EVIL AS AN EXPLANATORY CONCEPT

On the day on which Dr Harold Shipman, the Manchester serial killer, was convicted, there was wall-to-wall coverage of it in the media. During the course of one of the many reports, the daughter of one of his victims was interviewed, and asked for her views on why Shipman had acted as he did. What she said was this: she'd tried and tried to understand or explain his deeds, and she could only come to the conclusion that he was a really evil man. In saying this, she clearly meant to convey more than the obvious truth that what Shipman did was very wrong and entirely to be condemned. It seems to me that a secular as well as a religious audience would find the daughter's appeal to evil as an appropriate explanation perfectly comprehensible (though they might, of course, disagree with the actual assessment). But what exactly was it that was being attributed to Shipman, and how was it thought to explain his actions?

Different senses of evil

This paper is about whether evil is an explanatory concept. But first we must note that we use the term 'evil' in several different ways. Sometimes we use it to mean everything adverse in human lives, embracing both moral evils such as wars and massacres and natural evils such as drought and plague. On other occasions we use it more specifically to refer to the whole range of human immorality (as when we say "the evil that men do lives after them"). In this second usage, any wrongdoing can count as evil—we can talk about the evil of genocide, and also about the evil of malicious gossip (there is a slightly elevated, quasi-biblical quality about this use of the term.) Sometimes, however, we narrow its use still further, and reserve it for particularly horrifying kinds of action which we feel are to be contrasted with more ordinary kinds of wrongdoing, as when for example we might say "that action wasn't just wrong, it was positively evil."

"Evil as an Explanatory Concept" by Eve Garrard,
The implication here is that there is a qualitative, and not merely quantitative, difference between evil acts and other wrongful ones; evil acts are not just very bad or wrongful acts, but rather ones possessing some specially horrific quality. It is evil in this third sense that I want to concentrate on in this paper. There are some actions, some events, that we feel the need to describe in terms of their being evil in this more exclusive sense, in which we contrast their moral status with that of everyday wrongful actions. The terrible massacres of the twentieth century, the hideous and endless ingenuity of its tortures, seem to require description in terms of evil in this exclusive sense because other kinds of moral condemnation do not capture their nightmarish horror.

Two explananda

In attributing evil to an agent or action, what might we be looking to explain? In the first instance, there is the fact that we do want to categorise certain kinds of wrongful action as special in some way, as specially chilling or horrific. Is there some distinctive feature that such actions possess, or are we using the term ‘evil’ as a simple intensifier, to pick out cases of extreme wrongness (or badness), differing only in degree from other cases of wrongness? Secondly, there is the question of why such acts are performed. We understand human action in terms of the reasons which the agents take there to be for acting: how are we to account for some agents taking themselves to have reason to act in these peculiarly terrible ways? Any answer to this question will need to reveal something about the state-of-mind of the agent, about the favourable light in which he saw the act, but it does not follow that appeal to the agent’s character (i.e., his settled dispositions to act) will necessarily be helpful. The high level of popular participation in some of the most terrible massacres of the twentieth century strongly suggests that we need an account of evil under which evil acts can be committed by agents who do not necessarily have evil characters. Without such an account, we would have to accept that large, perhaps very large, numbers of people are evil, and I am assuming (rather optimistically) that this is implausible. What is needed is an account of the agent’s state-of-mind in committing the act in question, and this need not entail anything about his settled dispositions.

If the attribution of evil to an action is to have explanatory power, it should at least contribute to the answers to the questions presented above
(though of course there is no reason to suppose that appeal to the idea of evil will be able to provide full answers to all these questions. But that is not a special feature of the concept of evil: the provision of a full explanation of any action is likely to be a complicated matter drawing on a wide variety of considerations). On the face of it, claiming that the acts in question are evil does not by itself reveal why we group them together in one category, or why we respond with horror to them. Nor does it explain why the agents committed them. Again, this is not a problem specific to evil. Identifying an act as benevolent does not by itself explain why we group together certain acts in this moral category and respond to them with admiration; or why some agents commit such acts. But in the presence of an account of what benevolence amounts to, such questions are at least partly answered (e.g., to characterise an act as benevolent is to identify it as one in which the agent’s reason for acting was the promotion of the welfare of others. This already tells us something about why the agent acted as he did). Similarly, an adequate account of what evil is would show why certain acts are to be categorised together under that heading; why we respond as we do to them; and (at least to some extent) why the agents performed them. In the case of benevolence we take this kind of explanatory power for granted, so clear is our grasp of what benevolence amounts to. The nature of evil is more obscure, but I shall argue that an appropriate account of evil is available, and that once it is in place the concept of evil can do explanatory work.

Objections to evil

For those who have the appropriate theological commitments, the term ‘evil’, with its supernatural or even Satanic connotations, is not distinctively problematic—it inherits such problems as that general metaphysical context presents, but it finds its natural home there. But purely secular thinkers also feel the need to use this term; they too want to mark off certain kinds of actions as special, as qualitatively different from more ordinary kinds of wrongdoing. However, it is not clear what it is we are claiming when we attribute evil to an action or agent in a purely secular context, and the general obscurity surrounding the term makes some thinkers very reluctant to appeal to the idea of evil as part of a serious treatment of horrifying moral phenomena. So a further question I want to address is whether this reluctance is justified, or whether on the contrary
a legitimate place can be found for the idea of evil in our secular understanding of the moral domain. Of course, if evil turns out to be capable of playing an explanatory role in a secular account of human actions, then this will strengthen its legitimacy as an element in the web of secular moral concepts.

A notable example of this reluctance to appeal to evil is to be found in Inga Clendinnen's recent collection of essays *Reading the Holocaust*. One of Clendinnen's principal aims in those essays is to reach some understanding of the major perpetrators of that event, and in pursuit of that aim she explicitly rules out reference to claims about evil. She regards such reference as a barrier to the kind of understanding she seeks, and there seem to be two main reasons for this. Firstly, she regards the appeal to evil as non-explanatory: it is a "dismissive classification" which is "of no use whatsoever when it comes to teasing out why people act as they do" or explaining the enthusiastic killings and massacres of the Nazis and their local helpers. Secondly, references to evil take us beyond the domain of the human to somewhere "sinister and metaphysical," "beyond the moral pale . . . and therefore beyond the possibility of human understanding," inhabited by inhuman automatons or monsters rather than human beings whom we can hope, to some extent at least, to understand.

Let me start with the charge of explanatory inadequacy. Here the thought seems to be, firstly, that reference to evil should not appear as part of an attempt to understand the perpetrators unless it can explain in some way what was done, and, secondly, that the idea of evil cannot meet this constraint: it cannot explain the perpetrators' actions. But neither of these claims is entirely plausible. It is not immediately obvious that in our account of a great moral catastrophe such as the Holocaust we should only appeal to those features which pull clear explanatory weight in our understanding of human action. Reference to a particular kind of feature may be appropriate even if it isn't explanatory. The explanatory force of thin moral concepts such as right or wrong, good or bad, is widely contested, but any attempt to understand the perpetrators of that catastrophe which did not make at least implicit reference to these properties of their actions would be hopelessly inadequate. What would we make of an account of the Holocaust that wasn't obviously committed to the view that it involved the most terrible wrongdoing? And of course Clendinnen is clearly so committed.
Furthermore the thick moral concepts, such as courage or kindness, cruelty or cowardice, are clearly indispensable for the historical description of human action, let alone its explanation, and as a matter of fact Clendinnen makes no attempt whatever to do without them—e.g., she talks about the “bully-boy geniality” of the barracks culture of the Order Police barracks (p. 131); of the “toughness of spirit” of the Sonderkommandos, which she admires (p. 78); of the “heroic act of compassion” of the woman doctor in the Warsaw ghetto who killed the children in her care to save them from a worse fate at Nazi hands (p. 37). Indeed she even uses (rather than mentions) the term ‘evil’ in her description of Eichmann. The concept of evil is one element in our whole nexus of moral concepts, and in general their appearance in our account of perpetrators’ actions is unobjectionable and indeed unavoidable.

So appeal to the moral concepts seems to be legitimate even if they do not pull any very noticeable weight with respect to the explanation of action. But as I have suggested at the start of this paper, we should not take for granted the claim that there is no explanatory work being done here. Nicholas Sturgeon, for example, has argued extensively for the explanatory power of moral concepts. And clearly Clendinnen herself regards such concepts as able to do explanatory work: she regularly appeals to moral features of agents to explain their behaviour. She wants “to believe that [Primo Levi] survived because of his remarkable qualities: the curiosity . . . and the humour and compassion” and though she recognises that actually it was luck which was primarily at stake, she obviously regards such characteristics as the kind of consideration which does have explanatory power. She says of Gitta Sereny that “she is consistently honourable in her relationship with Franz Stangl [commandant of Treblinka], as with all her interview subjects, because she is by nature honourable”; of Rudolph Hoess, commandant of Auschwitz, she remarks that “the man that we see is energetic, vain, and much too frank in damaging self-revelation to be classed as a hypocrite.” Clearly the moral categories used in these quotations are regarded as doing explanatory work, as accounting for some aspects of the perpetrators and their deeds. And of course there is nothing remarkable about Clendinnen’s use of these categories; this is how historians, and the rest of us, standardly make sense of our fellow human beings.
Qua moral concept, then, there can be no objection to the concept of evil on grounds of explanatory inadequacy. The other moral concepts are sufficiently explanatory to figure in the historical understanding of human action. If there is a problem with evil, it must be because of the kind of concept it is, because of the place it occupies in the matrix of our moral understanding of human behaviour and character. And this takes us to Clendinnen’s second objection to the concept of evil: she does indeed see it as an appeal to something trans-human or inhuman; something alarmingly “metaphysical,” the attribution of which implies that the agents in question are monsters unlike the rest of us, and inaccessible to human understanding.

Now if we retain the connection between evil and the Satanic, then this view of the concept may be justified. But that is the theological conception of evil (at least, one fairly crude version of it); and no secular thinker should expect to appeal to it. If there is room for a secular account of evil at all, then it will not have these trans-human implications. Perhaps it might be argued that without the sinister metaphysics, there wouldn’t be anything recognisable as evil left. But the presence of so many secular references to it casts doubt on this suggestion. People who have no belief of any kind in the Devil find a use for the concept of evil. Of course, it is possible to hold something like an error theory of evil: the view that its use does imply something Satanic or at least supernatural, but that what is implied is just false, and hence no statements referring to evil can be true. In using the term, on this account, we are suffering from something like an intellectual hangover from a religious past. This view is possible, and in the absence of a secular account of evil it may even be plausible. But we need to see first whether there is a satisfactory secular account of evil, and if there is, an error theory will lose its appeal.

We should, however, also note that we do not have to accept the polarities just as they are set up by Clendinnen. She thinks that we should not regard the perpetrators as monsters, since this will exclude them from the domain of human understanding. But when we hear or read of the tortures which these men (and sometimes women) devised, we do think they are monsters—what more would an individual have to do to be classifiable as a monster? They are the stuff of nightmares. We could, however, regard the perpetrators as monsters without thinking that this
cuts them off in some radical way from the rest of the human race. To do this, we would have to give up the picture of human nature as intrinsically good, or at least as morally neutral. But this picture is not in any case a plausible one—the work of Browning and Goldhagen which Clendinnen cites so approvingly, and the depressing evidence of much of the rest of the terrible twentieth century, suggests fairly strongly that ordinary humans can all too readily become monsters, and that understanding monsters is what we will have to do if we are not to give up on the project of understanding ourselves. But the very idea of a monster that is also a human being just like us, indeed one of us, is part of what would be treated in a secular theory of evil, so here we see another reason to develop such a theory.

So Clendinnen’s rejection of appeals to the idea of evil is in some respects misplaced, since (1) concepts which are not obviously explanatory may still play a useful role in our account of human behaviour; (2) in any case it has not yet been shown that the concept of evil cannot play an explanatory role; and (3) attributing evil to agents or their actions does not necessarily imply that they are radically unlike the rest of the human race. Nonetheless, her reservations about appealing to evil do have some legitimacy, in the absence of a secular theory. Without such a theory, we cannot know if the secular concept of evil can do explanatory work; we cannot fend off an error theory of evil, and we cannot fully capture how terrible are some aspects of human nature—the nature of ordinary human beings.

A theory of evil

There are various forms which a secular theory of evil could take. I will offer a fairly formal one, which is addressed narrowly to the question, “What is it for an action to be evil?” With that on the table, we can then begin to see if such an account could make less plausible an error theory of evil; could present us with a way of seeing major perpetrators as both monstrous and human like us; and could show how the concept of evil can do explanatory work.

What, then, is it for an action to be evil? The first thing to note is that the very tempting view, that the evil action is the one which produces huge amounts of suffering, is not satisfactory. The production of enormous suffering is neither necessary nor sufficient for an act to be evil. It is not sufficient because all wars produce huge amounts of suffering, and yet not
all wars are evil, in the restrictive sense which is the topic of this paper. Many people regard World War II as a morally justified war, and one thing we can be certain of is that evil actions aren’t morally justified. But the Allies who declared and waged World War II produced enormous suffering, so this can’t be sufficient for evil. Nor is it necessary: there is a kind of small-scale horror, like an exquisitely detailed miniature, which produces suffering of too limited an amount to meet the requirement in hand, and yet is still unproblematically evil. The most obvious example of this is the case of the Iraqis during the occupation of Kuwait who, having shot a young boy, demanded money from the boy’s family to pay for the bullet. Here the principal suffering was caused by the killing; but it is the charging for the bullet which strikes most people as evil. Another such example is that of the sadistic voyeur, who chooses to observe, with intense relish, the sadistic acts of another. Here nothing is added to the sum of suffering by his voyeuristic behaviour; nonetheless we might wish to call it evil. Finally, consider the person who, with gloating enjoyment, slowly tortures a cat. In the scale of the world’s sufferings it barely registers, nonetheless it can plausibly be called evil.

If we cannot characterise evil in terms of the terrible suffering it produces, where else might we look to find its distinguishing features? It might be thought that the evil act should be seen as the dark counterpart of the supererogatory act: that just as we have the supererogatory act at one end of the spectrum of moral excellence, so we have the evil act at the other, negative, end. But this thought, even if true, is unlikely to be very illuminating about the nature of evil, since there is a very notable disanalogy between supererogatory acts and evil ones. Supererogatory acts are morally praiseworthy, but not morally obligatory—they’re outside the scope of duty, and in some sense above and beyond it. But evil acts aren’t outside the scope of prohibition: they fall squarely within the domain of forbidden acts. So however we are to understand the nature of supererogation, it seems unlikely to reveal what we want to know about the nature of evil.

Another possibility is to focus on features of the agent, and in particular his motives for acting. Colin McGinn has adopted such a strategy in his proposal that the evil act is one committed by an agent who derives pleasure, non-instrumentally, from the pain of others; where the agent’s motive is to cause suffering for no reason other than that it provides
pleasure to the agent.\textsuperscript{19} No doubt such acts often are evil (just as acts which produce huge amounts of suffering are often, though not always, evil). But this is not enough to ensure that the proposed analysis is satisfactory. Firstly, it rules out from being evil the acts of the desk-murderers who, though perfectly ready to produce appalling horrors, feel no particular pleasure at the misery they cause (although it doesn’t follow that they feel any regret either). Eichmann is usually cited as an example of such an agent, and though it may not actually be true of Eichmann that he took no pleasure in the suffering he caused, nonetheless that possibility should not be ruled out by our account of evil (nor should the account force us to the unacceptable alternative of denying that Eichmann’s acts were evil.)

Secondly, not all cases of pleasure-taking in the pain of others are evil. It depends what other morally relevant features of the action are present. The sadist who, knowing and regretting his propensities, tries to harness them to some good end (perhaps by working in a field where distress at the pain of others would be a positive handicap) need not be acting evilly, though there may still be some morally deplorable element in his actions.

It might be suggested that McGinn is not aiming to provide an account of the necessary and sufficient conditions for an act (or agent) to be evil, but rather to pick out a feature which is \textit{prima facie} evil; that is, which will, in the absence of some other redeeming feature of the act, be sufficient to make it evil.\textsuperscript{20} If so, this is quite a plausible claim about the motive on which McGinn is focussing. But its interest as an account of evil is questionable. There are so few cases where evil actions have only this feature as a morally relevant one; much further analysis is needed to cast light on the standard cases. Furthermore, there are other motives which are \textit{prima facie} evil in the proposed way: the aim of dominating others (which need not involve taking pleasure in their pain, or indeed hurting them at all) may also, if it appears without any other redeeming characteristics, be sufficient to make an action evil. Thirdly, there are many cases of evil in which the pain of others is sought instrumentally, regardless of whether pleasure is taken in it by the evil-doer. Think of the torturer who works for hire, torturing in order to extract information or concessions for his paymaster. He may take little or no pleasure in the pain he inflicts, but he holds his victims in such indifference or contempt that their suffering counts for nothing at all to him. What he does seems evil,
but nothing in McGinn’s analysis accounts for that. So, overall, it is hard to see a privileged role in our understanding of evil for the taking of pleasure, non-instrumentally, in the pain of others.

However, there are other ways in which the agent’s motives—i.e., the reasons which he takes there to be for acting—can figure. The theory which I am going to propose suggests that the evil act can be identified by reference to the reasons which the agent sees, and fails to see, for acting. Here I am drawing on an account given by John McDowell of action at the other end of the moral spectrum: McDowell proposes that we can understand the virtuous agent, and distinguish her from the merely continent agent, by reference to the phenomenon of silencing. The continent agent overcomes the temptations which she experiences, and does what is right for her to do. The virtuous agent, by comparison, silences rather than overcomes temptation: for her, the tempting considerations, which would in other contexts be genuine reasons for action, lose their reason-giving force in the presence of the reasons which there are to do the right thing. So, for example, the continent agent sees that it is right for her to give a substantial amount of money to a charity for helping the victims of some terrible natural disaster. She feels some temptation to keep the money for herself, since there are things she would like to buy with it, but with a certain amount of struggle she overcomes these temptations and donates the money. The virtuous agent (whom we need not at all suppose is normally indifferent to money) is by contrast unmoved by what she might purchase for herself were she to keep the money. She is so gripped by her understanding of the needs of the victims, so fully aware of how terrible things are for them, that the prospect of spending the money on herself has no motivational force. For the virtuous agent, the considerations which make the donation right silence the reason-giving force of the opportunity to spend some money on herself. There is nothing for her to overcome, and hence there is no struggle.

We need here to distinguish between what we might call metaphysical silencing on the one hand, and psychological silencing on the other. The virtuous agent, grasping the reasons as they really are, sees that in the presence of the reasons which make the action right, other considerations cease to be reasons at all—they are metaphysically silenced. But this can be contrasted with a total failure to see that certain considerations are
reasons at all, even when they are, and this we might call psychological silencing. Both forms of silencing will appear in the theory of evil which I am going to sketch out.

According to this theory, the evil action is one in which the agent is entirely impervious—blind and deaf—to the presence of significant reasons against his acting. It is not just that he allows less important considerations, such as his own power or pleasure, to outweigh these more forceful considerations, e.g., the suffering and loss of life of others; rather he is completely insensitive to these features’ reason-giving force. For him, there is nothing to be outweighed; he has (psychologically) silenced such considerations, and is unable to see that they are reasons for acting or refraining from action.

However, the mere fact that the agent has silenced—is entirely impervious to—the reasons which genuinely are present isn’t sufficient to make his act evil. There may be very good reasons for visiting our elderly parents, say, but someone who just doesn’t see them, who just does not care at all about his lonely old mother, can’t really count as acting evilly (in the sense required). He may be cold and heartless, but that’s insufficient for evil. More needs to be said about the structure of the reasons which the evil-doer has silenced.

As is suggested in McDowell’s account of the virtuous agent, some reasons are so powerful that they have the effect of metaphysically silencing considerations which in other contexts would have reason-giving force. The possibility of saving a modest amount of money is a perfectly good reason for buying one kind of fruit, say, rather than another. But if there is only one way to protect my much-loved child from a disease which will lead to a terrible and lingering death, then the fact that the protection will cost me the same modest amount of money is no kind of reason at all for not purchasing it. The reason I have to protect my child is a metaphysical silencer for modest sums of money—in its presence they lose their reason-giving force. It’s not that saving a few pennies is a reason to refrain from purchasing the treatment which is outweighed by the stronger reason to protect the life of the child; rather, in the context of saving the child’s life, saving a few pennies is no reason at all against getting the treatment. Consider also the woman who betrays her neighbour (whom she’s always disliked), and the Jewish family the neighbour is sheltering, to the Gestapo. The unlikeability of neighbours is often a perfectly good reason
for action, but in the presence of the terrible fate awaiting them at the hands of the Gestapo, their unlikeability loses its reason-giving force. The threat of that fate is a metaphysical silencer for considerations such as unlikeability. What the evil-doer does is (psychologically) silence reasons which are themselves (metaphysical) silencers.

On this account, the evil act turns out to be one performed by an agent who is suffering from a profound cognitive defect—an inability to grasp the presence of reasons of the first importance. It is not, of course, that the evil-doer fails to see that the considerations which constitute these reasons are present in the circumstances: the torturer knows very well that he is causing appalling pain to his victim—that’s what he’s aiming at, after all. What he fails to grasp is that the pain which the victim is suffering is an overwhelmingly strong reason for him to desist. He fails to see its reason-giving force.

_Evil as an explanatory concept_

I am not aiming to defend this account of evil here (having tried to do so elsewhere). What I want to do is discuss whether an account of this kind could meet the requirements suggested above: can it fend off an error theory of evil; can it accommodate the idea of something monstrous in human nature; can it play an explanatory role?

Firstly, this is a fairly formal theory of evil: it says nothing at all about what the reasons are which are silenced by the evil agent, and hence it can accommodate a variety of different moral theories. (The cases considered above are just examples, and could, if necessary, be replaced by others driven by different moral commitments.) Unless we have a general error theory of morality, there seems no reason why appeals to evil, construed in this way, should plausibly be seen as the result of systematic error.

Secondly, it seems to allow for a recurrent feature in the phenomenology of evil, namely our sense that there is something monstrous about the evil agent. The picture here is one of severe cognitive defect, resulting in the most terrible distortions of practical reason. The evil act is one in which the agent can’t even see that there is a reason of the most important kind against his action. What kind of a condition would you have to be in to fail to hear the screams and shrieks of your victims as any kind of a reason against torturing them? A very dreadful condition indeed, given how central practical reason is to our conception of what it is to be a
person. So perhaps here, in the idea of a deformed and distorted capacity for practical reasoning, we find an explanation of the sense that the men who perform these dreadful acts have something monstrous about them. But there is nothing in this way of construing evil which suggests that these monsters are totally cut off from the rest of us; on the contrary, it leaves entirely open the possibility that such blindness could affect others of us, if we allow ourselves to get into the cognitive states characteristic of evil-doers.

Finally, can this account of evil play an explanatory role? For evil, as for any other consideration, whether it is explanatory or not will depend on what question is being asked, and what range of alternatives are being considered.\textsuperscript{22} If the question is: "Why did he commit an evil act?" and the answer is: "Because he's evil," then indeed little has been explained. Here we are far too close to that paradigmatic case of non-explatoriness, the appeal to opium's dormitive powers to account for its ability to send people to sleep.\textsuperscript{23} But a \textit{theory} of evil should enable us to avoid such vacuities by providing a way of filling out what is being attributed to an act when it is called evil. And the filled-out account can at least to some extent help to explain why the evil-doer performed the act in question. We understand human actions in terms of their explanations, and we explain action by citing the reasons which agents take themselves to have for acting as they do. The account of evil outlined above, which identifies the evil act as one in which the agent is impervious to reasons of the most conclusive kind against his acting, is therefore apt for figuring in an explanation of the act in question.

So if the question is: "Why did the agent perform this chilling, horrific act?" then identifying the act as evil will, on this account of evil, amount to saying that the agent acted as he did because he was blind to the reason-giving force of (for example) the suffering of his victims—he just couldn't see that as a reason for him to desist. This has explanatory force: it shows (to some extent) why he performed \textit{this} act (as opposed to some other less dreadful one), because he couldn't see that there were overwhelming reasons against it; and it also explains (to some extent) why \textit{this} agent (rather than the ones who refrained) performed the act, since other agents might have been able to see what this agent couldn't see. Because the proposed account of evil locates it in the agent's motivation-
al state (that is, in the reasons he saw and failed to see), attributing evil to an action will always partially explain why the agent performed the act, since it will always reveal something about what the agent saw as reasons for acting, and about what reasons he failed to discern altogether.

There is, of course, a great deal which will not be explained by appealing to this account of evil. It will not, for example, explain why the agent is blind to these considerations. But that is a different issue—how people come to be evil—and one to be investigated by psychology and sociology and history rather than by philosophy. The explanatory power of the concept of evil may be quite limited; it is not, however, entirely negligible.

It might, however, reasonably be claimed that if this concept is to be truly explanatory, then it should be able to do more than just account for one kind of contrast—e.g., the contrast between performing and not performing a particular kind of act—since otherwise the concept may just label the phenomenon rather than explain it. This requirement may be another version of one we have already met (what we might call the dormitivitie worry), but in any case the proposed account of evil can meet it. Clendinnen cites Rudolph Hoess, the Commandant of Auschwitz, as comparing assaults on himself in prison, in 1946, by a Polish-Jewish guard, with the behaviour of the guards at Auschwitz, claiming that the comparison showed that controlling guards is always difficult and hence he was not to be blamed for the excesses of those who were under his command. As Clendinnen says, “The gross incommensurability of the two situations seems, quite simply, to escape him.” Where Hoess sees similarities, we, in contrast, see a huge disanalogy between the two situations, on account of the incomparably greater magnitude of the suffering of the victims at Auschwitz, and their utter innocence compared to Hoess’s own blood-soaked guilt. On the proposed account of evil, Hoess was impervious to the reason-giving force of that innocence and suffering—he did not at Auschwitz see it as any kind of reason to desist. That same cognitive defect explains his inability to see the moral difference between the situation of the guards at Auschwitz and the situation of the Polish Jew guarding him. (Note also that a different account of evil, say in terms of aberrant pleasures, might not be able to explain this.) Hoess cannot see that the guards at Auschwitz had every reason not to commit what he so
inadequately regards as excesses (and that he regards that nightmare behaviour in terms of excess is yet more evidence of a profound defect of practical reason). Both he and they were impervious to such reasons. Hence he cannot see that the Polish Jew guarding him is in a situation radically different in moral terms from that of the Auschwitz guards. Again, the appeal to evil will not explain how Hoess came to be in this cognitively defective condition. But again, that is a separate issue, and not necessarily a philosophical one.

At the start of this paper, two phenomena were proposed as suitable for explanation by appeal to the concept of evil. The first is our readiness to identify a subset of the class of wrongful actions, members of which provoke in us a special response of horror. The second is the readiness of some agents to commit these acts, against which there seem to be such overwhelmingly powerful reasons. The theory of evil which has been sketched out here seems able to explain (to some extent) both of these phenomena. We identify this subset of wrongful acts because its members have something in common (namely, that they are all performed by agents who are silencing reasons of the greatest importance against acting), and they provoke such horror in us because of the terrible deformation of practical reason which this silencing constitutes. We can explain (to some extent) why agents are prepared to commit these horrific acts, where there are such weighty considerations against acting, by citing the (putative) fact that those agents are impervious to the reason-giving force of these considerations. There is, of course, much more that needs to be said before either of these phenomena are fully explained. But that fact doesn’t discredit evil as an explanatory concept, since it will also be true of the concepts appealed to by any other elements of the full explanation.

So I conclude that in the context of a secular theory of evil, the concept of evil can do explanatory work. Whether the theory I have sketched out can be defended, is, of course, another matter. But if it can’t, then maybe an alternative will do better. For we need some such account if we’re to capture the full range and depth of our capacities for terrible wrongdoing.27

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NOTES

1. Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). I intend to focus on Clendinnen's work because she is so helpfully explicit about her decision to refrain from appeals to evil, but I do not intend any criticism of the book on historical grounds, having found much of it extremely interesting and plausible.


15. Objections might be raised here to the search for necessary and sufficient conditions for a phenomenon such as evil, on the grounds that such a search implies an unwarranted essentialism, or alternatively that for other phenomena such searches have not had a successful track record. I cannot address this methodological issue adequately here, but would like to note that philosophical practice, in the face of a proposed account of a phenomenon, usually includes consideration of whether there are uncontentious cases of the phenomenon which do not fit the account, and on the other hand, whether there are cases which do fit the account but aren’t examples of the phenomenon in question. It’s hard to see how this differs from considering whether the account provides necessary and sufficient conditions for the phenomenon in question.


17. I owe this example to Todd Calder.


19. McGinn contrasts this kind of “pure” evil with instrumental evil, in which the suffering of others is a means towards some other goal. He regards such instrumental cases as immoral selfishness or egoism rather than pure evil, so it seems clear that the phenomenon being analysed is the distinctive kind of evil which is the focus of this paper.

20. McGinn has made this suggestion to me during conference discussion.


24. "To construct—or employ, or discover—a theoretical entity to account for just one isolated difference is to restate the difference rather than to explain it." D. H. Mellor "Connectivity, Chance, and Ignorance" in *British Journal of the Philosophy of Science*, 1965, p. 212.


26. Such as McGinn's account outlined above.

27. I am grateful to Todd Calder, Chris Daly, André Gallois, Graham Macdonald, Geoffrey Scarre, Leo Zaibert and, in particular, David McNaughton, for very helpful discussion of earlier versions of this paper.