless, not because he prefers some end presently in conflict with moral rightness (like acquiring another person’s money, for example) but simply because he wants to do what is wrong for no other reason than to glory in its wrongness. The person (or demon) who believes that the moral wrongness of an act is a good reason, or even the best reason, for doing it is about as perverse as one can be. Satan would be proud to have such a title!

The picture of Satan that emerges may just border on incoherence, or if it stays inside the coherence border, it may describe a person who, if her nature were entirely human biologically, would be impossible psychologically. It may be, for all I know, that Milton's Satan is too odd for words, even for Milton's words. In another word, impossible. But that picture is our quasi-official model of extreme wickedness, and given that role, it is not surprising that the purest evil of which a poet can conceive is so bizarre.

Could it be that the Devil is mentally ill? Could Jeffrey Dahmer be triple sick, and the Devil himself not sick at all? Is the pure glee that comes from torturing people in hellfire and maximizing their pain and suffering by keeping it at maximum intensity forever be less of a symptom of mental illness than skinnning adolescent boys in the manner of Dahmer? Could a witness from earth observe the Devil's torture chambers in hell without muttering, sotto voce “That is sick”? Surely, no normal human being could enjoy the prospect as Satan is supposed to. If “normal” refers to all-human standards, then without question, Satan is abnormal. His human psyche, or some parts of it, is simply not functioning properly. His psyche is not in proper working order because some of its faculties, like defective parts in machinery, are broken. But why is it necessary that we use all-human standards to judge a fiend? Even a saint would do poorly if judged by the wrong norms. A juicy orange makes an “abnormal” apple.

While Satan smirks at his own criminal trial (we can imagine), his lawyer argues that his client was mentally ill, and that this is shown by the incoherent nuttiness of his conduct. When asked why he killed his victim, Satan replies: “Because I sincerely believed that it was morally wrong to do so.”

“You killed him precisely because you thought it wrong to do so?”
“That is correct.”
“Why do you want to do what is wrong?”
“I love doing what is wrong. In fact I have dedicated my life to it. Wrongness (what you call `evil`) is my good.”

Satan's lawyer would then be able to argue that his client does not satisfy the cognitive prong of the insanity defense, being obviously incapable of understanding how evil is different from good or, as the McNaughten Rules put it, what is the difference between right and wrong.

There are times when persons are prone to seek simple explanations. None of the usual accounts of our misfortunes seems applicable. It would be paranoid, at first, to assume that there must be some person or persons who have it in for us and are carrying on a vendetta without letting us know. It would be equally tempting for many to claim that there is nothing personal about the imposition of our misfortunes; it is things that happen in us. We have no evidence of that either, except that things seems to be acting up, and we have no other explanation for it. Perhaps it is a poltergeist that is causing our canned jars of turnips to jump up and down in the night, not earthquakes as we previously thought. In any event there does seem to be something out there that threatens us with harm, maybe a kind of impersonal evil built into things and prone to strike us hard for no visible reason. In a candid moment, the Devil will say, “I did it only to produce bad results. That is evil, but I love evil.”

Despite its recent comeback among historians and philosophers, the nominative “evil” is not a prominent word in ordinary speech. I think that is in part the influence of philosophers and theologians. As these scholars use the term, it is not merely a technical term in ethics. More fundamentally, it is a term in the metaphysic of morals. In the philosophy of religion, evil stands for a state of the universe as it must be described if it is not to be attributed to a deity. Philosophers have debated with one another over the “nature of evil.” Is evil a positive thing or a negative “absence of being”? This and similar questions are as much questions of metaphysics that is, questions about the nature of what ultimately exists, as questions calling for moral judgment.

Perhaps it is because of its association with such things as God and theology, cosmological and other great momentous themes that the concept of evil does not tempt many of us to a kind of relativism more widely invoked in theories of value (goodness and badness) and “oughtness.” It is not open to us, for example, while agreeing on all the historical facts, as collected in official documents, to deny that the Holocaust was evil, that the mass murders ordered by Pol Pot were evil (not just “a bad thing” or something the perpetrators “ought not” to have done) or that, on a smaller scale, most instances of child abuse leading to rape, battery, and murder are evil. If we
hesitate at all in making these judgments, it is only because we are not sure whether to classify these cases as examples of sheer evil or as examples of triple sickness.

What it is most implausible to say is that judgments of evil are “highly controversial” and that reasonable persons therefore can be expected to disagree over them. Some are tempted to the view that when we say that x is evil we are expressing our distaste for or rejection of x, so that we would be saying something conceptually incoherent, as well as diabolical, if we were to say that we “love evil” or that evil is to be “our good.” If x is to be our good, then (these writers conclude) why do we call it “evil” in the first place? That is like giving with one hand and taking away with the other.

I am unpersuaded by that argument. The term “evil” may not be quite as clear and invariant as some other moral terminology (for example, “moral” and “immoral”) but it is far from being a wild card in the deck that one can apply to anything at all that one rejects. However we define “evil,” our definition must be consistent with the judgments that child abuse, mass murder, genocide, terrorist bombing, sadistic cruelty, ruthlessness, and the unscrupulous pursuit of worthwhile ends by use of cruel means, in the absence of some extraordinary compulsion, are all examples of evil doings. The actions themselves are evil: the voluntary doing of those acts precisely because they are seen to be evil reflects evil on the character of the doer; and insofar as the doer is disposed generally to act in such ways from similar motives, he is an evil person.

Insofar as talk of pure evil emphasizes the unmixed and unattached, it suggests the Platonic formulas—“for its own sake” or “as an end in itself.” The truly evil person then is the who glories in what is in fact something bad. A person like that is herself evil if she values things that are bad in themselves, and values them precisely because they are bad.

Other persons may also like to produce bad things but they are not evil persons unless they value those things for no other reasons than that they are bad. Another person might produce or promote the same bad thing, but not because it is bad, but rather because it is a useful means to something else that is bad in itself, or even to something that is good (perhaps) in itself. Whether these judgments are correct is not generally a topic of ordinary moral discourse. In that respect they are similar to judgments about morality. Reasonable persons do not differ over whether morality really forbids murder, battery, and rape, or whether it really condemns lying, cheating, and stealing. If we understand this part of our English vocabularies at all, we know what sorts of acts are disapproved of or commanded by morality. We may very well wish to profit by performing an act we know is immoral, but we do not do that by arguing that these things are not immoral after all, that they are “inherently controversial.” and so on. Only the Devil can get away with that kind of talk.

Perverse Impishness (Edgar Allan Poe)

Perversity is a peculiarly irritating complex of character flaws. The original Latin from which the English word evolved was a kind of all-purpose directional term that combined readily with prefixes, which then served as turn indicators. See, for example, “inverse,” “obverse,” “reverse,” and so on. The main job of “perverse” has been to indicate a wrong turn, and even in modern English it bears the sense of being turned away from what is right or good. If I am headed in the wrong direction because someone turned me in that direction, then I have been perverted or corrupted.

The perverse person is not only the person who is headed in the wrong direction, he is the person who heads off at a tangent in order to frustrate his associates. He defends positions that the others strongly believe to be false and mischievous, and they are likely to simmer in anger. They believe that he does not even hold the controversial opinions himself but voices them for the sole purpose of irritating or insulting the others. But there is nothing playful about his manner, which is often harsh and dogmatic. More exactly, he is “stubborn, obstinate, and persistent by temperament and disposition in opposing what is right, reasonable, correct or accepted.”

With these traits he does not make friends easily, and he does not really care. His wrongheadedness typically grows into peevishness or petulance, and he is often in a sulk. In summary, the perverse person is wrongheaded, obstinate, and persistent in his errors. Basically, there are two main flaws that come together in this person: wildly erroneous opinions and stubbornness. He will not change.

So far there is nothing in the perverse person to suggest sheer wickedness. A fortiori, there seems to be nothing in impishness that suggests pure evil. My model of the imp is the small child who loves to play by being naughty with adults, usually giggling and screaming all the while, as she uses grandpa’s stomach as a trampoline.

In Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Imp of the Perverse,” these two very different notions, perversity and impishness, are brought together. The story has the form of a first-person narrative. The narrator is a convicted murderer awaiting his hanging for the crime he committed several years earlier. He thought that he had got away with “the perfect crime” and could never even be suspected, much less discovered and exposed. But that was before an “imp” from his own psyche began to give him away. He knew that to escape discovery there were certain things he must never do or say, else he would arouse suspicion. He suffered no intellectual confusion about this, nor was he subject to coercive pressure or trickery. His exposé was a kind of imp perversely goading him to do what he must not do if he were to escape hanging. Thus he did not escape hanging.

The prisoner’s tone suggests that he has no doubts, or is aware of no doubts, that his original plan—to keep quiet, cover up evidence, and the like—