CHAPTER ONE

Evil, Unintelligibility, Radicality

FOOTNOTES TO A CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN

HANNAH ARENDT AND KARL JASPERS

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In October 1946, a year and half after the end of World War II, Karl Jaspers wrote to his former student Hannah Arendt about her developing views concerning "radical evil."

> You say that what the Nazis did cannot be comprehended as a "crime"—I'm not altogether comfortable with your view, because a guilt that goes beyond all criminal guilt inevitably takes on a streak of "greatness"—of satanic greatness—which is, for me, as inappropriate for the Nazis as all the talk about the "demonic" element in Hitler and so forth. It seems to me that *we have to see these things in their total banality, in their prosaic triviality, because that's what truly characterizes them*. Bacteria can cause epidemics that wipe out nations, but they remain merely bacteria. I regard any hint of

myth and legend with horror, and everything unspecific is just such a hint . . . The way you express it, you've almost taken the path of poetry.[1]

Later in her career, while reporting on the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, Arendt would adapt and make famous the idea that even the worst evils can be "banal." In this early correspondence, however, she was unconvinced. In a reply to Jaspers she wrote:

> We know that the greatest evils or radical evil has nothing to do anymore with humanly understandable, sinful motives. What radical evil is I don't know, but it seems to me to somehow have to do with the following phenomenon: *making human beings as human beings superfluous*.[2]

Arendt goes on to indicate that "making human beings as human beings superfluous" is not the same as treating them as "mere means to an end." She thereby rejects the traditional Kantian view that *all* wrongdoing—no matter how benign or awful the effects—involves the willful violation of the categorical imperative by individual free agents.[3] Arendt defended her more exoticized view of evil in her 1951 blockbuster *Origins of Totalitarianism*, but precisely what she meant by "making human beings superfluous" remains controversial.

Jaspers's view of evil, by contrast, was both consistently non-exotic and consistently Kantian: "there is evil because there is freedom. *It is*

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1 Jaspers to Arendt, October 19, 1946, H. Arendt and K. Jaspers, *Correspondence 1926–1969*, trans. L. Kohler and H. Saner (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 62, emphasis added. See Robert Louden's illuminating discussion of this disagreement in "Evil Everywhere: The Ordinariness of Kantian Radical Evil," in *Kant's Anatomy of Evil*, ed. Sharon Anderson-Gold and Pablo Muchnik (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 93–115; see also Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (New York: Polity, 2002), 214–216.

2 Arendt to Jaspers, March 4, 1951, in *Correspondence 1926–1969*, 166, emphasis added.

3 Ibid. Again, see Louden, "Evil Everywhere," especially p. 98 and note. For more discussion of the early Arendtian picture, see section 3 below.

only possible for the will alone to be evil."[4] According to Allen Wood, this focus on human freedom as the root (*radix* in Latin) of *all* evil is "significant and commendable":

> Kant refuses to cater to our prurient craving for a special account that applies especially to the most extreme cases of evil. . . . He fears that occupying our imaginations with extreme cases of evil may be merely a way of indulging some of our nastier human traits— rationalizing our resentment and vindictiveness by supplying it with an object that would seem to justify it.[5]

David Frankfurter, an author who has spent more time thinking about our topic than almost anyone else,[6] likewise warns that

> [t]he application of the term "evil" to some horrible act or event renders it *outside* the realm of human comprehension and identification—in many ways "safely" outside that realm, where we no longer need to contemplate our own inclinations to such acts or to understand events as part of some cycle of misfortune (as in recent tragic cases of mothers who killed their children).[7]

Frankfurter goes on to describe cases of people who were regarded as agents or perpetrators of evil—as well, sometimes, as their relatives, the witnesses, or even their victims—being *tainted* as "conspirators in evil" who needed to be cleansed or purged. This of course led to worse violence:

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4 Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit: Philosophische Logik, Erster Band* (Munich: R. Piper, 1947. 2nd ed. 1958), 532, emphasis added.

5 Allen Wood, "Kant and the Intelligibility of Evil," in *Kant's Anatomy*, 157.

6 Jeffrey Burton Russell is also a contender for this prize. See for example his tetralogy of books on Satan, all from Cornell University Press: *The Devil* (1977); *Satan* (1981); *Lucifer* (1984); *Mephistopheles* (1986).

7 Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 10.

> [I]n every one of the historical cases I address, it was the myth of evil conspiracy that mobilized people in large numbers to astounding acts of brutality against accused conspirators. That is, the real atrocities of history seem to take place *not* in the perverse ceremonies of some evil cult but rather in the course of *purging* such cults from the world. Real evil happens when people speak of evil.[8]

In his contribution to this volume, Avishai Margalit similarly warns that "the idea of 'evil,' I believe, does a great deal of mischief. It anesthetizes morality by making evil too interesting and too beautiful."

Let's call the concerns expressed by these authors *Jaspersian concerns* for short. They are second-order concerns about how we should speak and talk of evil, and thus concerns raised by the very act of editing a book like this. They fall into two broad kinds: concerns about *exoticizing* wrongdoing by calling it "evil," and concerns about *tainting* people and things that are touched by evil, in a way that goes beyond the straightforward condemnation of the perpetrators. In the next section I elaborate these in turn before focusing on ways in which *extreme moral evil*, in particular, has been characterized as "unintelligible" (in section 2) or even "radical" (section 3). The goal is to identify which of these characterizations raise legitimate forms of the Jaspersian concerns.

A final note: it should be clear that these concerns are not merely relevant in the historical contexts that are the focus of this volume. On the contrary, they also arise in ongoing contemporary debates between *evil-revivalists*: those who think there is still a key role for the concept of "evil" to play in a contemporary secular vocabulary, and *evil-skeptics*: those who are opposed to rehabilitating what they see as

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8 Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate*, 12. See also Daniel Haybron, "Consistency of Character and the Character of Evil," in *Earth's Abominations: Philosophical Studies of Evil*, ed. D. M. Haybron (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 63–78.

a vague or supernaturally loaded concept that does little explanatory work and whose application often justifies further wrongdoing.[9]

1. Jaspersian Concerns and a Kantian Reaction
1.1. Sublime, Exotic Evil

It is impossible and inappropriate to theorize about what it is like for a *victim* to experience extreme evil at firsthand. However, descriptions of what it is like to *witness* or *imagine* evil often make it sound oddly akin to experience of the *sublime*. When we witness or learn about evil, we react with a flash of animal terror or revulsion. This is analogous to the "first moment" of the sublime in classical accounts—the moment of *transfixion* or *bedazzlement*. This initial moment is soon succeeded by the sense that our ability to analyze, capture, and categorize the experience in rational terms has been *outstripped* or rendered inert. We can describe the object or event in broad terms—a wave, a tornado, a gas chamber, a mass grave—but are at the same time unable to grasp why or how or what it all means.

In paradigmatic experiences of the sublime, at least on the eighteenth-century conception, there is a third moment—one which may occur almost simultaneously or quite a while later. In this third moment (*epiphany*), the subject appropriates or contextualizes the experience in such a way that a new world-understanding or self-understanding, however inchoate, results. For Edmund Burke, this involves realizing that we are physically safe and not vulnerable to the terrifying forces on display in a perceived or imagined scene. For Kant, the epiphany is different: it involves realizing that however powerful and terrifying a natural phenomenon is, we rational, moral agents are more valuable

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9 For this debate, see Todd Calder, "The Concept of Evil," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 ed.), ed. Edward N. Zalta; Luke Russell, *Evil: A Philosophical Investigation* (New York: Oxford, 2014), chaps. 10–11; Phillip Cole, *The Myth of Evil* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2006); Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (New York: Oxford, 2002).

and significant still: our free immortal souls cannot be touched by mere phenomenal, bodily destruction. Either way, the epiphanic third moment is the occasion for a powerful aesthetic response, and thus essential to experience of the sublime.

The experience of evil, by contrast, involves passing through the moment of transfixed horror and the moment of incomprehension and then waiting, groping toward some sort of understanding or significance. But the epiphany never comes.[10]

The first Jaspersian concern, then, is that because evil often presents itself in this way—like an abject, amputated facsimile of the sublime—we end up regarding it as essentially exotic and unintelligible. Any actions involved in bringing it about will seem entirely different from ordinary, intelligible action; they are thus something that we "ordinary people" could *never* do or understand. And because evil defies comprehension in this way, the thought goes, it *defies condemnation* too.

It is important to be precise about the concern here. Clearly witnesses to evil will not be able to resist the animal, visceral responses—the transfixion and the horror. And clearly it is fine to roil our minds with fictionalized versions of moral evil: the bewildering machinations of Medea and Iago; the eeriness of ghost stories, zombies, vampires, and Halloween; the campiness of cinematic gore-fests and Dr. Evil villainy. Some of these experiences may well be sublime.

What Jaspers insists on, however, is that we respond to encounters with *real-world* moral evil with a sober refusal to aestheticize, exoticize, or romanticize in any way. There may not be a fully satisfactory explanation in terms of motives and causes, and there may not be an epiphanic recognition that the world is safe or under rational control. But (says Jaspers) it is crucial to insist on seeing evil action as the result of

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10   For more on Burke and Kant, the three-stage analysis of the sublime, and the "abject sublime" as analogous to the experience of evil, see Andrew Chignell and Matthew C. Halteman, "Religion and the Sublime," in *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. T. Costelloe (New York: Cambridge, 2012), 183–202. Compare Richard Kearney, "Evil, Monstrosity and the Sublime," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, T. 57, Fasc. 3, Desafios do Mal: Do Mistério à Sabedoria (July-Sep. 2001): 485–502.

imputable human choices. That is presumably one of the main reasons to call it *moral* evil.[11]

1.2. Taint

The second Jaspersian concern is related to the first: it has to do with the *status* or *standing* of participants in evil. When we treat evil as spectacularly peculiar—separate from the sphere of ordinary moral evaluation—we are also liable to treat the people associated with it as spectacular, peculiar, and separate. Some will see the perpetrators as demonically great and the victims as transcendent martyrs. Others will see the perpetrators as unredeemable and the victims as defiled—both fit only for excommunication or annihilation. Our sordid history of witch trials, blood libels, inquisitions, punishment of rape victims,[12] and honor killings confirms this: the human mind is vulnerable to a pre-moral, magical idea that not only perpetrators of evil but also the victims, their families, and their associates are *tainted*. Such taint is a contagion and a threat, making everything it touches unfit for rehabilitation or re-inclusion.[13]

The second Jaspersian concern, then, is this: just as it is crucial not to let an evil deed *transcend* the bounds of moral condemnation, it is equally crucial not to let its sullying effects go *beyond* those bounds either. We can solemnly set apart the places where atrocities have

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11   For the distinction between moral evil and natural evil, see the essays by Brian Davies and Samuel Newlands in the present volume, as well as my "The Metaphysics of Evil," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

12   In the fall of 2007, the Qatif general court in Saudi Arabia sentenced a woman to ninety lashes, after she had been kidnapped and gang raped by seven men, as though to purify her from the taint of what had been done to her. When she tried to protest this in the media, her punishment was increased to 200 lashes. CNN.com, "Saudi: Why We Punished Rape Victim," *CNN*, November 20, 2007,

13   Jaspers knew well this human tendency to think in terms of contagion, uncleanness, and taint. His wife was Jewish, and in Nazi eyes this meant that a "taint" (*Versippung*) was upon him too. As a result, he was forced to resign from teaching and refrain from publishing during the war. See Suzanne Kirkbright, *Karl Jaspers: A Biography—Navigations in Truth* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

occurred: Bia Ogoi, Dachau, Srebrenica, Columbine, the Mandalay Bay Hotel. But we must not set apart—cast out, scapegoat, ghettoize— the *people* involved, beyond making a sober judgment of wrongdoing by the perpetrators. In other words, there is not some *further* defiled or accursed status that afflicts an evildoer's race, tribe, family, gender, and ethnicity such that members of these groups must be cleansed, ostracized, or purged. [14] There is also no taint or curse upon the victims and their allies. The lesson of the long twentieth century is not that evil is something that only "monsters" and "systems" do; rather, it is that people very much like us can do unspeakable things, often as part of a system. Adolf Eichmann started off as an ordinary (albeit highly anti-Semitic) salesman, and Radovan Karadžić was a poetry-loving doctor at the Kosovo Hospital. In nearby possible worlds, they lived out their lives, like the rest of us, as unremarkable members of normal society.

1.3. A Kantian Reaction: Rigorism

Once moved by these Jaspersian concerns, it is easy to go to the other extreme and stipulate that *every* wrongful act, or perhaps the intention behind every such act, is full-on evil. If all bad acts are tarred with the same brush, then no one is *especially* tainted by their sins, no matter how horrendous the consequences.

Again, Kant is the *eminence grise* here: his "rigorism" in ethics says that *every* act that involves preferring self-advantage to the moral law arises from our propensity to "radical evil." Our "disposition as regards the moral law is never indifferent (never neither good nor bad)"; it is thus impossible for us to "be morally good in some parts, and at the same time evil in others."[15] For Kant, there is no *moral* difference

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14 An exception might be cases where the attitudes that lead to evil are a pervasive part of a culture. Many Germans who were not deemed guilty of a specific crime were still required to go through a process of "de-Nazification," which might be viewed as a kind of cognitive purging.

15 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, trans. and ed. George di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Ak. 6: 24–25.

between Augustine of Hippo's invasion of the pear garden and Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland, even if there is a vast difference in the results.

The rationale for rigorism is clear: it highlights the fact that even a mere peccadillo can stem from an objectionable willingness to privilege self-advantage over respect for the moral law. Here is Allen Wood again:

> Kant's treatment of evil is designed to make us aware of the continuity between different cases of evil, what cases of evil have in common (however they may differ in degree), and therefore aware of our kinship with other evildoers rather than our distance from them. The Kantian view is that to "look evil straight in the face" is not to gaze in voluptuous horror at the visage of Hitler, but instead simply to look in the mirror, asking yourself honestly and soberly what you might do to improve what is there.[16]

The self-improvement lesson here is salutary, but in addition to going hard against the grain of ordinary linguistic usage, rigorism threatens to put acts that *intuitively seem* very different on the same moral plane. This can lead to wolf-crying: a presidential dalliance with a White House intern is immoral and even impeachable, perhaps, but when we describe it as "evil," we weaken the term's expressive force and trivialize other uses of it.[17] We also risk losing the intuitive conviction that some

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16 Wood, "Kant and the Intelligibility of Evil," 157.

17 Claudia Card also mentions the Clinton impeachment as an exercise in moralistic overkill and demonization on the part of Clinton's critics. She then goes on to suggest, however (and just as implausibly in my view), that special prosecutor Kenneth Starr's conduct in the Clinton case *was* evil. See Card, "Kant's Moral Excluded Middle," in *Kant's Anatomy*, 74–92. For another case of presidential-level wolf-crying, consider Donald Trump's insistence in 2017 that President Obama was "an evil guy" for allegedly having allowed the wiretapping of Trump Tower during the previous year's election campaign. Kelsey, Adam, "Spicer: Trump 'Clearly Stands by" Description of Obama as Evil," *ABC News*, May 1, 2017.

acts and events are just *categorically* worse than others—worse in moral kind and not just in degree.[18]

Philosophers who reject such rigorism and want to retain the intuitive idea that evil is special need to say something about what the difference consists in. Some suggest that it is ultimately a quantitative difference—moral evil is just *very, very* bad, or wrongdoing that has *very, very* bad consequences; the concept of evil is what we use to express and condemn it, and perhaps to signal that we think the perpetrators are beyond hope of rehabilitation.[19] Others regard the difference as qualitative—this is where the unintelligibility or incomprehensibility of the action is often invoked. Evil, on such views, defies comprehension in a way that the very, very bad does not.

The latter sort of appeal to unintelligibility is my focus here; it is what raises the Jaspersian concerns. In the next section, I look at some leading accounts of the "unintelligibility" of evil and argue in each case that the evil still turns out to be, on the one hand, rationally *imputable* and, on the other, *self-contained* such that *only* the perpetrators should be tainted by it. In section 3, I consider some leading accounts of the "radicality" of evil and suggest that some of these, if coherent, *do* threaten moral rationality in the way that had Jaspers concerned.

2. Kinds of Unintelligibility
2.1. Unintelligible Absences

Absence theory is an ancient account of the nature of evil: it says that evil is (or can be explained in terms of) a "lack" or absence of some good. "Privation theory" is a variation on this: it is the view that evil is an absence of a good that *ought* to be present.[20] Clearly we can know

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18 For a lengthy argument along these lines, see Card, *Atrocity Paradigm*, chap. 4.

19 For the best defense of this kind of view, see Russell, *Evil: A Philosophical Investigation*.

20 For more on these theories, see the essays by O'Meara, King, Davies, and Newlands in the present volume, as well as my "Metaphysics of Evil."

that there is such a lack, just as we can know that a room is empty. But is it possible to grasp, understand, or know the lack itself—the absence which is, itself, *no* thing? Can a privation be intelligible?

The question is not based in some flat-footed empiricism according to which all knowledge arises from sense-impressions of some *thing* with the causal power to generate them. Rather, it is based on the much more general idea that—in almost any epistemology—it is hard to see what it would be to understand or know absence *per se* (as opposed, again, to the *fact* that something is absent). This is why Augustine says that trying to understand something that is nothing "is like trying to see darkness or to hear silence"[21] and why Heidegger resorts to torturous aphorisms about the aboriginal "nothing that nothings itself."[22]

But even if we grant that evil is, metaphysically, an absence or lack that is per se unknowable and in that sense unintelligible, this needn't raise Jaspersian concerns about threats to our ordinary moral practices. We can simply revert to our knowledge of the *fact* that there is an absence, and account for that fact in one or more of the usual ways: by referring to nature or natures, causes, responsible agents, and so on. If moral agents are involved as perpetrators, then they and only they are tarnished by the evil.

2.2. *Unintelligible Relations*

The various "problems of evil" in the theological tradition—logical, evidential, existential—raise questions about whether the existence of natural and/or moral evil makes the existence of the traditional God impossible, unlikely, or at least emotionally unintelligible. But the unintelligibility

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21 Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), XII.7, 480.

22 Rudolf Carnap famously draws attention to and mocks Heidegger's tongue twisters about "nothing" in *What is Metaphysics?* See Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language," trans. Arthur Pap, in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (New York: Free Press, 1932), 60–81.

here has to do with the *relations* between evil and God. How could something so *bad* exist in the same world as a deity that is *so good, powerful, and wise*? How could God *allow* such evil? In this context, the question is not whether evil *an sich* is unintelligible, and so it is unlikely to raise Jaspersian concerns.

Another way of thinking about evil and unintelligible relations is found in the Hebrew wisdom literature tradition. As Carol Newsom (in this volume) points out, parts of Job and almost all of Ecclesiastes depict a world in which sudden, unpredictable, and undeserved outbreaks of disease or disaster threaten to undermine trust in the world itself—in its rationality, order, justice, and safety. It's not so much that the events *themselves* are unintelligible, on this picture; rather, the *distribution* of them is what renders the cosmos and its governor inscrutable from a moral point of view.[23] This kind of natural evil, too, displays an important kind of unintelligibility, but it's not of the sort to raise Jaspersian concerns about *human* moral evil.

2.3.   Unintelligible Banality

Perhaps the most famous account of the unintelligibility of evil is what we might call the *banality thesis*. This is inspired by Jaspers's letter quote above, and by Arendt's later reports in 1963 for *The New Yorker* from the Jerusalem trial of Adolf Eichmann. Jennifer L. Geddes and Avishai Margalit discuss a few different ways of characterizing the thesis, but it is clearly *not* the claim that people commit evil *because* they are banal.[24] Rather, the thesis is that when we confront perpetrators of real-world atrocities, they can seem shallow, ordinary, banal—maybe even a bit stupid or "thoughtless." In Susan Neiman's words,

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23 Carol Newsom, "Evil in the Hebrew Bible: The Case of the Wisdom Literature," present volume.

24 Hannah Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem," multi-article series in *New Yorker* starting February 16, 1963; Jennifer L. Geddes, "The Banality of Evil" and Avishai Margalit, "Satanically Great Instigators and Banal Compliers," both in the present volume.

to call evil banal is to offer not a definition of it but a theodicy.[25] For it implies that the sources of evil are not mysterious or profound but fully within our grasp. If so, they do not infect the world at a depth that could make us despair of the world itself. Like a fungus, they may devastate reality by laying waste to its surface. Their roots, however, are shallow enough to pull up.[26]

Any seeming unintelligibility in this kind of evil, according to the banality thesis, is a result of *our* misguided expectations. Evil acts are associated with outcomes so excessive that we expect the perpetrators to be equally enthralling, terrifying, repulsive, satanic. When we confront the banality of both instigators and compliers,[27] we are puzzled, brought up short by their quotidian explanations. It seems like there is an unintelligible remainder: *H*ow could *that* ordinary-seeming person do *those* horrendous things? And how could he offer *those* silly, quotidian reasons for it? Good questions, but clearly this kind of unintelligibility need not lead to either exoticizing or tainting.

2.4. *Unintelligible Inferences*

Theories of moral explanation often assume a Socratic intellectualist picture according to which human beings always and by a kind of psychological necessity act under "the aspect of the good." In other words, we voluntarily perform actions only if we take their results to be good *in some way*. The "aspect" or "taking" often turns out to be flawed or illusory: something can have the aspect of good, and be taken to be

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25 By "theodicy" here Neiman does *not* merely mean the project of justifying the traditional God's ways, but rather any effort to put evil in its place—to make it intelligible such that it doesn't threaten our sense of the moral order of the world.

26 Susan Neiman, *Evil and Modern Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 303. Newsom quotes this passage from Neiman in her piece on the Hebrew Bible in the present volume and adds: "Such was the conviction of Proverbs." Note that there are other ways to construe the banality thesis, and that not all of them assume that banality implies intelligibility. Banality might imply *familiarity*, but not all familiar things are intelligible. Thanks to Allen Wood for discussion of this point.

27 Avishai Margalit, "Satanically Great Instigators and Banal Compliers," present volume.

good, but in fact turn out to be bad on the whole. But a mistake in calculating consequences is all too familiar, and even if it is tragic and sometimes even exculpating, it is hardly *unintelligible*.

That said, if a mistake about the appropriate means to an end is utterly wrong and demonstrably absurd, we may find it difficult to see *how* anyone could regard what he is doing under the aspect of the good. We find his instrumental reasons or inferences unintelligible: we feel, in Arendt's words, that evil "breaks down all standards we know" and cannot be explained "by comprehensible motives."[28] Nadja Germann shows how commentators on the Qur'an sought to explain the fall of Iblis (Satan) in this way. Iblis *knew* that he must worship God, but he (wrongly) inferred that such reverence was somehow compatible with a refusal to submit entirely to God's commands.[29]

For a baleful human example of unintelligible evil reasoning, consider the bombing in Brindisi, Italy, in May 2012. Someone planted a massive bomb outside an Italian school and set it off just as students were arriving. The explosion killed a sixteen-year-old student named Melissa Bassi, and brutally wounded and burned numerous other children (including one who lost both of her legs). One month later, after a series of long interrogations, a sixty-eight-year-old married father of two, Giovanni Vantaggiato, confessed to making and planting the bomb. Vantaggiato never made his motive or affiliations clear, but there were suggestions that the bombing was intended as a statement against the local government and the mob-busting judge after whose wife the school was named, even though *both the judge and his wife had already been killed in another mafia bombing* twenty years earlier.[30]

Let's suppose that this was in fact Vantaggiato's "reason" for setting off the bomb at the school. The proximate cause of the event will then have been explained in some sense: the killer thought that it would be

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28 Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Francisco: Harcourt, 1994), 459.

29 See Germann, " . . . *but draw not nigh this tree:* Evil in Early Islamic Thought," present volume.

30 Andrea Vogt, "Man Confesses to Bombing Brindisi School," *The Guardian*, June 7 2012.

good to make a statement against an anti-mafia judge by blowing up a school named after the judge's wife, even though both were already long dead. Still, there is something in the psychology that remains unintelligible. Yes, Vantaggiato (or his patrons) inferred from the fact that the school was in the relevant judge's jurisdiction and named after the judge's wife that bombing it would count as an appropriate statement or revenge. And so, yes, the bomber saw what he was doing under the aspect of the good—getting revenge against an already-murdered judge and his wife. But most of us will still find the inference incomprehensible: How does the killing and maiming of innocent children outside their school count as revenge against local anti-crime strategies or *a couple that was already long-dead*? How could doing *that* be viewed as something that leads to justice or fitting retribution? It is an exercise in abhorrent logic.[31]

Despite the unintelligibility of the *inferences* here, however, there is no barrier to assigning blame. Even if we cannot grasp his reasons and even if we find his premises outrageous, we can still hold Vantaggiato and his patrons (and *only* them) accountable. In fact, we might condemn them *both* for the moral crime and for the terrible inferences. There may come a point, however, where the premises or inferences are so ludicrous that we cease to regard the perpetrator as a rational agent at all. Perhaps the Brindisi case is one such case—it's so hideously absurd to think that such an act counts as revenge against a deceased judge that perhaps we have to regard Vantaggiato as clinically insane. Either way, if the unintelligibility of evil is of this logical-inferential sort, Jaspersian concerns won't arise. To find contexts in which they do more clearly arise, we must turn to recent discourses about *radical* evil.

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31   For further and deeper reflection on the ways that different kinds of psychological explanations do and do not make an action intelligible, see Rachana Kamtekar, "Explaining Evil in Plato, Euripides, and Seneca," present volume.

3. Kinds of Radicality

Kant is the source of "radical evil," but his way of using the term is out of favor. Most people (even in philosophy) use it in a precisely opposite way—as signifying something spectacularly set apart—as bad in a way that is different from the way in which ordinary things can be bad. After considering the Kantian way of using the term, I'll turn to three other usages and suggest ways in which they each, if coherent, *do* succeed in raising Jaspersian concerns.

3.1. *Radical Evil as Violating the Moral Law*

Kant argues in *Religion* that free choices against the moral law are unintelligible in the sense that they are *irrational* and must be left as an inexplicable mystery at the heart of our moral psychology. F. W. J. Schelling, picking up the refrain, rejects the privation theory in favor of the view that moral evil is the irrational decision to prefer self-advantage over the moral law: "just how the decision for good or evil comes to pass in the individual, that is still wrapped in total darkness."[32] Robert Louden highlights this inscrutability in Kantian moral psychology:

> [Kant's] account of radical evil is primarily a theory about *what* evil is (and *how* we should respond to it)—not a theory about *why* people do evil. However, given the indecipherable character of much human action, perhaps it is best not to speak presumptuously about why people commit evil. Those who think they have succeeded in descending into the depths here are often mistaken. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to ever reach bottom in this particular line of work, for the depths of human evil are unfathomable.[33]

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32 F. W. J. Schelling, *Of Human Freedom*, trans. James Gutmann (Chicago: Open Court, 1936), 59. This passage is also cited by Bernstein in *Radical Evil* (p. 93) and Louden in "Evil Everywhere" (p. 99). See also Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (New York: Oxford, 2010).

33 Louden, "Evil Everywhere," 103.

For Kant and Schelling, such choice boils down to preferring self-advantage over the claims of reason and justice. For a consequentialist it might involve choosing in a way that is obviously *not* going to lead to the best overall consequences, although it does lead to something good *for the agent*. By way of example: one of the greatest contemporary engines of evil—the lobbyist-politician relationship—exists for mutual profit at the expense of taxpayers, the environment, and any effort to set up fair, transparent markets. These agents presumably see what they are doing under the aspect of *some* good or other—good for their company, good for their bonuses, good for their re-election efforts—even though they know that what they are doing is ultimately despicable. Still, the choice cannot be *fully* explained: full explanations appeal to good reasons, and there are no good reasons for what such people do. The war cry of Milton's Satan—"Evil be thou my good!"—is not absurd, but it is also not wholly intelligible.

There is a normative sense, then, in which any choice for the bad is "unintelligible"—it is *irrational* and thus cannot be "understood" in the sense that it cannot be grasped or sanctioned by reason. But surely there is a broader sense of "explain" or "understand" in which it is no mystery at all: it is the most depressingly familiar thing in the world. We humans incessantly opt for self-advantage rather than doing what we know, at some level, to be the morally correct action. Kant found this so obvious that, without bothering to provide the "formal proof," he could point to history for overwhelming evidence that we are both individually and collectively *as a species* inclined to evil.[34] In this he is hardly original:

> Our natures do pursue
> Like rats that ravin down their proper bane
> A thirsty evil;
> and when we drink we die.[35]

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34 See Kant, *Religion*, part I.

35 Claudio in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, act I, scene 2.

Perhaps Kant is right to think that there is a mystery about how we (or our natures[36]) come to side with bad impulses over the clear dictates of reason and morality. But as we have seen, Kant would also insist that this radical unintelligibility does *not* preclude us from assigning blame, holding perpetrators responsible, and resisting the urge to taint the innocent. This explains why Jaspers found the Kantian picture so attractive:

> To rank the will to happiness, which dominates among men's motives, above the unconditioned law that shows itself in reason— *that* is the root of evil, the "propensity" which Kant calls "radical evil."[37]

3.2. *Radical Evil as Choosing Evil for Its Own Sake*

Some philosophers, and more than a few poets, novelists, and screenwriters, have found the entire intellectualist picture—the picture according to which we are always going after what we *regard* as good—inadequate to the psychology of thoroughgoing malevolence. It may have suited the melioristic self-conceptions of antiquity or the enlightenment, but the famous mechanized horrors of the recent past demand a bleaker picture of perpetrator psychology. Serial killers, murderous dictators, torturers, derivatives traders: these malign actors, surely, must *see their own actions as atrocious*—as making the world worse not just for some of us, but even for themselves—and yet still choose to perform them. They are not saying "Evil be thou my good." Rather, they are self-consciously *male-volent:* they *will the bad*

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36 This is a source of great consternation among Kant interpreters. Kant seems on the one hand to ascribe radical evil to us at birth as a function of our membership in the species. His moral theory also requires, however, that we each individually be responsible for our standing with respect to evil or good. See George Huxford, "Kant's Journey on Evil," present volume.

37 Jaspers, *Der Philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung* (Munich: R. Piper, 1962), 321.

under the aspect of the bad. And yet they are not insane—this is what makes their actions especially difficult for the rest of us to understand or process.

Augustine reports in his *Confessions* that during the pears incident he took pleasure

> in the very sin and theft itself . . . I willed wickedness to no purpose, and there was no cause of this my malice but malice itself. It was deformed, and yet I loved it . . . I loved the sin itself.[38]

It's tempting to say that in "loving the sin itself," Augustine was in some sense regarding it as good. But he at least gestures here at the idea that some acts can be performed under the aspect of their own deformation and rottenness.

As we have seen, the philosopher who coined the term "radical evil" 1,400 years later does *not* think it can involve choosing evil for its own sake. In fact, and despite Augustine's claim that he stole the pears *because* he knew it was wrong, Kant regards that entire psychological picture askance: he argues that such "diabolical evil" is incoherent or at least psychologically impossible for human beings. If that is correct, then it obviously needn't raise Jaspersian concerns.

But it may not be correct. Kant's skepticism didn't stop Dostoyevsky from composing *Notes from the Underground* (1864) as an extended and somewhat plausible portrait of one man's effort to choose evil *qua* evil. And there are more recent, real-life people who seem to confess—in private diaries or braggadocious depositions—that they did what they did *because* it was evil.[39] This is not a question of making a series of

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38 *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. J. G. Pilkington (London: Heritage Press, 1963), 61–62.

39 In this context, consider (if you can bear it) psychologist Michael Stone's portraits of some of the worst serial torture killers in chap. 7 of *The Anatomy of Evil*. Even in that list of horrors, however, it is hard to find a perpetrator who doesn't exude *some* sense that he takes what he is doing to be good— ridding the world of "garbage women," giving someone his "just deserts," correctly following the orders of the voices in his head, and so on.

unsound inferences or of mistaking the bad for the good. Rather, it is a self-conscious turning away from anything that could be regarded as good by anyone, even by the agent. In this way, it could also be described as a self-conscious turning away from *being itself*.[40] If Augustine's confessions about the pears—or these more serious confessions about recent evils—are accurate, then there may be a baffling and almost self-contradictory psychological state that some people can get into while still remaining agents, and that the rest of us cannot fathom.

If that is right, the psychology of someone who self-consciously chooses evil *qua* evil (and is still, let's grant for the sake of argument, a moral agent) is going to be hard for most of us to grasp and thus hard for us to condemn. Still, the fact that we regard the choice as one performed by an agent in a willful effort to do something that we, just as they, regard as evil *seems* to allow room for the intelligible imputation of wrongdoing, even if the psychology behind the wrongdoing is not fully intelligible. In this respect, *Radical Evil as Choosing Evil for its Own Sake* is similar to the case of *Evil as Unintelligible Inferences* described in Section 2.4 above.

3.3. Radical Evil as Repudiating the Moral Law

There is yet another concept of radical evil, however, whose application clearly does succeed in raising Jaspersian concerns. Although Hannah Arendt ultimately rejected it in favor of the banality thesis, others (including Richard Bernstein and Gabriel Motzkin[41]) remain sympathetic to some version of it.

The idea is to think of "radical evil" as the name for acts (or practices, like slavery and genocide) that do not merely violate rational principles

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40 Terry Eagleton's recent *On Evil* is a whimsical late-career ramble of a book that receives humorous and well-deserved criticism for its "free associative riffing" from Luke Russell (*Evil: A Philosophical Investigation*, 23). One detectable line of argument in Eagleton's book, however, is that we must distinguish between the "mere wickedness" of our everyday and the special kind of evil that "hates being itself." See Eagleton, *On Evil* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 16.

41 See Bernstein, *Radical Evil,* and Motzkin, "Evil after the Holocaust," present volume.

but rather constitute an effort to *repudiate* moral rationality altogether
or at least to transcend it entirely. When we steal or lie, there is a sense
in which we might be failing to treat others with the respect that they
deserve. And as we have seen, Kant doesn't hesitate to view such choices
as stemming from our propensity to "radical evil." But radical evil in
the early-Arendt-Motzkin sense is categorically different: it involves an
intentional refusal to acknowledge that some other person or group
has *any moral standing at all*—the kind of moral standing that would
prevent us from instigating or complying with their humiliation, deg-
radation, or extinction. In Arendt's words, it involves "making human
beings as human beings superfluous."

Morally irrational agents, like Giovanni Vantaggiato, come up with
abhorrently bad means to comprehensible ends or knowingly violate
a law whose force they still in some sense acknowledge. But these are
still acts that fall within the domain of moral reason. Radical evil, on
this repudiative conception, denies the universal scope—and thus,
perhaps, the very existence—of the moral sphere altogether. It is *anti-
rational* rather than *merely irrational*—and this is what threatens to
make it incomprehensible or inexplicable in a unique way.

Here's another way to look at it: morally irrational evil is like making
a bad move in chess or like cheating by moving one's pieces in an illegal
way when one's opponent isn't looking. Radical evil, by contrast, is like
crushing all the opponent's pieces and upending the table. The player who
does the latter is no longer or perhaps never was a player: she cannot ex-
plain her behavior by saying that she was trying to win by making what
turned out to be a bad move or a cheat. She cannot explain her behavior
in terms of chess at all.

The analogy extends only so far, however. That's because there are still
some reasonable explanations left to our non-player—explanations that
are external to the game: "I was hungry, so I crushed all of your pieces and
swept them off the board in the hopes that you would suggest lunch." By
contrast, there can be *no* credible reason why someone does something
that constitutes a denial of *reason* altogether. That is why radical evil on

this repudiative conception threatens to be uniquely unintelligible and troubling. If someone—not a beast or a machine, but a human being—is able to act in a way that entirely disclaims not just an awareness of moral authority but also the basic rules of moral reason altogether, then he effectively places himself in an antelapsarian state, unburdened with the knowledge of good and evil. His act suggests that he has transcended entirely the moral sphere—that his actions *can't* be wrong, and perhaps that there is no such thing as wrongness.

Richard Ramirez, the "Night Stalker" serial killer in 1980s Los Angeles, snuck into women's houses to rape and kill them, sometimes cutting off body parts and taking them with him. After his fourteenth murder, he was caught and then boasted to his captors:

> You don't understand me . . . you are not capable of it. I am beyond good and evil . . . I love to kill people. I love to watch them die. I would shoot them in the head and they would wiggle and squirm . . . I love all that blood.[42]

This idea that a human being could do something that would *enact* his own transcendence of moral norms—that would *establish* his own status as somehow "beyond good and evil"—is what concerned Karl Jaspers, and what he was hoping Arendt would resist.

3.4. Radical Evil as Systemic: Human Beings Made Superfluous in Another Way

Systemic or structural evil exists at the level of groups, networks, and collectives rather than at the level of individuals. The origin and nature of such evil is controversial, since it is hardly fair to call it natural, and yet it does not seem fully moral either. Formally organized structures like governments, corporations, *Einsatzgruppen*, and religious institutions

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42 Quoted in Michael Stone, *The Anatomy of Evil* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009), 208.

can be evil in this way; so can more loosely organized systems like "Academia," "Silicon Valley," "Industrial Animal Agriculture," "K Street," and "Wall Street."

Arendt's early work on totalitarianism highlights the ways in which evil can arise in systems where *no* individual or even *collection* of individuals is fully responsible for its perpetuation. The cogs in the machine, as well as the leader or leadership, are clearly responsible for *some* of the harms produced, but the evil of the whole structure (on this view) is somehow greater than the evil produced by the sum of its parts. That is what makes such evil so mysterious or even unintelligible.

It is also what makes it particularly important to discuss in our current context. The essays and Reflections in this volume reflect the fact that, for most of written history, we focused on evil as a metaphysical condition or moral act on the part of individual human beings. But now, non- or super-human agents—corporations, collectives, markets, computer systems, artificial intelligences—rather than individual human beings appear to be the most powerful sources of possible evil in the world. Corporations have boardrooms and executive suites and are even treated as persons by some legal systems, but (as investigation after investigation indicates) it is hard to find the heart of their darkness when trying to assign responsibility. Computer systems, markets, and AI offer an even clearer example: these systems arise from innumerable individual human efforts, but are also *designed* to make (many) human beings superfluous. Some of this is and will be for the good—there are fewer back-broken menial laborers in the fields or exhaust-inhaling toll collectors on the highways. But some will be for the bad, and in ways that are not foreseeable or even intelligible to us now, in part because of the way they will make human beings superfluous.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed some of the key concerns questions raised by the very act of discussing evil in the way that philosophers often do. Is

there really a *nature* of evil that we can identify and condemn? Is evil unintelligible in a way that threatens to set apart the perpetrators as something more than wrongdoers, or to stain (and harm) people who had nothing to do with the original choices involved? What does it mean to say that evil is *radical*, and how does that affect our ability to understand, evaluate, and resist it?

The chapter ended with a look at four conceptions of radical evil, the last three of which do threaten to raise these sorts of Jaspersian concerns. It is worth summarizing them here:

Radical-Quotidian: An act is radically evil if it arises from our natural propensity to privilege self-advantage over the demands of morality. (This is the Kantian view that *every* immoral act is radically evil.)

Radical-Diabolical: An act is radically evil if it involves knowingly willing what is bad under the aspect of its badness.

Radical-Repudiative: An act is radically evil if it enacts the assertions that (a) there is no such thing as morality and/or that (b) that it is performed by someone who stands outside of all moral rules.

Radical-Systemic: An act is radically evil if it is evil and performed by an agent whose acts are not equivalent or reducible to the acts of individual human beings.

Although I can't defend the claim here, I suspect that Kant is right to say that the diabolical conception of radical evil is incoherent or at least psychologically impossible for us human beings to instantiate. The early Arendt's repudiative conception, by contrast, seems both coherent and dangerous. Its widespread application to acts that are hard to understand would raise serious Jaspersian concerns about the scope and validity of moral reason. Given that Jaspers's letters were addressed to the early Arendt, this seems like a fitting result, even if it was only

a face-to-face confrontation with Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem that ultimately changed her thinking about radical evil.[43]

Finally, although cosmic and individualist conceptions of evil were the focus in most of the historical periods surveyed in this volume, it is clear that systemic conceptions will take on increased importance in the years to come. A world in which markets, corporations, and unfathomably complex computer systems are the primary agents of change is a world in which human beings have been made superfluous in yet another way. It is thus a world in which a new and more troubling form of radical evil becomes really possible.[44]

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43 Eichmann's deeds may have been radically evil in the quotidian-Kantian sense, but David Cesarani argues that Eichmann's malevolence was anything but commonplace. His book presents a case for thinking that Eichmann intentionally and successfully masked the extraordinary virulence of his anti-Semitism and the extremeness of his crimes from Arendt and other observers in Jerusalem. See *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a "Desk Murderer"* (London: De Capo Press, 2007). In his contribution to this volume, Avishai Margalit likewise disputes Arendt's characterization of Eichmann as banal, arguing that Eichmann was full of "mischievous ingenuity, wicked imagination, and most importantly resourcefulness."

44 Thanks to Silvia De Toffoli, Matthew Halteman, Christia Mercer, and Allen Wood for feedback on earlier drafts.