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Barriers to Evil

ABSTRACT

In this paper I critically investigate the conceptions of moral evil defended by Morton and Card. In the light of this investigation, I present and briefly defend the following conception of evil: An evil act is one in which the perpetrator acts in a way which, through a consideration of their circumstances, motives, intentions, responses and the like, we judge to go significantly beyond the pale of mere wrongdoing and so to be worthy of our very strongest moral condemnations, and who in so acting wrongfully inflicts life-wrecking or ending harms upon others.

BIOGRAPHY

Paul Formosa is a post-graduate research student in the Philosophy Department at the University of Queensland. His thesis is on the topic of evil. Paul has had articles accepted for publication in the *Journal of Social Philosophy*, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, *Human Studies*, *Sorites* and *Crossroads*.

BARRIERS TO EVIL

Traditionally all of life's 'minuses' have been lumped together under the rubric of evil. In its broadest sense evil can cover 'everything adverse in human lives' from 'wars and massacres' to 'drought and plague.'ⁱ This is the axiological sense of evil, and it is in this sense that evil takes on its familiar role as the opposite or lack of good. Here the terms evil and bad are essentially equivalent. However, we use evil not only in an axiological sense, but also in a moral sense.ⁱⁱ We use evil in a moral sense when we refer to those acts of moral agents that are beyond the pale of *mere* wrongdoing. For example, what Hitler did was not merely wrong, it was evil, whereas failing to keep a promise may be wrong, but it certainly isn't evil. Evil acts are those acts that go significantly beyond the pale of mere wrongdoing, and for that reason, we judge them to be worthy of our very strongest moral condemnations.

It follows from this that all moral evils are wrong, but not all moral wrongs are evil. Thus the purpose of a conception of evil is to separate out moral evil from the merely wrong. There are three ways that this can be done – either it is something about the *perpetrator*, such as their motive, or the *victim*, such as the amount of suffering they endure, or *both*, that makes an act not merely wrong, but evil. There has been a number of recent attempts to provide a conception of evil, however, I focus here only on Mortonⁱⁱⁱ and Card^{iv} – but see also Corlett^v, Cushman^{vi}, Formosa^{vii}, Garrard^{viii}, Kekes^{ix}, Midgley^x, Singer^{xi}, and Vetlesen^{xii}. Morton^{xiii} has recently argued for the following conception of evil:

A person's act is evil when it results from a strategy or learned procedure which allows that person's deliberations over the choice of actions not to be inhibited by barriers against considering harm or humiliating others that ought to have been in place.

On Morton's conception of evil it is primarily something about the perpetrator, in particular the nature of their deliberations, that makes an act not only wrong, but evil. On this conception, if I commit a murder because someone makes me very angry, then that act is not evil, though presumably still wrong. In contrast, if I have a strategy or learned procedure for overcoming my barrier against doing violence, and I use that procedure to bring myself to commit murder, then my act is not only wrong, but evil.

Morton^{xiv} claims, drawing on Robert Blair's work on VIM (violence inhibiting mechanisms), that we are all subject to an innate biological barrier against violently doing harm to others. However, we all have a threshold limit at which we naturally overcome this barrier and pass from a peaceful to a violent mode. Of course, we all have different limits to which we can be pushed, but if pushed hard and long enough, there comes a time when we will all react, potentially violently. For some the provocation that will elicit violence needs to be very small, for others very large. We become violent and aggressive, however, not only as a natural response to provocation, but also unnaturally, as a result of learned procedures. The sort of learned procedures that Morton has in mind include things like: learning to become violent in order to get what one wants, and acquiring racist beliefs that make it easy to inflict violence against those considered racially inferior.

When we overcome a barrier against harming and humiliating others that ought to be in place, as a result of a learned procedure, then according to Morton that act is evil, even if the harm or humiliation inflicted is minimal. But which set of barriers ought to be in place? This set cannot simply be those barriers (if any) that are biologically innate to our species, because "many of the barriers that ought to be in place are learned"^{xv}. As such, given that at least some barriers that ought to be in place must be learned, it follows that it is possible (even likely) that some of those barriers that ought to be in place may not in fact be in place.

This leads to the following problem. Take the example of Hannibal, who has never learned to erect barriers against harming others. Further, Hannibal is a sociopath and, as such, is not subject to innate biological barriers against harming others. Not surprisingly, Hannibal comes to inflict much gratuitous harm upon others. Indeed, Hannibal tortures and kills scores of people, and he even comes to enjoy harming others for its own sake. But Hannibal's acts can *never* count as evil on Morton's conception, because Hannibal's acts do not result from a learned procedure for overcoming barriers against harming and humiliating others that ought to be in place. Hannibal did not need to overcome such barriers for the simple reason that no such barriers were there in the first place, and thus no method was needed for overcoming them. This implies that someone, like Hannibal, who acts in violation of barriers that ought to be in place, but where those barriers are not in fact in place, can literally do no evil. This is deeply counter-intuitive. Thus if we wish to judge the acts of sociopaths like Hannibal to be evil, as Morton^{xvi} rightly seems to, then we must reject Morton's conception of evil.

Another example will further illustrate the problems with Morton's conception of evil. Take the example of Mary, who has a barrier against stealing, but who learns to overcome that barrier by telling herself that the shop she is stealing from is owned by a very rich person who won't miss what she takes. Mary's act of stealing, as it results from a learned procedure for overcoming a barrier against doing harm to others that ought to be in place, counts as evil on Morton's conception. But surely we would not want to say that Mary performs an evil act by stealing in this way, even if she does wrong.

Morton's conception of evil, as the examples of Hannibal and Mary illustrate, suffers from two sorts of problems - sometimes we judge an act to be evil even when no learned procedures are in play, as in the case of Hannibal, and sometimes we judge an act not to be evil because the harms inflicted are minor, even when learned procedures are in play, as in the case of Mary. While the first of these problems is specific to Morton's conception of evil, the second is endemic to all conceptualisations of evil that focus *solely* on the perpetrator's psychology or process of deliberation. Such approaches tend to focus too much on the perpetrator of evil and not enough on the victims. This can potentially have the, at times, counter-intuitive consequence that wrongs with trivial outcomes are considered evil, while wrongs with enormously harmful and humiliating outcomes are not considered evil.

In contrast to Morton, Card^{xvii} offers a conception of evil that focuses on the harm done to victims, rather than the perpetrator's psychology or process of deliberation. For Card an evil act is any act whereby an 'intolerable harm' is 'brought about, seriously risked, sustained, aggravated, or tolerated by culpable wrongdoing'^{xviii}. On this conception it is something *solely* about the *victim* of a wrongful act that makes that act not merely wrong, but evil. On Card's conception, no matter how or why someone wrongly inflicts an intolerable harm on others, that act is evil.

However, Card's conception of evil suffers from the following problem. Take the example of John, who normally never drinks, but on hearing of the death of his closest friend, goes out and gets drunk. John decides to drive home while grossly intoxicated. Tragically, his erratic driving causes another car to swerve and crash into a tree, killing the family of five inside. John acts wrongly by driving while intoxicated, and his actions brought about the deaths of five people, including three children. But is John's act evil? Morton would certainly not think so. John's act was a one-off, brought on by despair, which did not result from a learned procedure for overcoming barriers that ought to be in place. But Card's conception of evil commits her to calling John's act evil. Indeed, *any* wrongful act that inflicts (or even only seriously risks, sustains, aggravates, or tolerates) much harm, no matter what the circumstances, is *automatically* to be conceived of as evil on Card's conception. But this seems deeply counter-intuitive in cases like John's.

The failures of Morton's conception of evil suggest that evil acts are distinct from wrongs acts on the grounds that the former necessarily inflict significant amounts of harm. The failures of Card's conception of evil, in contrast, suggests that it cannot be *only* the infliction of enormous and serious amounts of harm that makes evil acts distinct from wrong acts. From this it follows that an evil act is to be distinguished from a merely wrong act by something about *both* the harm inflicted upon the *victim* of that act, *and* some relevant facts about the *perpetrator* of that act. In the light of this I suggest the following conception of evil, which I shall not defend here beyond illustrating its very strong intuitive plausibility. *An evil act is one in which the perpetrator acts in a way which, through a consideration of their circumstances, motives, intentions, responses and the like, we judge to go significantly beyond the pale of mere wrongdoing and so to be worthy of our very strongest moral condemnations, and who in so acting wrongfully inflicts life-wrecking or ending harms upon others.*

The broadness of this conception of evil allows it to handle the great many different forms that evil can take. As I argue in Formosa^{xix}, perpetrators of evil are not a homogenous set - they include everyone from the banal nobody Eichmann, to the diabolical Hitler. People perpetrate evil in all sorts of ways and for all sorts of reason, and they are affected by and respond to their evil acts in a multiplicity of ways. What binds perpetrators of evil together as a group is not only that they wrongfully inflict great harms upon others, but that they do so in ways which we judge to deserve our very strongest moral condemnations. We judge them to deserve our very strongest moral condemnations on the grounds of a thorough and rounded consideration of: the situation the perpetrator acted in; their motives for acting; their intentions; the affect their harming others had on them; and their long-term responses to that act of harm. We judge a perpetrator more harshly: if they acted in a situation which did not strongly provoke their harmful behaviour; if their motives were particularly sadistic or in some other way unusually reprehensible; if they intended harm directly rather than indirectly; if they enjoyed the harm they inflicted; or if they failed to acknowledge and offer compensation for their harmful actions.

In order to test the intuitive plausibility of this conception of evil, I shall return briefly to the three examples I examined above. Hannibal had sadistic motives, enjoyed the harm he directly intended to inflict and felt no remorse. In combination with the amount of harm he inflicted, this makes his wrongdoing evil. John's irresponsible behaviour was unusual for him, and brought on by a difficult emotional situation. As such, his motives were not unusually reprehensible, he did not directly intend harm, he felt remorse, accepted punishment, and offered compensation. For this reason we do not judge John's acts to be evil, even though they were harmful. Mary's wrongdoing was not provoked by her situation (she was not poor), she enjoyed inflicting minor harm on the shop owners, and felt no remorse or guilt. But Mary's acts, though wrong, inflicted such minor amounts of harm that they do not deserve to be judged evil.

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