Evil and Incomprehensibility

LUKE RUSSELL

1. INCOMPREHENSIBLE WRONGS

Evil actions are morally wrong, but they are not merely morally wrong. You ought not score cheap laughs by embarrassing a friend in public, and you ought not cheat on your income tax, but it is not evil to do these things. In contrast, the terrorist spree killing carried out by Andre Breivik in Norway in 2011 does strike many people as being not just wrong, but evil. Actions that deserve to be condemned as evil, including Breivik’s murders, are never trivial. Evil actions are extreme. Evils possess a gravity that is lacking in many ordinary wrongs. While this intuition is widely shared, it is hard to say exactly what the difference between evil and non-evil wrongs amounts to. Some philosophers suggest that the difference lies in the fact that evil actions are extremely harmful. For instance, Claudia Card claims that an evil intention is the “culpable intention to do someone intolerable harm, or to do something with that foreseeable result”, and “[i]n an evil deed, the intention succeeds” (Card 2002, 20). Marcus Singer agrees that “evil acts are acts that are horrendously wrong, that cause immense suffering” (Singer 2004, 193). Breivik’s evil actions, we could argue, are distinct from non-evil wrongs in virtue of being much more harmful.

This claim seem unconvincing, though, when we consider a case in which a morally wrong action is extremely harmful, but in which the extreme harm caused by the action was not rationally foreseeable. For example, let us imagine that someone breaks into a medical lab in an attempt to steal drugs, and in doing so inadvertently releases a dangerous virus contained in a test tube in the lab, which
subsequently causes an epidemic that kills hundreds of people. The thief’s action is morally wrong and, *ceteris paribus*, he is blameworthy and deserving of punishment, but it would be a mistake to hold him responsible for the unforeseeable calamity that was caused by his wrong action. In contrast, Breivik and other evildoers are properly held responsible for the extreme harm that they inflict on their victims. Perhaps what is distinctive of evil actions is not only that they are extremely harmful, but that they are actions in which the agent is properly held responsible and is blameworthy for having caused extreme harm.

While this account of the difference between evil and non-evil wrongs is attractively simple, some philosophers have argued that it does not match widespread intuitions about which particular actions are evil, and hence that it ought to be rejected. Eve Garrard, for instance, offers some examples of actions that plausibly are evil, even though they are less harmful than other non-evil wrongs:

The most obvious example of this is the case of the Iraqis during the occupation of Kuwait who, having shot a young boy, demanded money from the boy’s family to pay for the bullet. Here the principal suffering was caused by the killing; but it is the charging for the bullet that strikes most people as evil. Another such example is the sadistic voyeur, who chooses to observe, with intense relish, the sadistic acts of another. Here nothing is added to the sum of suffering by his voyeuristic behaviour; nonetheless we might wish to call it evil. (Garrard 2002, 327)

These examples are complex and difficult to assess, but I agree with Garrard that acts of sadistic voyeurism, when directed at extreme suffering, can count as evil actions even if the voyeurism itself is not harmful. Perhaps there are less contentious examples of comparatively harmless evil actions. Let us consider a misanthropic would-be suicide bomber who attempts to blow up scores of innocent people, but whose bomb malfunctions, leaving his intended victims oblivious and unharmed. We could fairly describe this man’s failed attempt as an evil action, even though it is much less harmful than many other non-evil wrongs. Thus, we ought to conclude that the extremity of evil actions does not lie in the amount of harm that is inflicted by those actions. If all evil actions are extreme, they must be extreme in some other respect.

In seeking to identify the kind of extremity possessed by evil actions we might look not to the extreme effects of those actions on their victims, but to our psychological reaction to evil deeds. Some philosophers have claimed that our reaction to evil actions differs from our reaction to non-evil wrongs. The difference, they suggest, is that we can understand why people perform ordinary wrongs, whereas evil actions are incomprehensible. According to Stephen de Wijze evils stand out from ordinary wrongs in that they evoke “horror, disgust and incomprehension” (de Wijze 2002, 213). Adam Morton says that we “very often react to evil as if it were mysterious and inexplicable. We can’t imagine how anyone like us could do anything like that” (Morton 2004, 21). The “point of view of the victims of evil”, Morton claims, “is usually that of incomprehension” (Morton 2004, 14). Similar thoughts have been expressed by non-philosophers. For instance, journalist
Lance Morrow declares that “ultimately it is not possible to understand evil” (Morrow 2003, 3). The psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen also thinks that people who judge that actions are evil are treating those actions as incomprehensible:

The standard explanation is that the Holocaust . . . is an example of the “evil” that humans are capable of inflicting on one another. Evil is treated as incomprehensible, a topic that cannot be dealt with because the scale of the horror is so great that nothing can convey its enormity. (Baron-Cohen 2011, 4)

Perhaps Breivik’s mass killing, acts of sadistic voyeurism, and harmless failed attempts at suicide bombing are evil acts in virtue of the fact that all are beyond the threshold of comprehensibility, and in that sense are extreme wrongs.

2. KINDS OF INCOMPREHENSIBILITY

My project in this paper is to evaluate the theory of evil action according to which an action is evil if and only if it is a culpable wrong action that is incomprehensible. Before we can do so we need to get a better grip on what it means for an action to be incomprehensible. In the broadest sense, an incomprehensible action is an action that cannot be understood. This paraphrase does not in itself help us to fix on a more precise meaning of incomprehensibility, because there are several different things that we might mean when we say that an action cannot be understood. I will consider a range of possibilities before assessing in more detail the most plausible interpretation of the claim that evils are incomprehensible wrongs.

The first possibility is that “incomprehensible” means that which has not yet been imagined or considered possible, and that does not fit with our existing worldview. If evils were incomprehensible wrongs in this sense, then to judge that an action is evil would be to judge that it is a new and shocking kind of wrong. Something that is at least close to this view is expressed by Susan Neiman, when she says that “designating something as evil is a way of marking the fact that it shatters our trust in the world” (Neiman 2003, 9). While it is true that some evil actions are new and shocking and happen to destroy the trust or the optimism of some people, it is not plausible that all evil actions are incomprehensible in this sense. If evils were incomprehensible in this sense, then an action could count as evil only while it was still considered new and surprising, and it would be impossible for a jaded pessimist to judge that the same old kind of evil actions will inevitably happen in future. Since there are pessimists who make just this judgment, we ought to reject the view that evils are wrongs that have not yet been imagined or considered possible.

Perhaps instead the claim that evils are incomprehensible wrongs should be read as suggesting that evil actions are wrongs that are too harrowing or too uncomfortable for us to contemplate and dwell upon. Evils, we might say, are wrongs which we are incapable of staring in the face, wrongs from which we flinch and turn away. This suggestion is superficially attractive, but as with the previous option, it is not defensible. It is true that some people find themselves incapable of
pondering specific evil actions for any length of time, but many people, including victims of evil and scholars of evil, spend long hours thinking closely and carefully about evil actions without retracting the judgment that those actions are evil. A Holocaust survivor who finds herself unable to stop thinking about the atrocities that she witnessed could maintain nonetheless that the Nazis did evil, so it is false that evils are wrongs that it is too harrowing or uncomfortable to contemplate for any period of time.

Another possibility is that when people say that evil actions are incomprehensible they mean that we are unable to identify their causes. Some wrongs, such as financial fraud, are easily explicable in terms of the self-interest of the perpetrators. Even some extreme and violent wrongs have causes that are easy to identify. For instance, when a jealous wife murders her husband’s mistress we deplore her action, but her reasons for committing this horrible crime are far from mysterious. The murderer’s motive and intent are plain. In contrast, some extreme wrongs do seem mysterious. During the Rwandan genocide many ordinary people butchered their neighbors, seemingly without provocation. This kind of killing is not only horrible, but may seem impossible to explain. Similarly, it is extremely difficult to see what led English doctor Harold Shipman to murder more than 200 of his patients, mostly elderly women. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Hannah Arendt claimed that the mass atrocities of the twentieth century had shown us a “radical evil” that could not be explained by the everyday motives of “self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice” (Arendt 1967, 459). Perhaps evils are those wrong actions whose causes are so far from the everyday as to be unidentifiable. In other words, perhaps evils are wrong actions that are incomprehensible in the sense that we are unable to explain why they occur. For ease of reference, let us call this the view that evil actions are inexplicable wrongs.

There is an obvious objection to this account of evil action. Sometimes the concept of evil appears to be used in explanations of actions, as when journalists say that a serial killer did it because he was evil (cf. Cole 2006, 7; Russell 2010). Several philosophers also clearly use the concept of evil in explanations of actions (e.g., Garrard 2002, 332; McGinn 1997, 91; Steiner 2002, 190). If the concept of evil regularly is used in explanations of actions, how could it be the case that evil actions are precisely those wrongs that we are unable to explain? Philosophers who wish to defend the view that evil actions are inexplicable wrongs face a choice. They could argue that the popular uses of the word “evil” in explanations are misuses that do not reveal the true content of the concept of evil, and that the people who properly grasp that concept believe that evil actions are inexplicable wrongs. If this were the case, then someone who really understands the nature of evil action and who says that an action was evil would thereby communicate the belief that we cannot identify the causes of that action.

Alternatively, philosophers who say that evils are inexplicable wrongs could hold a more complicated view. They might think that the folk who say that certain

1. After witnessing the trial of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt recanted this view (e.g., Arendt 1978, 251).
actions are evil also believe that the concept of evil is explanatorily useful, but that
the folk are mistaken in this belief. This appears to be Phillip Cole’s view, which he
expresses by claiming that the concept of evil gives the illusion of explanatory
closure (Cole 2006, 142). According to Cole, someone who says “he did it because
he was evil” is communicating the belief that the action has been explained (in
virtue of being labeled “evil”), while simultaneously closing down further inquiry
into the causes of that action. Thinking in terms of evil blocks the path that leads
to understanding of the true causes of wrong actions, according to Cole (Cole 2006,
8, 236). This leads Cole to conclude that no actions are evil, and that we should
dispense with the concept of evil (Cole 2006, 235). Cole’s view of evil seems to be
shared by Baron-Cohen:

What the Nazis (and other like them) did was unimaginably terrible. But that
doesn’t mean we should simply shut down enquiry into how people are
capable of behaving in such ways, or use a non-explanation, saying such
people are simply evil. (Baron-Cohen 2011, 4)

If Cole and Baron-Cohen are right about this, then there is a convoluted sense in
which evil actions are inexplicable wrongs: in judging that an action is evil, the folk
assume that they have explained it, when in fact they have left it unexplained. By
judging certain wrongs to be evil actions, Cole believes, we trap ourselves in a
position from which we are unable to identify the true causes of those actions.

Is it really true, though, that evil actions are inexplicable, or that in judging an
action as evil we render ourselves incapable of identifying its causes? In fact, we
have good reason to reject both of these claims. It is true that some evil actions are
very difficult to explain, but in other cases of paradigmatic evil actions the agent’s
motives and intentions are clear. Breivik’s mass killing did seem utterly mysterious
at first. As news reports came in immediately after the tragedy it was unclear what
caused the killer to travel to the island of Utøya and methodically shoot 69 victims,
most of them teenagers. We knew at that time that what Breivik had done was evil,
but we did not know why he did it. That question subsequently has been answered
in crushing and stupid detail by Breivik himself, in his published manifesto and in
his trial. He was motivated by a desire to inspire armed resistance against what he
perceived to be the Islamification of Europe, and he targeted the children on Utøya
because they were on a camp run by the Worker’s Youth League of the Norwegian
Labour Party, which supports multiculturalism. Breivik even detailed the methods
by which he desensitized himself to killing, and prepared himself psychologically
for the deed. If it were true that evil actions are those wrongs whose causes we are
unable to identify, and hence which we cannot comprehend, then our discovery of
Breivik’s motives and intentions should lead us to conclude that his actions were
not evil after all. I contend that this is not the case. Breivik did evil, and we now see
why he did it.

What about the allegation that Cole and Baron-Cohen would make in this
case; namely, that if we judge Breivik’s actions to be evil then we prevent ourselves
from identifying the true causes of those actions? If we want to explain Breivik’s
actions then we should ask what allowed him to overcome his potential empathy
for his victims (cf. Morton 2004, 42). We also should ask what caused him to adopt militant nationalist politics, and to understand this we would need to consider social conditions in Norway, as well as the complex interaction between ideology and state power (cf. Kekes 2005, 191). There are also many more fine-grained questions that we should ask about Breivik’s motives and intentions. For instance, we should ask whether Breivik saw himself as defying morality, or as inflicting harm that was undeserved by the victims but justified on consequentialist grounds, or as killing people who deserved to be killed (cf. Singer 2004, 205). We should ask whether he felt pity for his victims, or whether, as some witnesses suggest, he took sadistic pleasure in the act of killing (cf. Perrett 2002, 306; Steiner 2002, 189). All of these questions are relevant, and in answering them we are better able to comprehend and explain Breivik’s actions.

If Cole and Baron-Cohen are right, then judging that Breivik’s actions were evil would somehow prevent us from answering, and perhaps even from asking, these more fine-grained questions. No doubt some people will try to explain Breivik’s actions by claiming that he is an evil person, and will refuse to ask more detailed questions regarding motives, intentions, and other causes. Yet many people who use the concept of evil do not suppose that the fact that an action or a person is evil fully explains why a certain action was performed, nor that it precludes further investigation into its causes. For instance, all of the philosophers referenced in the previous paragraph—Morton, Kekes, Singer, Perrett, and Steiner—employ the concept of evil in their moral thinking, and all explicitly ask these further questions that are relevant to fine-grained explanation. The idea that thinking in terms of evil prevents us from asking detailed questions about causes of wrongdoing simply does not fit with the evidence provided by recent philosophical literature on evil.

Even if it is true that the fact that a person is evil partially explains that person’s evil actions, we still can and do ask what causes a specific person to become evil, and what environmental conditions facilitated the manifestation of that evil person’s character in action (Russell 2009, 273). Moreover, it is widely accepted that not every evildoer is an evil person (Card 2002, 22; Formosa 2008, 234; Garrard 2002, 321; Haybron 2002, 279; Morton 2004, 65; Singer 2004, 190). This implies that we must explain many evil actions without saying “he did it because he was evil” (Russell 2009, 270). Causal explanations of extreme wrongdoing in terms of empathy deficits (Baron-Cohen 2011, 16) or in terms of adverse social conditions (Cole 2006, 140) are actually compatible with the judgment that those wrongs are evil, and that the wrongdoers are evil persons. It turns out that we have no reason to conclude that evils are wrong actions whose causes cannot be identified, nor should we believe that in judging an action to be evil we block the identification of its causes.

3. I CAN’T IMAGINE DOING THAT

Some people will say that Breivik’s actions are evil and are clearly explicable, but are incomprehensible nonetheless. Even in cases in which it is clear to us why someone committed an atrocity we might say that we cannot understand how he...
could have done this. When people say that evil actions are incomprehensible perhaps they mean that they cannot imagine performing those actions themselves. This claim has some philosophical support. For example, Morton says that when it comes to evil we “can’t imagine how anyone like us could do anything like that” (although Morton explicitly states that he does not intend this claim to be a definition of evil action) (Morton 2004, 21).

Let us consider in more detail the view that an action is evil if and only if it is a culpable wrong action that is incomprehensible in the sense that we cannot imagine performing that action. The idea that there are some actions that we cannot imagine performing ourselves is common enough, but it requires clarification. Imagining oneself performing an action might be taken to mean visualizing oneself performing that action, or rehearsing the motions required by the action in one’s mind. Some actions are unimaginable in this sense merely because they are unfamiliar, and we do not know what it would take to perform those actions, or what it would look or feel like to perform those actions. Presumably, this kind of imaginative failure is not what people have in mind when they say that evils are wrongs that they cannot imagine performing themselves. Many evil actions are straightforward, and would not require complex practical knowledge. Moreover, we know at least roughly what it would look like to perform the kind of atrocious murders carried out by Breivik, for instance, because we are familiar with similar visual scenarios in video games and in films. In spite of possessing this knowledge, many people would insist that they cannot imagine themselves doing what Breivik did.

In other cases it is impossible for me to visualize performing an action not because I do not know what it would feel like to do it, nor because I am unfamiliar with the steps involved in performing that action, but because something in me shuts down any attempt at a mental rehearsal. Perhaps a sense of horror or revulsion prevents me from imagining carrying out an action. I might simply be unable to go through with the mental rehearsal for reasons that are not apparent to introspection. It is comparatively more plausible that this kind of inability to imagine performing an action is the alarm bell which signals that the action in question is evil.

It is likely that some of the people who say that they cannot imagine performing a certain action are pointing to this kind of inability to picture or mentally rehearse the act. However, it is not obvious that this is the best candidate for the kind of incomprehensibility that might be the hallmark of evil action. If someone says that she finds skydiving incomprehensible, and that she cannot imagine ever jumping out of a plane, it is possible that she not only is capable of visualizing the experience, but has done so. It could be that her vivid and disconcerting visualization of the experience—her knowing what it would be like—is what convinces her that she cannot imagine doing such a thing herself. In this case what she means by that claim is not that she does not know what it would feel like to jump out of a plane, but that she cannot imagine deliberating and freely choosing to jump out of a plane. It is not clear whether an action is incomprehensible in this sense simply when one believes that one would never freely choose to perform that action, or whether its incomprehensibility is grounded in an inability to perform the mental
act of imagining making that choice. In either case, though, there is a clear sense in which an action can be inconceivable or incomprehensible to a person even though that person knows how to perform that action, and can mentally rehearse performing that action.

It is possible that some of the people who say that they cannot imagine doing what Breivik did are actually capable of rehearsing the experience of shooting innocent teenagers on an island, but cannot imagine freely choosing to do this. We might claim that, in contrast, there are many other wrong actions that we can imagine choosing to perform in some circumstances. For instance, someone might say that he could imagine choosing to attack and kill enemy soldiers if his country was under attack, but that the thought of torturing a prisoner is inconceivable, in the sense that he thinks he would never choose to do that under any circumstances. I contend that this kind of inconceivability is what many people have in mind when they claim that evil actions are incomprehensible (although they may also find it impossible to visually imagine performing at least some of such actions). Moreover, I think this is the best candidate notion of incomprehensibility for those philosophers who want to draw a tight connection between evil action and incomprehensibility.

4. Is incomprehensibility necessary or sufficient for evil action?

The view that an action is evil if and only if it is an incomprehensible wrong in this sense is attractive in some respects. It fits with the fairly common folk intuition that evils are beyond our understanding. Moreover, if we say that evil actions, by definition, are incomprehensible wrongs, then we can maintain that evils need not be harmful, because some incomprehensible wrongs are harmless, but we could also argue that all evil actions are extreme rather than trivial, because incomprehensibility is a kind of extremity that rules out the possibility of triviality.

Yet there is an immediately apparent problem with the suggestion that an action is evil if and only if it is an incomprehensible wrong. An action that is comprehensible to one person might be incomprehensible to others. What I can imagine myself freely choosing to do depends on many of my idiosyncrasies. My value judgments differ to some degree from the values endorsed by other people, and so do my imaginative powers, my level of squeamishness and my ability to engage in hypothetical practical deliberation. The fact that this kind of incomprehensibility varies from person to person could lead us to the implausible conclusion that a single action could be both evil and not evil, because some people can imagine doing it but others cannot. Perhaps instead we should say that the concept of evil is essentially relativistic, and hence that it does not make sense to say that any particular action is evil simpliciter, and we should say instead that it is evil-relative-to-me or evil-relative-to-you. It is plausible that some concepts, such as the concept of the shocking or surprising, are essentially relativistic in this way, but this seems not to be true of the concept of evil action. When I denounce an action is evil, I do not intend to weaken the judgment by adding the qualifier “evil-to-me.”
This consideration gives us a reason to look for an objective rather than relative conception of incomprehensibility.

Another problem with the view that all evils are incomprehensible wrongs becomes apparent when we consider the possibility of self-conscious evildoing under that very description. There is a strand of philosophical thought stretching back to the Ancient Greeks according to which it is contentious whether a person knowingly can do what is morally wrong (Aristotle NE, Bk vii). If knowing defiance of morality really were impossible, then no one could knowingly do what is evil. Yet we are familiar with cases in which people, often through weakness of will, choose to do something that they know to be morally wrong in order to secure some other end. In the domain of fiction we encounter many characters—from Milton’s Satan to Mr. Burns from the Simpsons—who not only do what they judge to be morally wrong, but strive to do what is wrong because it is wrong, and take pleasure in the wrongness of their acts. Arguably there are some actual people who are like this. For instance, defiant serial killers such as Denis Rader, who write taunting notes to the police, appear to do what is evil while judging that it is evil. Yet if the judgment that ø is an evil action included the judgment that ø is incomprehensible, then it would be a conceptual impossibility for Rader self-consciously to plan to perform an action that he takes to be evil. We cannot plan and intend to do what we cannot imagine ourselves freely choosing to do. Since self-conscious evildoing seems to be a conceptual possibility, we have another good reason to reject the view that my judging that an action is evil involves my judging that I would never freely choose to perform that action.

These problems could be avoided if we advocated a slightly more complicated view of the relationship between evil and incomprehensibility. Perhaps evil actions are those wrongs that are incomprehensible to a specific kind of person. One such account is advocated by Marcus Singer, who defines an evil action as “one so bad, so awful, so horrendous that no ordinary decent reasonable human being can conceive of himself (or herself) doing such a thing” (Singer 2004, 196). On this account the fact that a vicious serial killer can imagine himself freely choosing to perform a sadistic murder would not imply that this action is not evil, nor that the serial killer cannot judge it to be evil. If an ordinary, decent, reasonable human being cannot imagine freely choosing to perform that sadistic murder, then Singer could say that the action is evil, regardless of what the serial killer can imagine doing. Furthermore, Singer could argue that ordinary, decent, reasonable people agree on which actions they could not conceive of doing themselves, and hence that there need not be any relativity in the concept of evil action.

While Singer’s account of evil action is preferable to the bald claim that an action is evil if and only if it is an incomprehensible wrong, it remains vulnerable to criticism. One problem is that there might be morally wrong actions that are incomprehensible in Singer’s sense, but that intuitively fall short of being evil. If this is the case, it seems that Singer will have failed to identify sufficient conditions for evil action. Some morally wrong actions are of trivial importance, but are inconceivable to ordinary, decent, reasonable human beings nonetheless. Cases like this are possible because there are several different kinds of reason for which an
action could be inconceivable. Some trivially wrong actions are highly costly and utterly pointless. For instance, let us imagine that a disgruntled tenant chooses to write an elaborate 100,000-word poem insulting her innocent landlord, and to read this out in public. Given that the landlord does not deserve this kind of unjustified public criticism, we would judge that the tenant’s action is morally wrong, yet clearly it is not sufficiently morally grave to count as an evil action. It is plausible that an ordinary, decent, reasonable human being could not imagine freely choosing to do what the tenant did, because the action is so irrational and time-consuming. This is an inconceivable moral wrong, but it is not an evil action.

Presumably Singer would respond by pointing out that his definition specified that evil actions are inconceivable to ordinary, decent, reasonable human beings in virtue of the fact that those actions are “so bad, so awful, so horrendous” (Singer 2004, 196). Even if the public reading of the poem is an incomprehensible wrong, Singer could claim, it is not an evil action because its incomprehensibility stems from the fact that it is irrational or imprudent, rather than from the fact that it is bad, awful, or horrendous. Yet there are other examples of wrong actions that are inconceivable to ordinary people because they are awful and horrendous, but that are comparatively trivial wrongs, and hence not evil actions. Imagine that someone goes to a hospital and wanders through the wards licking the toes of incapacitated patients in order to annoy them. This action is morally wrong, given that the toe-licker has not gained the consent of the patients or the permission of the hospital staff. Moreover, it is plausible that this action is so disgustingly awful that ordinary, decent, reasonable people could never imagine freely choosing to do this. On Singer’s definition the toe-licker does evil. Intuitively, though, this action is a comparatively trivial wrong, and falls well short of the moral gravity required of evil actions.

Some minor wrongs are inconceivable to ordinary, decent, reasonable people in virtue of the fact that, in addition to being morally wrong, they are egregiously irrational or viscerally disgusting. For this reason the claim that all evils are incomprehensible wrongs does not rule out the possibility of morally trivial evils. If we wanted to ensure that Singer’s definition of evil action did rule out that possibility, we would have to stipulate that evil actions strike decent people as inconceivable because these actions are extremely morally wrong. Yet if this is the case, then it is not clear what work is being done by the notion of inconceivability in the definition of evil action. If we agreed that no ordinary, decent, reasonable person can imagine freely choosing to commit torture in a military setting, we might then conclude that he is not morally decent after all. In this case inconceivability to a decent person would not be functioning as a criterion for evil actions. Rather, the conceivability of doing evil would be functioning as a criterion for the decency of persons.

In any case, there are independent reasons to reject the claim that an action is evil if and only if it is so morally wrong that it is incomprehensible to ordinary, decent people. What we can imagine ourselves freely choosing to do depends,
part, on what we believe that people like us are disposed to do in various situations. Someone who is very much in love with her husband might have no desire to cheat on him, and feel no temptation when looking at other men, but given that she knows that adultery is quite common she may conclude that she can imagine herself freely choosing to commit adultery at some point in future. Knowing that many ordinary people commit adultery can help to make adultery a comprehensible action, in the relevant sense. Situationist social psychologists have shown that a large proportion of ordinary people are disposed to perform horribly wrong actions in certain situations. Most significantly, Milgram’s obedience experiment suggests that more than half of us would inflict potentially fatal electric shocks on an innocent victim simply because we were instructed to do so by an authority figure in an experimental setting (Doris 2002, 39; Milgram 1974). Despite the fact that the subjects in this experiment were following orders and not doing what they ordinarily would want to do, they are culpable for their wrong actions. According to some viable philosophical accounts of evil action, many of the subjects of the Milgram experiment are revealed to be people who would do evil under these conditions.2

Suppose that we agree that Milgram has demonstrated that a great many ordinary people would do evil when placed in certain situations. This is a surprising and disturbing discovery, and it is common for people who watch footage of the Milgram experiment to refuse to believe that they themselves would ever follow orders that are so clearly and extremely morally wrong. Yet some of us who watch this footage and see the experimental results might conclude that we too would probably perform these actions were we placed in a similar scenario. Even though now I have no inclination to perform actions of this type, and feel a strong imaginative resistance to doing so, I could judge that it is not only possible but likely that I would choose to follow such orders at some point.

If it were true that an evil action is an action so wrong that an ordinary, decent, reasonable human being could not imagine doing that action, then my judgment that it is conceivable that I would follow a Milgram-style order should push me to conclude either that I am not an ordinary, decent, reasonable person, or that following a Milgram-style order could not be an evil action. I contend that this is not the case. It is possible for me to believe that I am an ordinary, decent, reasonable person, but also believe that in some circumstances I would choose to perform an evil action. Many ordinary, decent, reasonable people are weak-willed and suggestible, and some of us know this about ourselves, and find our own weakness to be morally deplorable. Judging that an action is evil includes the judgment that it is an extreme culpable wrong; an action that, for moral reasons, should not be chosen by anyone. But this does not imply that ordinary, reasonable people would never do such things, nor that they could not imagine doing such things.

2. The subjects in the Milgram experiment did not act out of malice towards their victims, so any account that includes malice as a necessary condition for evil action (e.g., McGinn 1997) would imply that the subjects in the Milgram experiment performed horribly wrong actions, but did not do evil. However, many viable accounts of evil action do not take malice to be a hallmark of evil (e.g., Card 2002, 9; Formosa 2008, 15).
Of course, it is possible for Singer and others to retain the view that evil actions are incomprehensible to morally decent human beings, and then to argue that most people are not decent, or that following Milgram-style orders is not evil. The more plausible conclusion, though, is that incomprehensibility is not necessary or sufficient for evil action. It is not surprising that many people are unable to imagine choosing to perform evil actions themselves, given that those actions clash with our deeply held values and our desire to be morally virtuous. But what we think that we morally ought never do need not correspond with what we think that we would never do, and this holds true in the case of extreme wrongs as well as comparatively minor wrongs.

REFERENCES