The Concept of Evil*

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I

My topic is evil, in the sense in which 'evil', used precisely, is the worst possible term of opprobrium imaginable. That is the sense in which it is used by psychiatrist Robert L. Simon, when he says: 'Evil is a thick rope of many complex, twisted, and intertwined strands. An effort to comprehensively define evil is an impossible task, a fool's errand'.[1] Is it? I am confident it is not, and I have a pretty good idea of the complexities that lie behind this claim. The problem lies, I think, in the underlying conception of definition: 'comprehensively defining evil' is not itself defined. In the context what it appears to mean is not merely analyzing the concept of evil, which is problem enough, but, the nature of evil being defined, providing a comprehensive, detailed, and accurate account of its causes, conditions, extent, signs, and remedies, along with a comprehensive account of the persons and groups who manifest evil. Clarifying the concept of evil, defining its nature, is a distinctively philosophical task. These other matters are not. So '*comprehensively* defining evil', an enterprise of enormous importance, is not what I am setting out to do, though I am setting out to define evil, that is, define its nature.

There are some uses of the term 'evil' that must be set aside at once. The term is typically used as the generic opposite of 'morally good'. Thus there are constant references to 'good and evil', not to 'good and bad' (an antithesis more appropriate in aesthetic contexts). One standard account defines *evil* as the 'antithesis of good'.[2] Evil is the antithesis of good, but this overgeneralized sense of 'evil' is not the sense relevant to this topic. Another standard account

* Dedicated to Alan Gewirth, in honour of his 90th birthday, and in appreciation of his superb, illuminating, and ground-breaking philosophical work over many years.

[1] Dr. Robert L. Simon, 'Serial Killers, Evil, and Us', *National Forum, Phi Kappa Phi Journal* 80(4), Fall 2000, p. 24.

[2] *The New Columbia Encyclopedia* (4th edn; New York, London: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 908.

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defines 'evil' as 'the term in general use for the abstract conception of whatever is the reverse of *good*, especially of the morally good...'[3]. This demarcates this same overgeneralized sense of 'evil'. Evil itself is something over and above this.

There are still other uses of the ubiquitous term 'evil' to be ruled out. In the expression 'a necessary evil', 'evil' means only something one doesn't like or finds undesirable, and the point of it is that one often has to do or accept something one doesn't like—such as a root canal—for the sake of something better. If something is really evil, it cannot be necessary, and if it is really necessary, it cannot be evil. Similarly, in the expression 'the lesser of two evils', the term is used only figuratively. If I vote for A rather than B because I regard A as the lesser of two evils, that does not mean that I regard either A or B as actually evil. This usage, though perfectly common, is not to the present point.

As A. C. Pigou has observed, with some indignation: 'The misery and squalor that surround us, the injurious luxury of some wealthy families, the terrible uncertainty overshadowing many families of the poor—these are evils too plain to be ignored.'[4] These are beyond a doubt evils—and they still exist today nearly one hundred years later, in the richest country in the world—but they are evils in the plural, and in this usage 'evils' could be replaced by 'wrongs'—or better, 'terrible or horrendous wrongs'—with no loss of meaning, though certainly some loss of emphasis. This is another usage of 'evil'. Once we recognize it for what it is it ceases to puzzle. My topic is *EVIL* itself, evil as such, its nature, its degrees or levels, and its reality, not the evils, the bad things, the injustices, the inequities, the horrendous and unjustified wrongs or misfortunes or misery or suffering in the world, though there certainly are significant connections, as we shall see.

Curiously enough, this is not a topic that has borne much weight in the history of philosophy, though it has, obviously, strong theological connections. So we cannot learn anything to the point from standard philosophical treatises on ethics. Sidgwick, so comprehensive on just about everything else, has nothing whatever to

[3] I have quoted this explication, from *Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms* (Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, 1968, 1984, p. 303) nearly in full because it is so especially perspicuous. I am not supposing that in philosophizing one is replicating a dictionary. Occasionally, recourse to a good dictionary, especially an analytical dictionary, can throw considerable light on a seemingly intractable problem of interpretation.

[4] A. C. Pigou, *The Economics of Welfare* (1st edn, 1920; 3rd edn, London: Macmillan, 1929), p. vii.

say about evil in *The Methods of Ethics*, bypasses the question of the nature and varieties of evil altogether. Evidently the topic never occurred to him as one for moral philosophy, as distinct from metaphysics or theology. (In Sidgwick's *Essays on Ethics and Method* the term appears just twice, once in a passing reference to 'the problem of the existence of evil'—the standard theological question—with no indication how evil is here to be defined, later in a glancing way as a rough synonym for bad thing.) Immanuel Kant is one of the few major philosophers to write explicitly about evil. In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant has a discussion of the radical evil in human nature, so this might be thought to come close to our topic.[5] But Kant conceives of the evil in human nature as the will or disposition or propensity to act on maxims contrary to the moral law. This may be true, but does not really target our topic. For not all maxims that are wrong—contrary to the moral law—are *evil*, nor is the will to act on such a maxim necessarily an evil will.[6]

I just alluded to strong and obvious theological connections; a diversion from that area should be dealt with straightaway. Some theologians would claim a monopoly on dealing with evil—or, rather, would relegate evil to the province of God. Stanley Hauerwas, a professor of theological ethics, claims that 'For Christians, the proper home for the language of evil is the liturgy: it is God who deals with evil, and it's presumptuous for humans to assume that our task is to do what only God can do' [*Time*, 3 March 2003, p. 45]. It may be granted that it is 'presumptuous for humans to attempt to do *what only God can do*'—no one can argue with that; it is *impossible* for humans to do *what only God can do*—but the stipulation that only God can deal with evil is preposterous in its presumption and naïvety—and fatalism. On this account the

[5] Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (1874; 7th edition: London: Macmillan, 1907); *Essays on Ethics and Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 62, 252. Kant's discussion of 'the radical evil in human nature', in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), is mainly in Book One, chapters 1–4 (transl. by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, 1934; Harper Torchbooks, 1960) pp. 15–49. There is also some discussion of evil in the posthumous *Lectures on Ethics*, available in definitive form in the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, ed. by Peter Heath and J. B. Schneewind, translated by Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and in *The Metaphysics of Morals,* transl. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[6] This distinction is, oddly enough, highlighted in a cartoon in which an attorney says to the judge: 'Your Honor, may I point out to the court that my client pleaded guilty to wrongdoing but not evildoing' (Arnie Levin, *The New Yorker*, 17 December 2001, p. 76.)

Nuremberg War Crimes Trials would be put out of court as 'presumptuous', as would the relief of Kosovo and Bosnia. God did not prevent or put a halt to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, nor did humans, but humans, acting through The United Nations, were alerted to it, could have prevented it, and certainly should have. God did not prevent or put a halt to the Holocaust. Neither did humans prevent it, but humans, in the guise of the Allied armies, put a halt to it and publicized it for all the world to see (and incidentally and unwittingly generated the new profession of Holocaust-denial for fanatic racists).

The overgeneralized usage mentioned before is also reflected in philosophical works which would appear from their titles to be explicitly about evil. Hastings Rashdall's treatise *The Theory of Good and Evil* (1907), a thorough and illuminating work on standard topics in ethics, has absolutely nothing to say about evil as such; 'evil' is used in the title merely as a euphonious surrogate for the opposite of 'good'. *On the Knowledge of Good and Evil*, by Philip Blair Rice (1955), also has nothing to say about evil as such, discusses it not at all. *Good and Evil: A New Direction*, by Richard Taylor (1970), also throws no light on the concept of evil, provides no new direction. John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* uses 'evil' in this same overgeneralized way, and, despite its readability—and also despite its catchy title —, provides no insight into the concept of evil, evil as such. Josiah Royce's *Studies of Good and Evil* (1898) might be thought to be an exception, but Royce merely glances at the topic of evil itself, for the most part conceives of evil in the sense in which it is the opposite of morally good. The explanation of this phenomenon has already been provided.

Another philosophical work similarly entitled is *Patterns of Good and Evil,* by D. W. Gotshalk (1963), who says something about evil worth some notice:

> If good is value realization, evil is value destruction, and patterns such as murder wherein activity is value destructive are prime illustrations of evil. Yet, it seems, no human act is pure evil. Ordinarily the murderer ... aims at what he thinks is some good, such as revenge, wanton blood-letting, a 'thrill'. Moreover, what he does, indeed any evil, can be instructive of what evil is.[7]

[7] Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1907; 2nd edn, 1924); Philip Blair Rice, *On the Knowledge of Good and Evil* (New York: Random House, 1955); Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil: A New Direction* (New York: Macmillan, 1970). John Berendt, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (New York:

This last point may appear to be profound; in reality it is not. On this view, there was some merit in the Holocaust, or in the Rwanda massacre of 1994, because it was 'instructive of what evil is', and on the same precarious ground some merit in the other cases shortly to be described. But the point is almost self-refuting. On this view, even Satan, the paradigm of pure evil, is good to some extent. This would amuse Satan immeasurably, but that is no good reason for believing it. It is evident, in any case, that Gotshalk is thinking of ordinary wrong or bad actions, of evil in the sense in which 'evil' is the antithesis of 'good', and not of *evil* as such.

So much for what evil—evil itself—is not; I turn now to what it is. My initial stimulus was provided by two books that appeared only a few years ago: *Evil: Inside Human Cruelty and Violence,* by Roy Baumeister, a social psychologist, and *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil*, by Ron Rosenbaum, a journalist. Since then the events of 9/11/01 have generated a flurry of philosophical interest in evil, which I merely allude to without further discussion.[8]

II

The concept of evil applies to persons, to intentions, to motives, to conduct, and to organizations, institutions, practices, arrangements,

[8] Roy Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Cruelty and Violence* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1997); Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil* (New York: Random House, 1998). Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) a valuable recent contribution to this topic, presents a view of evil quite different from mine. The April 2002 issue of *The Monist* (vol. 85, no. 2) is devoted to discussions of evil and the Winter 2003 issue of *Hypatia* (vol. 18, no. 1), is a special issue on 'Feminist Philosophy and the Problem of Evil'. There is an interesting review of Baumeister by Leonard Berkowitz in *Contemporary Psychology* 43 (May 1998): 317 ff.; Berkowitz has a more extensive discussion of the subject in 'Evil is More Than Banal: Situationism and the Conception of Evil', *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3 (1999): 246–53.

Random House, 1994), is called a 'nonfiction novel'. Josiah Royce, *Studies of Good and Evil* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1898, 1906); cf. chap. 4, 'The Knowledge of Good and Evil', pp. 89–124 (reprinted from *International Journal of Ethics* 4 (1893). D. W. Gotshalk, *Patterns of Good and Evil: A Value Analysis* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1963), p. 96; the optimism of Gotshalk's remark is simply baffling; it amounts to saying that every cloud has a silver lining—even a tornado cloud and the mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb explosion.

programmes, agencies, endeavours, and situations. Thus, 'It is evil to torture someone for pleasure'; 'The Holocaust was evil'; 'Genocide is evil'; 'Slavery is evil'; 'Racism is evil'; 'Hitler was evil'. These statements all make sense, and they are all true.

The term 'evil' is the worst term of opprobrium that can be applied to a human being. And the concept, in my conception of it, applies primarily to persons and organizations, secondarily to conduct and practices. Evil deeds must flow from evil motives, the volition to do something evil, by which I mean something horrendously bad. One cannot do something evil by accident or through thoughtlessness. Through accident or misadventure one can do something wrong or bad, even terrible, but not something evil. So when we say that someone did something evil, we are saying something about that person, that person's motives and consequently about that person's character. (I am not saying that someone who did something evil, and who therefore acted on an evil motive or with an evil intention, is necessarily an evil person. The judgment of a person as a whole requires a complicated judgment ranging over a whole life, depends on many complicated factors.)

This, obviously, is not a view that is universally accepted, and it may not even be widely accepted. A striking example of the opposing view, that evil actions do not necessarily flow from evil motives, has been presented by Daniel Haybron, who says: 'If we ascribe evil incorrectly, particularly as we are wont to, then we shall fail to understand why evil-doing occurs; most evil actions are not the product of evil people ... the connection between evil-doing and evil character is much lower than most writers suppose'. Haybron says further: 'the conflation of evil persons with evil-doers may lead us to punish the latter far out of proportion to the severity of their crimes or the turpitude of their characters'. This is true, but seems to me another example of the inflation—and hence misuse—of the term 'evil'. In any event, no reasonable penal system punishes a person for 'evil-doing', but rather for the proved commission of crimes, though the severity of the crime may lead to more severe sentencing. Obviously, Haybron and I have different conceptions of evil. I should say that an action, though very very bad, even terrible or horrendous, and of the sort that Haybron would label 'evil', is not evil if the resulting harm is not intended or reasonably foreseeable by the agent.[9]

Evil is something over and above ordinary badness. When we say that someone is evil or did something evil, if we are careful about

[9] Daniel Haybron, 'Moral Monsters and Saints', *Monist* 85 (2), April 2002, p. 279.

what we are saying, we are saying something of great moment, something beyond saying that someone is bad, or even mean malicious and vicious (though the latter come close). *If* we are careful about what we are saying ...

But people are not always careful about what they say, and often use the term 'evil', instead of 'wrong' or 'bad', emotively, for emphasis, to express strong feelings of revulsion and disapproval. Thus ordinary usage is a poor guide here, and frequency studies useless. So we must search for clear cases, cases uncontentious and clear beyond any reasonable doubt, cases such as those I am about to depict. If there are no clear cases of evil, there can be no concept of evil and no theory of evil. Examples—clear and uncontentious examples—are of the essence. That is the method I am using. I shall not judge anything or anyone evil that is not clearly and unquestionably evil, on which it is my considered judgment that there can be no reasonable doubt. Someone else might disagree with some of my examples. That is not my present concern. I am here attempting to describe the essence of the cases I regard as clear beyond doubt in order to clarify and define the concept and thus arrive at a stable conclusion about the nature of evil. The horrendous events that occurred in the twentieth century—some of which are continuing into the twenty-first, which in turn has been providing its own innovations—provide a rich field for examination. And, as should be immediately apparent, evil is not the province only of large scale actions, such as holocausts and genocides and pogroms, but occurs all around us in what we regard as civilized society.

The importance of uncontentious examples cannot be overemphasized. There are people who called President Reagan evil, as there were those who called President Roosevelt evil. And there were contemporaries of President Washington who regarded him as evil. Such loose talk merely expresses profound disapproval or distaste for certain policies and programmes, and perhaps personal hate, uses the term 'evil' in a purely emotive way. A recent statement by Grover Norquist, who has been identified as 'an excitable conservative impresario', provides another example (perhaps its only merit): 'The lefties, the takers, the coercive utopians are not stupid. They are evil. *Evil*'.[10] This is an example of the unfortunate tendency to demonize one's political opponents, which

[10] Quoted by Hendrik Hertzberg, *The New Yorker*, 11 March 2002, p. 87; the expression 'excitable conservative impresario' is Hertzberg's.

is what labelling them as 'evil' tends to do. Such ejaculations may reflect nothing more than a feeling of the moment, of frustration or anger. Nonetheless, the effect of such talk is to muddy the waters of political discourse, turning political disagreements into something like guerilla warfare, warfare with poisoned arrows. Though it may not itself be evil, it is certainly very bad, it has evil tendencies, and in some instances, if it is done deliberately and with malice aforethought, might aptly be termed wicked. Such loose talk, certainly no contribution to intelligent discourse about the nature of evil, only darkens counsel. We must be careful not to overinflate the use of this inflammatory term.

In determining the nature of evil, we are inevitably also considering wickedness, cruelty, and malevolence. These phenomena are closely related, and some philosophers have written on this topic, as I conceive of it, under the heading of 'wickedness'. I take evil as central, but an evil person is also at the same time a wicked, cruel person, and may also be malevolent, and an evil action or practice is at the same time a wicked action or practice. These other concepts are not to be neglected. At the same time, there are contexts in which 'wicked' cannot be replaced by 'evil'. Thus one can speak, playfully, of someone having a 'wicked smile' or a 'wicked sense of humour'; one could not speak playfully of an 'evil sense of humour', and an 'evil smile'—something we are all familiar with, if only from movies—would be just that, an evil smile, the smile of an evil person contemplating or reflecting on some evil. On the other side, 'evil-doers' is an expression with no 'wickedness' counterpart. So the terms are neither synonyms nor equivalent. And 'wicked' has further aberrant uses, as in 'wicked weather', 'a wicked pain', and 'a wicked day at the office'.

To say that 'evil' is the worst term of opprobrium that can be applied to a human being needs some slight qualification. For, apart from such terms as 'wicked' and 'cruel' and 'malevolent', there are other terms, such as 'monstrous', 'inhuman', 'unnatural', which are applied both to persons and their actions when their conduct goes so far beyond the bounds of what is ordinarily intelligible as to baffle understanding. A man who kidnaps a young girl and tortures her, rapes her numerous times, cuts off her hands and then abandons her to bleed slowly to death and who never feels any remorse for what he has done, is beyond any doubt evil—monstrous, inhuman, beyond the pale—'sick', some might say. But 'sick' is not a psychiatric diagnosis; it merely repeats the previous three adjectives. And the conduct is evil—monstrous, inhuman, unnatural. Often we tend to think of the person who

has done this as a monster, an inhuman monster. And this observation provides us with our first criterion: *evil acts are acts that are horrendously wrong, that cause immense suffering, and are done from an evil motive—the motive to do something horrendously wrong, causing immense suffering.* The evil motive makes the act even worse, even more horrendous.

Is the case I just described real or made up? It doesn't really matter, but it is real enough—too real, unfortunately. Here is a somewhat more formal account [taken from an Associated Press dispatch of March 1979]: In October 1978 a man named Lawrence Singleton offered to take a 15-year-old girl, Mary Vincent, from Berkeley to Los Angeles. On the way she fell asleep, and after she fell asleep he took her to a canyon in Nevada, where he beat her, threw her into the back of his pickup truck, ripped off her clothing, tied her hands, raped her several times, later dragged her from the truck, held her hands down and chopped them off with his hatchet. 'He chopped it three times. The blood was spurting all over'. She was then tossed over a guard rail, stuffed into a culvert beneath a road, and left for dead. But somehow she didn't die, somehow she survived, and she was later found, dazed and bleeding, naked with both arms chopped off below the elbows, blood streaming from them. No doubt the monster who did this hoped and thought she would bleed to death and not live to tell the tale. But she did, and then found the strength to testify against her assailant in court. Lawrence Singleton was evil; anyone who would do such a thing—who would treat another human being in this manner—is evil.

In 1998, near a small town in Texas, two men (whose names don't matter) chained James Byrd Jr. by his feet face down to the rear of a truck and dragged him, still alive, for several miles along a rough road. His arm was severed from him, his face marred almost beyond recognition, and his death preceded by monstrous almost unimaginable pain—all this simply because he was black. One of the criminals pleaded guilty and professed some remorse. There is some hope for his soul and character. Nonetheless, what he did was evil, and his intention was evil, for he fully intended to do what he did. The other perpetrator pleaded not guilty, manifested no remorse, and spit curses at the family of the victim and at black people in general. He was even more evil, evil in toto. And this Texas case was paralleled in Laramie Wyoming in October 1998 by the brutal beating and murder of Matthew Shepard, a young college student, who was repeatedly beaten with fists and gun butts, then hogtied to a fence from which he

could not free himself, and left to die in awful pain by two evil hate-filled homophobic monsters, simply because he was gay.[11]

In 1986 a man named Travis Baker, then out of work, was lured to a ranch in Texas with the promise of a job, was then beaten and tied up, repeatedly poked with an electric cattle prod, and forced to dig trenches—his own grave, he was told; he was later hand-cuffed to a tree, was constantly 'cattle prodded', while two young women sat around and watched and laughed. One of these women got a gun and shot around his feet; one of the bullets hit him in the knee and knocked him to the ground. Another man, Warren Dunn, who had been kidnapped at about the same time, was also tortured, then beaten to death, after which his body was doused with gasoline and incinerated. Travis Baker's life was saved (at least temporarily) by a coin toss. This all was lots of fun for the three men and two women involved. [AP dispatch from Kerrville, Texas, May 1986.] Now there can be no doubt about the evil manifested in this case, by all five of the defendants.

Though further cases may not throw further light on the *concept* of evil, they do demonstrate its reality. So I present two more, which have their distinctive points of difference.

Not long ago in a town in Texas, two women were kidnapped, stripped naked, and held captive—one for *nine months,* the other for about a week—with chains around their necks, in a dilapidated apartment, the walls of which were covered with pornographic pictures, and repeatedly beaten and raped. The apartment had no

[11] This event has been memorialized in a play, *The Laramie Project*, by Moises Kaufman and the Members of Tectonic Theater Project (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2001), available on a video. Given the interest this play has excited, it appears that some good has come out of this evil action after all. This point was actually made by Matthew Shepard's father, Dennis Shepard, when he said in retrospect, 'Matt's beating, hospitalization and funeral focused worldwide attention on hate. Good is coming out of evil' (p. 85). The good coming out of it, however, does not balance out the evil.

The monstrous event of 7 June 1998 in Jasper, Texas, has been definitively discussed by Dina Temple-Raston in *A Death in Texas* (New York: Holt, 2002), a superb piece of reporting and investigating, very illuminating. Her subtitle is also noteworthy: 'A Story of Race, Murder, and a Small Town's Struggle for Redemption'. The following passage is especially poignant: '"I don't think Mr King [father of Bill King, one of the perpetrators] believed Bill did it until about a week before the trial", said Sonny Cribbs months later. "Sometimes you don't have to be a racist to end up raising one. This was hard for everyone, not just Mr King, to admit."' (p. 227). One curious thing here is the qualification 'sometimes'.

running water and limited electric service. Their screams of pain and fright could be heard in neighbouring apartments, though nobody in any of those apartments raised an alarm or did anything to help, or even inquired into the matter. A neighbouring resident said, 'You could hear them women screaming all day long' (as though this was a normal everyday event in the neighbourhood). One of the women somehow managed to escape and get help. The perpetrator, Leonard Williams, was arrested, tried, and convicted. [AP Dispatch from Dallas, September 1982.] The perpetrator certainly was evil. But the neighbours, who could hear constant screams of pain and cries for help, yet did nothing—what should we say about them? In my judgment, in manifesting gross indifference to the suffering of others, suffering that was made manifest to them by the 'screaming all day long'—it would have taken no effort and cost no money to have dialed 911—if they were not evil they were at least wicked, though this judgment might shock them, since no doubt many of them were also regular church-goers and thought of themselves as good people.

Some time in 1999, a 21-year-old man named Brandon Wilson followed a 9-year-old boy into a beach restroom, came up behind the boy as he stood at a urinal, pulled back the boy's head and slashed his throat, then stabbed the boy in the back five times. In court, he said he would do it again if he had the chance. 'My whole purpose in life is to destroy your society', he said in court, 'so you should try to destroy me'. He said he wanted to die, but didn't commit suicide because, he said (and I am not making this up), *suicide would be contrary to his religion*. So he asked to be put to death. He was. [From AP dispatches of October and November 1999, from Vista, California.] On my view, Brandon Wilson should not have been granted his wish to be executed—since this was giving him what he wanted, and is thus a sort of reward for wicked conduct—but rather imprisoned for life with no chance for parole. (The death penalty is often regarded as the worst form of punishment available, but if death is what the malefactor wants it is not genuine punishment at all.)

These other terms of extreme opprobrium—'monstrous', 'inhuman', 'fiendish', 'unnatural'—all imply evil, may even be thought to go beyond evil, though I do not think so. They go beyond evil only in emphasis and expressiveness, not in meaning. They stretch our vocabularies as they stretch our imaginations, our understanding of what human beings are capable of. The *test* is that *no normal decent reasonable human being can conceive of himself (or herself) acting in such a way*. Most people can conceive of themselves as lying, steal-

ing, breaking a promise, robbing a store, hitting someone, even killing. But most people cannot conceive of themselves as treating another human being in any of these ways, certainly no normal decent civilized person can. So these terms tend to be reserved for *conduct that one cannot conceive of oneself as engaging in*—and for persons, human in form and shape and appearance, totally lacking in empathy and sympathy (though they can fake it) who engage in such conduct.

This then is the test of whether some action is evil, as distinct from wrong or bad. If an action is so horrendously bad that one cannot conceive of oneself as performing it, or conceive of any reasonably decent person as doing it, and the action is done deliberately and intentionally, in knowledge of what one is doing, then that action is evil. In order to understand evil as evil, one must already have a moral sense. And this point is not in any way circular. But here, in this context, the test of conceivability is not a logical test; I do not mean that one who cannot conceive of performing such an act would be involved in a self-contradiction in supposing it. Nor is it to the point to dream up other actions that human beings cannot conceivably perform, such as jumping over the moon or flying simply by flapping one's arms. In the criterion just mentioned, one already thinks of the action in question as wrong, and this is the context. And one can imagine oneself jumping over the moon, or flying simply by flapping one's arms. But no ordinary decent human being, possessed of normal capacities for empathy and sympathy, can imagine himself treating someone else in a way that is evil. Hence the definition: *An evil action is one so bad, so awful, so horrendous that no ordinary decent reasonable human being can conceive of himself (or herself) doing such a thing. And an evil person or organization is one who knowingly performs, wills, or orders such actions, or remains indifferent to them when performed by another in a situation where one could do something to stop or prevent them.*

The term 'evil' consequently lies at the end point of a scale of badness. Thus acts and persons are judged *mischievous* (a term usually applied to children or in a joking way to adults), *naughty, bad, mean, spiteful, cruel, vicious, malicious, wicked, malevolent, ... evil*, on an increasing scale of badness, with '*monstrous*', '*inhuman*', '*fiendish*' and '*unnatural*' perhaps going off the scale. 'Wickedness' and 'evil' are actually regarded by some writers as practically equivalent, though there are differences.

To be evil, as I have said, an act must be *horrendously* bad and must proceed from an evil intention or evil motive, a motive or intention to do evil. An evil motive or intention is a motive or

intention to do something that one knows or believes, or has reason to believe, is horrendously wrong or bad, intentionally causing immense suffering. One need not consciously apply the concept of evil to be in this category; it is enough for one to deliberately inflict pain or suffering or harm on another for the sake of doing so, or without caring.

I take it as axiomatic that it is always wrong wilfully to cause unnecessary suffering, to inflict pain for the sake of inflicting pain. Wanton cruelty, cruelty for its own sake or because one enjoys inflicting it, is always wrong, and it is more than wrong—it is evil. And one who engages in a pattern of such conduct is evil. Such a person, to be sure, might not be evil in other circumstances or in relation to other persons—his children perhaps or his mother. One of the paradoxes of evil is that a person can be evil in one set of circumstances and not in others, or evil in relation to certain other persons, but not evil in relation to others. The head of an organized crime syndicate may inflict pain on others mercilessly—may order them tortured and caused to die slowly of 'the wound of a thousand cuts'—and yet be kind to his mother, his wife and his children—a 'model family man', practising what has been called 'family values'.[12]

What is cruelty? Philip Hallie defines cruelty as 'the activity of hurting sentient beings', and adds that 'There are thinkers who hold that it is the paradigmatic example of evil'. He observes further that 'The depths of an understanding of cruelty often lie in ... an understanding of human dignity and of how one can maim without bloodshed and without localizable pain', by, for example, crushing someone's self-respect or self-esteem. This is both sound and important; the definition, however, needs some revision, for as it stands it applies to activities that hurt but are for the benefit of the being hurt, as with surgery to remove a tumour. A more precise albeit cumbersome statement would be: *cruelty* is the deliberate infliction of pain or suffering on sentient creatures, not for their benefit, but either heedlessly or for its own sake or for the amusement or benefit either of the agent or someone else. More concisely, *cruelty is the wanton infliction of pain or suffering on a sentient*

[12] Though the expression 'family values' conforms to idiom, it is seriously question-begging. There are good family values and bad; the moral task is to determine which are good and which are bad. The values in a family in which the father—the patriarch—constantly and ferociously beats his children in order to get them to conform to his ideas of value and religion, are bad. Adolf Hitler was practically the embodiment of evil, yet he was said to be a delightful conversationalist at dinner parties, and a vegetarian, especially solicitous for the welfare and comfort of animals.

creature. In any event, Hallie goes on to observe that there 'are many paradigmatic cases of cruelty, and any full treatment of evil must take serious account of cruel transactions'.[13] This is right to the point. Evil actions and evil persons are, in being evil, wilfully inflicting pain or suffering on sentient creatures, wilfully being cruel.

The Holocaust is a paradigm of evil, evil on a vast scale, so vast and so evil that it baffles understanding.[14] But there were other genocidal events in the 20th century that equal it in evil if not quite in scale and the degree of central planning, such as the mass slaughter of over a million Armenians by Turks in 1917, the brutal killing of 800,000 Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda in 1994 (the slaughter of 8,000 a day for 100 days, which the rest of the world, though it had ample intelligence of it, did nothing to prevent), the forced relocation and violent slaughter of two million Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot, the Rape of Nanking by the Japanese Army in December 1937—the vicious torture and slaughter of 300,000 Chinese civilians—which also need study and understanding, and which the world needs to be informed about, everlastingly. The Rwanda massacre, where machetes were the weapon of choice, actually murdered people at a faster pace than the Nazi Holocaust, but of course it wasn't hidden, took place in public for all the world to see, as did the Rape of Nanking.

Consider the following passage from Iris Chang's book *The Rape of Nanking*:

[13] Philip Hallie, 'Cruelty', *Encyclopedia of Ethics,* ed. by Lawrence C. and Charlotte B. Becker (New York and London: Garland, 1992), I: 229, 230, 231; (2nd edn; London and New York: Routledge, 2001), I: 360, 361, 362. Cf. Hallie's book *Cruelty* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982; revised edn of *The Paradox of Cruelty* [Wesleyan University Press, 1969]); the encyclopedia article, however, provides a sharper and more concise account. See also *Ordinary Vices*, by Judith Shklar (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), esp. chap. 1, 'Putting Cruelty First', pp. 7–44.

[14] Much has been written on the Holocaust. Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990; 2nd edn, Syracuse University Press, 2003) is a particularly valuable philosophical discussion (written, unfortunately, in a rather dense style). In his 'Reintroduction', in the 2nd edn, Lang summarizes his reasons for preferring to speak of the Nazi Genocide rather than of The Holocaust, though he recognizes that 'the chances of displacing that term are slight' (p. xii). See also the article 'The Holocaust', by Steven T. Katz, in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), vol. 4, pp. 495–9.

> The Rape of Nanking should be remembered not only for the number of people slaughtered but for the cruel manner in which many met their deaths. Chinese men were used for bayonet practice and decapitation contests. An estimated 20,000–80,000 Chinese women were raped. Many soldiers went beyond rape to disembowel women, slice off their breasts, nail them alive to walls.... Not only did live burials, castration, the carving of organs, and the roasting of people become routine, but more diabolical tortures were practiced, such as hanging people by their tongues on iron hooks or burying people to their waists and watching them get torn apart by German shepherds. So sickening was the spectacle that even the Nazis in the city were horrified, one proclaiming the massacre to be the work of 'bestial machinery'.[15]

The language typically used in describing such events is often revealing, for example, the following, from a review in a newspaper: '[*The Rape of Nanking*] is a story of such *crime* and *horror* as to be almost unbelievable, the story of the *depredations* of a horde of *degraded criminals* of *incredible bestiality*, on a peaceful, law-abiding people'.[16] The terms emphasized are expressive of horror and revulsion, yet this expressive character does not prevent them from being descriptive, nor does it prevent the statement in which they appear from being true. It is.[17]

[15] Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 8. Raymond Lamont-Brown, in *Kamikaze: Japan's Suicide Samurai* (1997; London: Cassell, 1999), refers in passing to 'such outrages as the "1937 Rape of Nanking" where, on 13 December 1937, *Taisho* (General) Iwane Matsui, Commander-in-Chief of the Central China Area Army, unleashed his forces to slaughter and maim about 300,000 Chinese' (p. 12). As I mentioned in the text, the Rape of Nanking wasn't hidden; it was fully reported in *The New York Times* and other papers. (Chang, pp. 144-6.) The world at the time simply wasn't interested, perhaps because it was Orientals who were being tortured and slaughtered by other Orientals. On the other hand, it is not in the least evident what could have been done to stop it. Cf. *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*, by William L. Shirer (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), esp. pp. 663–5, 967–74; and Shirer's *A Native's Return 1945–1988* (Boston, Toronto, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), pp. 26–31.

[16] George Fitch, quoted in *The Capital Times* (of Madison Wisconsin), 30 October 1998, 11A, emphasis added. The source is unimportant; what matters is the thing said.

[17] Barbara Kirwin, a forensic psychologist, in *The Mad, The Bad, and The Innocent: The Criminal Mind on Trial* (Boston: Little, Brown and

There are numerous evil persons and evil-doers in literature, and in literature, as distinct from life, it is often possible to be clearer on the motives and intentions of the evil-doer. Indeed, in literature one can often be certain of the motives. Iago might head such a list—if only because of the fame of Shakespeare—and the list could grow extremely long. Consider how Iago is described in a precis of the play: 'Othello ... unconsciously evokes *the spirit of evil* in *the villainous Iago* ... by choosing as his lieutenant ... Michael Cassio. Partly to be avenged for this slight but principally *because of a satanic delight in doing evil to feed his own wicked pleasure* ... Iago ...'[18] Another character deserving of a place on the list appears in *David Copperfield*—Mr. Murdstone, along with his sister, Miss Murdstone. And the fortunate readers of *Kai Lung's Golden Hours* will remember 'the malignity of the depraved Ming-Shu', evil if anyone was, who had a great capacity for dreaming up excruciating ways of extending painful tortures without terminating the life of the victim prematurely.[19] Iago comes across as real, not as a mere creature in fiction, and so do the Murdstones and Ming-Shu. As

[18] Homer A. Watt, Karl J. Holzknecht, and Raymond Ross, *Outlines of Shakespeare's Plays* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1941), pp. 166-7, italics added. The authors actually use some of Shakespeare's language in describing Iago: 'outwardly "a man ... of humanity and trust", but actually a ... villain without conscience; a "viper", an "inhuman dog", of cold, egoistic ... evil' (p. 166).

[19] Ernest Bramah, *Kai Lung's Golden Hours* (1922; London: Jonathan Cape, 1926); the quotation is the title of chapter 1 of Bramah's *Kai Lung Unrolls His Mat* (London: The Richards Press, 1928).

Company, 1977; New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1997), claims that 'There is no doubt ... that the notorious serial killers Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer were both psychopaths. They were not crazy; they were evil' (p. 25, Harper edn); and that 'To equate evil with madness is tantamount to the medieval thinking that saw mental illness as demonic possession' (p. 95). She does not define evil, though we can infer that 'psychopathic criminals—who, though basically lacking a conscience, are *able* to conform their conduct to the law but *choose* not to ...' (p. 24) are evil. The distinction between psychosis and psychopathy is made explicit by Jonathan Kellerman in *Savage Spawn: Reflections on Violent Children* (New York: Ballantine, 1999). Kellerman argues that criminal psychopaths are not psychotic or mentally ill, even though psychiatrists are trained to conceive of them under the category of mental illness. They are human beings who lack any sense of right and wrong, have no capacity for empathy or sympathy, are incapable of feeling remorse or even understanding what it is, though they can act as though they do.

does Rhoda Penmark, the psychopathic girl in William March's novel *The Bad Seed*. Mr Hyde, in Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, is intended to be evil, pure evil—that is how he is regarded by those who have observed him, though the reader is not really informed of the extent of his evil—but it is at least an open question whether Dr. Jekyll, who is regarded as good, in deliberately creating and drinking the potion that turns him into Mr. Hyde, is not evil as well, supposing there is any sustainable distinction between Jekyll and Hyde.[20]

III

I turn now to consider the account of evil presented by Roy Baumeister, who observes that 'to explain the causes and processes of evil, it is sufficient to identify the main, prototypical cases' (cited note 8 *supra*; p. 8). Baumeister is quite right on the importance of demarcating the 'main, prototypical cases'. The problem is that he defines 'evil as intentional interpersonal harm', says that 'the prototypes of human evil involve actions that intentionally harm other people'. Although this definition demarcates the subject Baumeister is interested in, it does little to throw light on the nature of *evil*, as distinct from what is morally wrong or bad. It is true that 'evil involves actions that intentionally harm other people', but evil, so conceived, is indistinguishable from cruelty or ordinary wrongdoing. Nor does this definition, taken by itself, distinguish an intentional action that causes harm to another from an intentional action that causes harm to another and is motivated by that intention. In fairness, it should be mentioned that Baumeister is deliberately avoiding focusing on what he calls 'the grandiosity of the term *evil*'. He tells us that his discussion is 'not restricted to great crimes and horrendous events'. 'It is also important', he says, 'to understand the petty cruelties and minor transgressions of everyday life, at least insofar as they involve deliberate interpersonal harm'.

I should not deny the importance of 'understanding the petty cruelties and minor transgressions of ordinary life'. But for under-

[20] William March, *The Bad Seed* (New York: Rinehart, 1954); Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (London, 1886); Eric T. Olson, 'Was Jekyll Hyde?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66(2), March 2003: 328–48, is a discussion of this very question. A reviewer for *The Atlantic Monthly* characterized *The Bad Seed* as '... an impeccable tale of pure evil ...'; the nature of 'pure evil' is left for the reader to discern.

standing the nature of evil as such, which takes us a distance from the 'petty cruelties and minor transgressions of everyday life', we must focus on 'the grandiosity of the term evil' and consider cases of different kinds. For distinctively philosophical purposes, it is essential to aim at understanding the nature of evil when evil is understood as approaching or involving 'the monstrous'—wickedness, not evil understood merely as the antithesis of good, but evil understood as the end term of a series of negative appraisal terms. And for this we must make further and more difficult distinctions, and we must also distinguish gradations of evil. The term 'evil' is already inflated enough; inquiry into its nature, causes, surrounding conditions, and effects ought not to inflate it further.

Baumeister certainly deserves great credit for dealing explicitly with this subject and not submerging it under the false cover of mental illness, and thus bringing evil into the area of psychological investigation, but along with his attenuated conception of evil, he has also an attenuated conception of the 'four major root causes of evil', which he lists as 'the simple desire for material gain', 'threatened egotism', 'idealism', and 'the pursuit of sadistic pleasure' (pp. 576–7). His account deserves careful consideration, but only the last item—'the pursuit of sadistic pleasure'—is, as it stands, a cause of evil as such.

IV

A tradition going back to the beginnings of Western philosophy maintains that no one can do something wrong because it is wrong, that no one can do evil for the sake of doing evil, that an agent in acting must conceive of the action as good. After Socrates and Aristotle probably the most famous exemplar of this view is Kant. But it is not really necessary for one to regard everything one wants as good, no absolute bar to supposing that we occasionally want things we judge to be bad. We are all familiar with the conflict between desire and prudence. I can recognize that I have wants I ought not to have, that I ought not to act on, that it would not be good to satisfy, that it would be better not to have. Examples are numerous; think of anything you feel tempted to do or eat or drink, when you realize you shouldn't. Or, if you are someone fortunate enough not to be troubled by temptation, think of drug addiction, of which addiction to tobacco is just one kind. It is, clearly, just false that everyone conceives of everything they want as good. And there are some philosophers who have insisted that it is possible for

people to do evil knowing that it is evil. Most prominently, Felix Adler: 'many a man has done ... evil, and done it most deliberately, knowing evil as evil'.[21] On this matter I think Adler, who had a considerable amount of 'real-world' experience, is right, and that the moral psychology of those who deny this possibility is faulty, needs radical revision. It is not self-contradictory to say that I want to attain something, but do not regard my attaining it as good.

But, though Adler claimed that people can do evil knowing it to be evil, he did not take the further step of maintaining that people can do evil *because* it is evil. That is a drastic move, but one it is essential to take if we are to have an accurate and adequate account of evil. Such a motive may be conceived of as Satanic. Thus, one who says, 'Evil, be thou my good' is saying (apart from the paradoxical implication) 'Evil, be thou my aim (my end, my purpose).' The saying derives its force from the standard—though not necessary—presupposition that people generally regard their aims or ends or purposes as good while the saying seems to run counter to this presupposition. Human beings cannot transform evil into good, though they may be able to persuade themselves that their evil purposes are good. To be sure, evil can be their aim, their purpose, their goal, and in this sense, their 'good'.[22]

Kant conceived of the Good Will as the settled disposition to do what is morally right simply because it is right. But, even though Kant could not conceive of it, denied its possibility, it is nonetheless logically possible to do what is wrong because it is wrong, because one wants to do what is wrong; in Kantian language, to act contrary to the moral law *because* it is contrary to the moral law. This is *malevolence*—the Bad or Evil Will. And if there is benevolence, the doing or willing of good for its own sake, then there logically can be

[21] Felix Adler, *An Ethical Philosophy of Life* (New York: D. Appleton, 1919), p. 172. Adler continues: 'Remember the career of a Caesar Borgia, the extermination of the Caribbean Indians by the Spaniards, the outrages on women perpetrated during the present war, the exploitation of human labour practiced on a large scale among the civilized nations. That the blackest crimes may be committed with a full knowledge of the horrible consequences to the victims seems hardly to admit of doubt. Evil is known as evil'. (Cf. pp. 180 and 327.)

[22] What I have referred to as a 'saying' is of course a line from a poem, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, bk. 4, l. 108: 'So farewell hope, and, with hope, farewell fear, / Farewell remorse: all good to me is lost, / Evil, be thou my Good.' The speaker is Satan, hence this aim is Satanic. (I have here incorporated some passages from my 'Gewirth, Beyleveld, and Dialectical Necessity', *Ratio Juris* 13(2), June 2000, p. 190.)

malevolence, the doing or willing of what is bad for its own sake. *This is what evil, in its most extreme or malignant form, consists in.*

Kant claimed that such a being would be a demon, not a human being. It would be more accurate to say that such a being would be a demon, not a decent human being. Such a being, however, can be biologically a human being, and we can see the upshot of such a claim in our tendency to regard such a being as 'monstrous', 'inhuman', 'unnatural', 'a fiend', 'a demon'. But to make such a claim is to make a moral judgment, not a biological one.

V

John Kekes has defined evil as 'serious unjustified harm inflicted on sentient beings'.[23] But, as is true of similar definitions, this does nothing to distinguish evil actions from wrong or bad or terrible ones. I mention only in passing that, interpreted precisely, this definition implies that it is the harm inflicted that is evil, not the person or the action causing the harm. Baumeister's definition of evil as 'actions that intentionally harm' others is actually closer to the mark. Kekes's account does specify one necessary condition for something being evil—namely, that it inflicts 'serious unjustified harm on sentient beings'. That, however, is not all that is necessary. This difference derives in part from his view that 'the primary subjects to which moral evil ... may be ascribed are human actions. Intentions, agents, and institutions may also be evil, but only in a derivative sense'. In my judgment the truth is quite the opposite; an action that inflicts 'serious unjustified harm on sentient beings' is not evil apart from an agent, whose action it is, and apart from the intentions of that agent. Otherwise it is not evil, it is rather misfortune, misadventure, or calamity. If it is evil, it is because of the intentions of the agent, and it is then these intentions and motives that are evil. I agree that 'evil actions are widespread, and ... are responsible for much suffering'. To be sure, on Kekes's view of the nature of evil, on which telling a lie which 'inflicts serious unjustified harm' on a sentient being is an instance of evil, evil actions would be very very widespread. Evil as such, though widespread, is happily not as widespread as that. On my view, persons and motives are at the core, and it is actions that are evil 'only in a derivative sense'. Thus, telling a lie which 'inflicts serious unjustified harm on

[23] John Kekes, 'Evil', *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward Craig (ed.) (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), II: 463–6.

a sentient being', though (presumptively) wrong, and though as described it certainly has bad consequences—consequences much worse, let us suppose, than the agent intended or foresaw—nonetheless is not evil unless the agent *intended* to 'inflict serious unjustified harm'. The difference is important, and this brings out the essential nature of intentions in relation to evil.

VI

Evil acts, on the conception I am developing, are acts that are horrendously wrong, that cause immense suffering and are done with an evil intention or from an evil motive, the intention or motive to do something horrendously wrong causing immense unwarranted suffering. And malevolence, the doing or willing of what is wrong because it is wrong is what malignant evil, evil in its most extreme form, consists in. If an action is thought of as so wrong or bad that one cannot conceive of oneself as performing it, or conceive of any reasonably decent person as doing it, then that action is evil.

Now there are at least six degrees or gradations of evil to be distinguished: of those who do something evil (or horrendously wrong), it must be determined whether they do it —

(a) knowing it to be evil, and *because* it is evil, or
(b) knowing it to be evil, but not caring, or
(c) judging it to be evil if inflicted on them or on people they are concerned about (such as those who worship the same God or are members of the same tribe), but not regarding it as evil if it is inflicted on others, or inflicted by themselves, or
(d) knowing it to be evil, but for other reasons, such as their own convenience, or
(but these next two categories do not really fit under the concept of evil, though they may appear to),
(e) knowing it to be 'evil', or at least bad, but, in the light of a fair and full consideration of all the factors reasonably knowable, for the sake of some greater good to be achieved, or
(f) not believing it to be evil, but judging it to be good.

Pure evil, malignant evil, is defined primarily by case (a), secondarily by case (b). Case (a) is ultimate, pure, *unalloyed*, extreme evil, more evil than case (b). Case (b) might be characterized as *ruthless evil*, cases (b) and (d) as *criminal evil*. Case (c) exemplifies *fanatical evil* (such as practiced by the Taliban in Afghanistan or other religious or racist fanatics). Case (d) also exemplifies evil, but derivatively

and secondarily; this is *egoistic evil*; in some instances case (c) also manifests *egoistic evil*. Cases (e) and (f), as I have said, do not really involve or exemplify evil at all—and therefore should be removed from the list, because for an action to be justifiably judged evil, it must be a clear case of evil.

In actual practice, these points would be practically impossible to make out with certainty, given that motives, even our own, are so devilishly difficult to ascertain and to be certain of. Thus, I cannot see any way to *prove* that some action is an instance of malignant evil, or that some individual is malignantly evil, but we can have reasonable belief some distance from proof. And the difficulty of being certain about which of these alternatives applies in any particular case, though it is part of the source of the denial of the possibility of malignant evil, is not a sufficient reason for denying that malignant evil is possible. It is possible, whether or not anyone has ever acted malignantly. The distinctions mentioned provide a basis for distinguishing degrees of evil; whether we can ever be certain which form of evil is manifested in instances of evil is another question, largely a question of fact, not of moral philosophy.

VII

I turn now to consider the conception of evil presented by Ron Rosenbaum in his book *Explaining Hitler*. Rosenbaum is haunted by the question 'Do we have to redefine our conventional, centuries-old notions of evil to take into account the nature of Hitler; or do we have to redefine our notion of Hitler to account for him in terms of our previous notions of evil?'. I see no need for *redefinition* of either our idea of evil or our idea of Hitler, but this question was generated for Rosenbaum by his preconceived view that Hitler and Hitler's evil are unique and unprecedented. Still, Rosenbaum tells us that he had a frustrating search for a philosopher who would take the question seriously, though he

> ultimately ... did find one philosopher who did not beg the question, did not claim it to be irrelevant or impossible to pursue, who did not claim to have a final answer, but who wrestled with it with what I thought was scrupulous honesty, and who seemed to be suggesting a provocative new way of answering it.

Rosenbaum is here referring to Berel Lang, whom he describes as making

> a leap in his argument that few philosophers and historians have been willing to make. The leap from saying that the perpetrators of the Final Solution did evil despite knowing it was wrong, to the suggestion that they did it *because* it was wrong.[24]

Many philosophers', Rosenbaum continues, 'question whether this degree of evil, this kind of person, exists at all, *outside of literature...*'.[25] This is unquestionably true, and I have already explored the reason for this reluctance. The reason so many have such difficulty with the idea of doing something *because it is evil* is that it seems to them, on the basis of a philosophical preconception tracing back to Socrates, impossible for someone to do something because it is wrong. To say such a thing runs counter to one of the most well embedded tenets of philosophical psychology, that 'every art and every activity', to paraphrase Aristotle, 'aims at some good'. So the reference to works of literature misses the point. *If* it is *impossible* to do something *because* it is wrong, that would be as true in literature as it would be elsewhere. But it is not self-contradictory, hence not impossible. It is certainly unusual—a good thing, for evil is common enough as it is—but not logically impossible.

Rosenbaum observes that 'even Iago offers a kind of explanation, feels he needs to excuse his evil-doing', despite rubbing his 'hands

[24] Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler* (cited *supra,* note 8), p. 208, reporting on an interview with Berel Lang. Rosenbaum's book, something of a tour-de-force, is a tremendous job of research and interpretation, but it is not so much an attempt at 'explaining Hitler' as 'explaining explaining Hitler', thus more like 'metaexplaining Hitler', since it concentrates on discussing the myriad—and mutually incompatible—attempts to explain Hitler that had appeared up to that time.

[25] Ibid, p. 214, emphasis added. Rosenbaum says that Lang's distinctive contribution to the topic consists in developing the 'notion of evil as an art, the art of evil'. The idea is fascinating, deserves discussion on its own. (Cf. Lang's *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*, cited *supra* note 14; the idea of 'evil as an art' is not developed in it, but it is approximated to.) There is an analogy here to what Alex Ross has called 'the morally inane comments of Karlheinz Stockhausen, who called the destruction of the World Trade Center a Luciferian masterpiece—"the greatest work of art imaginable"' (*New Yorker*, 8 October 2001, p. 80). A twisted view if there ever was one, characteristic of a moral idiot. On the other hand, if one abstracts from the destruction, the killing and the wounding and the human misery entailed, and just observes the event on a screen as something disembodied, it may be thought to have a certain beauty. Perhaps this is an example of 'the art of evil'. Evil can be addictive, another factor adding to its insidiousness.

in glee over the evil [he] design[s]'. 'But still', Rosenbaum adds, '*he's fictional*'. This, as I already said, misses the point. The claim that one cannot do evil because it is evil is not maintained as an empirically ascertained law of nature. If it were an empirical matter, to say 'still, he's fictional' would have some point. This is, rather, a conceptual matter; it is held to be impossible, and even the best drawn fictional account would run into this difficulty. If it is impossible, because self-contradictory—*If*—, then it would be as impossible in fiction as in real life.

VIII

I turn now to wickedness, which some philosophers have concentrated on in lieu of analysing evil, even though the two topics are intrinsically related. The sense of 'evil' in which 'evil' is used as the antithesis of 'good', so common and with all the force of religion and tradition behind it, might possibly explain this; 'wickedness' seems much less ambiguous. Stanley Benn defines wickedness as 'whatever it is about someone that warrants our calling him a wicked person', and says that therefore wickedness

> is a different notion from what makes an action an evil deed, for an evil deed may be done by someone who is not evil but only weak or misguided. Neither is every wrongdoer evil, for one may do wrong with good intentions ... [26]

But neither is every wrongdoer wicked. Every adult human being has done something wrong at some time or other; and some, of course, especially those with a defective moral sense, do wrong with greater than ordinary frequency. Ordinary wrongs, however—to repeat what I have said before—do not rise high enough. On the

[26] Stanley Benn, 'Wickedness', *Ethics* 95 (July 1985): 795-810, at p. 796. Benn distinguishes different forms of wickedness, which he labels *self-centered* wickedness, *psychopathic* wickedness, *conscientious* wickedness, *heteronomous* wickedness, and *malignant* wickedness. I have made use herein of his discussion of the latter, and have adopted his term 'malignity' (pp. 805–9). Malignant wickedness is evil done in full knowledge that it is evil and because it is evil, and this is what I take malignant evil, unalloyed evil, to be. Benn also refers to it as 'unalloyed wickedness', and argues effectively that it is not impossible for someone to do something for the reason that it is wicked or evil. On wickedness, cf. Mary Midgley, *Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay* (London and New York: Routledge, 1984).

view I am advancing no one can commit an evil action by accident or misadventure or unintentionally, and evil is primarily a characteristic of persons, secondarily of deeds and practices. Benn's view does not appear to supply any ready way of distinguishing an evil deed from a wrong action. It may be that we are using the terms 'wickedness' and 'evil' almost interchangeably; almost, but not quite, for Benn, in his explanation of wickedness, especially the unalloyed wickedness he calls 'malignant wickedness', defines it in terms of evil.

Benn, however, conceives of wickedness as Kant conceived of evil, as 'willing to act on a maxim that one cannot will to be universal law'. He says: 'Common ... to both wickedness in action and wickedness in attitude is an evil maxim, in something like Kant's sense.... A person may be wicked because the maxims that order his life are, by and large, evil maxims, that is, maxims that no one ought to act on at all'. And 'a person may act on an evil maxim, knowing it to be so' (p. 796). But, to repeat, the problem with Kant's conception of evil is that it provides no way of distinguishing wrong maxims or actions from evil ones.

Consider now Benn's view from another angle. By parallel reasoning, one could define 'evil' as 'whatever it is about someone that warrants our calling him an evil person', and add that therefore evil 'is a different notion from what makes an action a wicked deed, for a wicked deed may be done by someone who is not wicked but only weak or misguided. Neither is every wrong-doer wicked, for one may do wrong with good intentions'. This last point should be evident with respect to both evil and wickedness, and I actually can see no ground for the distinction Benn has drawn between evil and wickedness. The Holocaust was not merely wicked; it was evil. Hitler was not merely wicked—'wicked' is hardly adequate in application to Hitler —; he was evil. Satan—whom we all have a conception of—is the paradigm of evil—'wickedness' is too tame a term.

Moreover, Benn's definition prevents him from saying of institutions and laws and organizations that they are wicked, for he defines wickedness as an attribute of persons, an odd and undefended restriction. But clearly it is not only persons who are evil or wicked. So are institutions, laws, organizations, agendas, endeavors, and corporations—such as slavery and racism, Murder Incorporated and the Mafia, the Nazi Party and the Taliban. (It would not be hard, however, to emend Benn's definition by extending it beyond persons.)

One of the many merits of Benn's discussion is his clear recognition that it is not the case that everyone conceives of what he or she

wants as good. As Benn says, 'if one aims at an outcome then, in a rather weak sense, one must desire it; but it is not, even for the person desiring it, necessarily desirable on that account'. As he further observes, 'A malignant person recognizes the suffering of someone else as an evil and rejoices in it just because it is evil' (p. 807).

Some writers distinguish between wickedness and evil by construing 'wickedness' as characterizing persons and 'evil' as characterizing deeds, as in 'wicked persons' and 'evil deeds' (which would rule out speaking of 'evil persons' and 'wicked deeds'). This apparently is what Benn is doing. Though I think I understand the motive for such a distinction, I can see no justification for it, in either usage or theory. Rosenbaum, discussed previously, seems to think that 'wickedness' is 'the stricter term'; thus he says that some philosophers prefer 'the stricter term "wickedness" to describe wrongdoers who do evil deeds *knowing* they are doing wrong' (p. xxii); this after reflecting on what he describes as 'the difficulty ... in defining what evil is, despite an intuitive sense that it exists ...' (p. xxi). This may sound odd, but Rosenbaum's problem is deciding whether Hitler 'did evil knowing it was evil', a problem generated not only by the difficulty in knowing beyond a doubt what Hitler's motives were, but also by the conceptual roadblock I have just been dismissing.[27]

IX

The horrific events of the twentieth century, epitomized but not wholly summarized by the Holocaust, apparently could not even have been imagined in the previous century. This is indicated by the following remark by John Grote, Sidgwick's teacher at Cambridge:

[27] For all his sophistication, Rosenbaum does exhibit some naïvety in being surprised that, as he puts it, 'even an atheist [can] have little hesitation in using the word "evil"' (p. xxi), a consequence no doubt of what I have called 'obvious theological connections'. Susan Sontag, in *Illness as Metaphor*, claims that 'we have a sense of evil but no longer the religious or philosophical language to talk intelligently about evil. Trying to comprehend "radical" or "absolute" evil, we search for adequate metaphors' (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 85. Sontag was writing about illness—primarily syphilis, tuberculosis, and cancer—and not about Hitler and Genocide; nonetheless, although this claim is intriguing, I regard it as philosophically naïve. On the other hand, at the time she wrote her book philosophical discussions of evil had not yet emerged from the Dark Ages. Still, if she had ventured, she might have discovered the requisite language herself. It has been available all along.

> The notion of an organization adapted to produce evil or pain is an entire incongruity or impossibility in the conception, serving to bring into relief before us, through contrast, the nature of organization and order.[28]

Thus John Grote—and no doubt his entire generation of ecclesiastics and intellectuals—could not have conceived of the Nazi Genocide or of anything like it. It would have been 'an entire incongruity or *impossibility in the conception*'—meaning inconceivable. Yet Grote displayed some hint of this knowledge when he said: 'It appears ... that there may be pure and intense hatred or *ill-will entirely disinterested as regards the future*, but not entirely disinterested as regards the past, i. e., not uncaused by some feeling akin to injuredness' (p. 261, emphasis added).

Abstracting from Grote's disclaimer 'as regards the past', we can see that he is admitting the possibility of pure malevolence, pure '*ill-will entirely disinterested as regards the future*'.

If even John Grote could admit the possibility of disinterested and pure malevolence—that is, of evil for evil's sake—, there is even more imperative need to understand evil, to get clear on the genuine moral and social problems of wickedness or moral evil in the world—evil motives, evil people, evil actions, evil regimes, evil endeavours, evil agencies, evil organizations, evil practices, and evil institutions. There are many problems of evil, not just one.

So I return to the point of the beginning, by quoting again Dr. Robert Simon, this time on events that took place in Argentina, during the Repression:

> During the Argentine terror, torturers placed live rats inside a tube plugged at one end and inserted the open end into a victim's anus or vagina. The rats tore away the victims' internal organs and killed them. Were the perpetrators of such horrific acts sadistic psychopaths? Assuredly they were, but it is also certain that their acts were facilitated and condoned by an infrastructure of compliant supporters whom psychiatric evaluation would in all likelihood have diagnosed as normal. For every paid sadistic torturer, there were numerous 'administrators' who participated in the killings by answering telephones, keeping records, driving cars, and performing other day-to-day tasks so that the business of torture and evisceration could go on—just a regular part of an

[28] John Grote, *Treatise on the Moral Ideals*, edited by J. B. Mayor (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell and Co., 1876), p. 517. Grote died in 1866, and this book, incomplete and in some disarray at the time of his death, was prepared for publication posthumously.

> administrator's ordinary day at the office. The unmistakable lesson is that ordinary, 'good' people, devoted to their families, their religion, and their country, are capable of inflicting horrible harm on those whom they dehumanize and demonize (p. 25).[29]

There is little doubt that these 'compliant supporters', these 'administrators', whom 'psychiatric evaluation would have diagnosed as normal', would have appeared as banal to such an astute observer as Hannah Arendt. But in dealing with this topic we should not be misled by appearance—we need to get at the reality. A knowing accessory to a crime is also a criminal. A knowing accessory to evil is also evil.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt said, in a remark that has become famous: 'It was as though ... [Eichmann] was summing up the lessons that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil'.[30] I take it that Arendt is trying to make the point that evil presented in such banal guise is even worse than when presented in all its horror: 'the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil'—though it would have been better if this point had been made directly, obviating the need for guessing. But evil as such is not banal—though Eichmann, a mere functionary, someone who treated himself as 'a utensil', may have appeared so—and it is not clear that Arendt meant to assert a claim so sweeping, and so startling. On the other hand, it is not clear that she didn't. Still, it is true that evil when presented in this remote

[29] 'The Terror' is an apt appellation, akin to 'The Reign of Terror', which refers to the terror prevailing in France from early 1793 to mid-1794. Since then there have been other reigns of terror, some lasting for a shorter period of time—Rwanda —, others lasting a lifetime. One who wants more detail on the Argentine Terror can find it, in all its horror—unexplained kidnappings and disappearances, wanton torture by indiscriminate beatings, brutal incarceration in cells in which one could neither stand up nor lie down nor comfortably sit, and the application of electric prods to the genitals (to mention just some of the devices used)—described in Jacobo Timerman's remarkable book *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981). Timerman observed it—experienced it—and was enabled to survive to write about it. Similar atrocities were carried out at about the same time in Chile, under the murderous regime of General Pinochet.

[30] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), p. 231. Cf. the following: 'Apparently some quirk in human nature allows even the most unspeakable acts of evil to become banal within minutes, provided only that they occur far enough away to pose no personal threat' (Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, p. 221).

banal form is 'fearsome and word-and-thought-defying'. Eichmann did not appear in the witness box with blood and gore dripping from his hands, and he remained self-possessed throughout the trial. What if Dr. Mengele had been captured and brought to trial? Would he also have generated thoughts of the 'banality of evil'? It is possible.

It is important to recognize the reality of evil, that there are evil people who commit evil deeds, that there are other people more normal and 'banal' in appearance and visage who provide their support staff—and therefore sustain evil and make it possible, and that occasionally—indeed, too often—these persons are in positions of enormous wealth and power and influence, and can also command immense intelligence.

I see no possibility of 'eliminating evil from the face of the earth', as some have set out to do. Evil is just too embedded in the human condition, is not located in any one place, is not the sole possession of religious or racist fanatics, of Nazis or ruthless ideologues, who are prepared to exterminate whole peoples in order to achieve their goal of world domination, aiming at bringing about 'racial purity' or the 'classless society' or 'the domination of the White Race'. Evil is also generated by fear, and envy, and ignorance, and malignant hatred, and, as the Bible tells us, it is also generated by greed, and is manifested in the actions of an employer who locks large numbers of employees in a building, or locks them to their worktables, providing them with no fire escape or ready outlet in case of fire, as happened in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911—for which no one was prosecuted.

John Stuart Mill wrote of 'the great positive evils of life' [*Utilitarianism*, chap. 2, para. 14], most of which he judged to be 'in themselves removable'. As Mill presents them, they can be summed up as poverty, 'in any sense implying suffering', crime, misery, disease, and war—and, we can add, new and up-to-date devices of terrorism, with fully loaded commercial aircraft as well as biological, chemical, and nuclear devices used as weapons. And we can add further such moral aberrations as fanaticism, sadism, greed, malicious envy, gross hatred, racism, malevolent selfishness (which Mill calls 'selfish egotism'), gross and malignant indifference to the suffering of others, and enjoying or rejoicing in the pain of others. Disease is a natural evil—except when caused by biological or chemical weapons. The rest are moral evils, caused by evil actions, therefore by human beings—evil human beings—, created in the image of God, acting like Demons.[31]

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[31] I have benefited from acute comments on the first draft (1998) by Leonard Berkowitz and David Weberman, and on a later draft (1999) by

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Claudia Card. An abridged version of the present paper was presented at the Symposium in Honor of the 90th birthday of Alan Gewirth, on 10th May 2003, at the University of Chicago. The discussion was intense and illuminating, unfortunately had to be halted for reasons of time. I benefited greatly from the discussions both immediately after the paper and later that evening, have revised the text somewhat as a consequence, but have left intact for their stimulus value some of the formulations that stimulated the greatest controversy. I am happy to acknowledge the especially stimulating and helpful comments I received from Deryck Beyleveld as well as others. (But I much regret that I did not take adequate notes, and that my memory is not up to remembering the names of all those—a considerable number—who made good and valuable comments. I am grateful nonetheless, despite the enforced anonymity.)