The Abuse of Evil

The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11

RICHARD J. BERNSTEIN

The Abuse of Evil

The Abuse of Evil

The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11

RICHARD J. BERNSTEIN

polity

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can

make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publishers will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.polity.co.uk

Contents

Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even "condition" them against it?

Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*

Preface

On August 31, 2001, I completed the manuscript of my book, *Radical Evil.* Eleven days later, the most dramatic terrorist attack in history took place. No one now doubts that the world changed on that infamous day. Overnight (literally), we were bombarded with images and talk of evil. My book *Radical Evil* was an attempt to comprehend the horrendous evils experienced in the twentieth century. I wanted to see what we might learn about the meaning of evil from the modern philosophical tradition. I subtitled the book "A Philosophical Interrogation," and I interrogated Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Freud, Nietzsche, Levinas, Jonas, and Arendt in order to learn what they teach us about the nature of evil. I concluded the work with a series of theses. Here is my first thesis: *"Interrogating evil is an ongoing, open-ended process.* Throughout I have indicated my skepticism about the very idea of a theory of evil, if this is understood as a complete account of what evil is. I do not think that such a theory is possible, because we cannot anticipate what new forms of evil or vicissitudes of evil will appear." I did not realize, at the time, just how prophetic my claim would be.

  After 9/11, I considered whether I wanted to revise my book, but I decided to let it stand as I had written it. Since 9/11, evil has become a popular, "hot" topic. Politicians, conservatives, preachers, and the media are all speaking about evil. Frankly, I have been extremely distressed by the post-9/11 "evil talk." I argue that the new discourse of good and evil, which divides the world according to this stark and simplistic dichotomy, is an *abuse of evil.* Traditionally, the discourse of evil in our religious, philosophical, and literary

traditions has been intended to provoke *thinking,* questioning, and inquiry. But today, the appeal to evil is being used as a political tool to obscure complex issues, to block genuine thinking, and to stifle public discussion and debate. I argue that what we are now confronting is a *clash of mentalities,* not a clash of civilizations. A mentality that is drawn to absolutes, alleged moral certainties, and simplistic dichotomies stands in contrast to a mentality that questions the appeal to absolutes in politics, that argues that we must not confuse subjective moral *certitude* with objective moral *certainty,* and that is skeptical of an uncritical rigid dichotomy between the forces of evil and the forces of good. I call this mentality "pragmatic fallibilism." I also challenge what I consider to be the unjustified and outrageous claim that without an appeal to absolutes and fixed moral certainties we lack the grounds to act decisively in fighting our real enemies. There is no incompatibility between fallibilism and a passionate commitment to oppose injustice and immorality. I also argue that the post-9/11 abuse of evil *corrupts* both democratic politics and religion. There is no place for absolutes in democratic politics. And we violate what is most vital in the world religions when we uncritically assume that religious faith is a *sufficient* basis for knowing what is good and evil. There are religious and nonreligious fundamentalists and fanatics. And there are religious believers and nonreligious secularists whose beliefs, deeds, and emotions are informed by a robust fallibilism. The clash of mentalities cuts across the religious/secular divide. The stakes are high in this clash of mentalities in shaping how we think and act in the world today – and in the future.

Introduction

Today our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature.

> George W. Bush, Address to the Nation,
> September 11, 2001

America has shown its evil intentions and the proud Iraqi people cannot accept it.

> Moktada al-Sadr, April 7, 2004

What do we mean when we call an event, an intention, a deed, or a human person evil? What are we referring to when we use evil as a *noun,* when we say "Today our nation saw *evil.*" There is something chilling and powerfully emotional when we speak of evil. We feel that we know precisely what we intend. There is no ambiguity or confusion about what really is evil – even if we are at a loss to define what we mean. And we also feel that there can be no compromise with evil. We must fight to eliminate it. When challenged to clarify what we mean by evil, we may appeal to other expressions, such as unjust, immoral, wrong, sinful, horrible, wicked, malevolent, sadistic, vicious, etc. But none of these is as strong, terse, or compact as evil. To add emphasis – to the name the worst – we speak of *absolute, pure,* or *radical evil.* Although we sometimes compare evils and use expressions such as "the lesser of two evils," more often we think of evil in absolute terms. Evil is evil; there are no gradations here.

The concern with evil is as old as civilization itself. It is fundamental for all the major religions. Our greatest

philosophers, theologians, poets, and novelists have struggled with the meaning and consequences of evil. It is a central theme in Plato, St Augustine, Shakespeare, Milton, and Dostoevsky. Theologians and philosophers speak of "the problem of evil," or the problem of "theodicy" – a word invented by the eighteenth-century philosopher Leibniz. If one believes that there is a God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent, then the question arises as to how we can reconcile the *appearance* of evil with the existence of such a God. The reason I stress *appearance* is because some thinkers have denied the *reality* of evil. Evil is a lack or privation of what is good; it lacks real existence. Others affirm the reality of evil, but claim that human beings, by misusing their free will, are responsible for the evil that exists in the world: free will, a gift from God, involves the *choice* of good or evil. Still others have challenged the idea that God is really omnipotent. If we survey the historical literature dealing with the "problem of evil," we find that almost every possibility has been explored which would reconcile the idea of a benevolent Creator with the existence of evil in this world. There are even some religious doctrines (considered to be heretical by Christianity) that deny the benevolence of the Deity. Actually, the traditional "problem of evil" is not concerned primarily with defining or characterizing the *meaning* of evil. Rather – whatever we take to be evil – the question is how we can reconcile the existence of evil with a belief in a loving God. The task is to "explain" or "justify" evil in a way that does not make God responsible for it. Sometimes, the problem of evil is used to challenge the existence of such a God. Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov argues passionately that the gratuitous murder of innocent children cannot be reconciled with a belief in a benevolent God.

Evil has been closely associated with suffering – especially suffering for which there does not seem to be any meaning or justification. This is why the Book of Job is frequently

cited as one of the earliest discussions of how the apparent evil of Job's suffering can be reconciled with faith in a just God. It would be a serious mistake to think that the "problem of evil" is exclusively a religious problem. Secular thinkers have raised similar questions. They too want to know how to make sense of a world in which evil seems to be so intractable. Nietzsche declared that human beings do not repudiate suffering as such: it is *meaningless* suffering that is so intolerable. And the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has argued that *any* attempt (religious or secular) to *justify* or rationalize the horror of evil is a form of theodicy; we must resist the *temptation* of theodicy.

At the beginning of the modern age, many thinkers classified evils as either natural or moral. Natural evils are those that occur without *direct* human intervention. Perhaps the most famous example was the devastating Lisbon earthquake that struck the city on the morning of November 1, 1755, and buried thousands of persons in the rubble. The question – debated throughout Europe – was whether such a terrible event was compatible with a faith in the Christian God. What kind of God would allow the death of so many innocent people? The best minds in Europe, including Voltaire, Rousseau, and Kant, struggled with the question. And it caught the popular imagination in pamphlets and sermons of the time. Today, most of us do not think of such terrible natural events as earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and hurricanes as manifestations of evil. The entire category of natural evils has been called into question, in part because of what Max Weber calls the "disenchantment of nature." Susan Neiman claims that the Lisbon earthquake marked the birth of modernity because "it demanded recognition that nature and morality are split" (Neiman 2004: 267).

The discourse about evil in the twentieth century has been extremely paradoxical. There are some philosophers and theologians who have continued to struggle with the

classic problem of evil. But these discussions have become specialized and esoteric; they are remote from the concerns of everyday life. Moral philosophers tend to focus on what is just and unjust, right and wrong, moral and immoral. Kant, who many think of as the greatest of modern moral philosophers, argued that the *justification* of moral claims ought to be independent of our religious beliefs. We may learn our morality – our sense of what is right and wrong, good and bad – from our religious upbringing, but this does not mean that the *justification* of our morality is based on religious beliefs. Even those moral philosophers who disagree sharply with Kant's claims about the foundations of morality generally accept the claim that morality should be clearly distinguished from religion.[1] Consequently, many moral philosophers have avoided discussing evil, because evil is so intimately tied to religious discourse.

But at the same time, ever since we have become aware of the full horrors of the Nazi period and the perverse cruelty of the Shoah, Auschwitz has come to symbolize the most extreme evil of our time – an evil unprecedented in history. Hannah Arendt is one of the very few thinkers who sought to comprehend what is distinctive about the new form of evil that burst forth with twentieth-century totalitarianism. Appropriating Kant's expression *radical evil,* she tells us:

> Evil has proved to be more radical than expected. In objective terms, modern crimes are not provided for in the Ten Commandments. Or: the Western Tradition is suffering from the preconception that the most evil things human beings can do arise from the vice of selfishness. Yet we know that the greatest evils or radical evil has nothing to do any more with such humanly understandable, sinful motives. (Arendt and Jaspers 1992: 166)

But what is radical evil? Radical evil is making human beings superfluous as human beings. This happens as soon as all unpredictability – which, in human beings, is equivalent to spontaneity – is eliminated. We can understand more fully what she means by turning to the description she gives of total domination. She presents a three-stage model of the "logic" of total domination. It is in the concentration and death camps that we find the "laboratories" of totalitarian regimes. And it is in the camps that we find the most radical experiments for changing the character of human beings.

"The first essential step on the road to total domination is to kill the juridical person in man" (Arendt 1968: 447). This started long before the Nazis established the death camps. Arendt is referring to the legal restrictions that stripped Jews (and other groups such as homosexuals and gypsies) of their juridical rights. "The aim of an arbitrary system is to destroy the civil rights of the whole population, who ultimately become just as outlawed in their own country as the stateless and the homeless. The destruction of man's rights, the killing of the juridical person in him, is a perquisite for dominating him entirely" (Arendt 1968: 451). Inmates in concentration camps have no rights.

"The next decisive step in the preparation of living corpses is the murder of the moral person in man. This is done by making martyrdom, for the first time in history, impossible" (Arendt 1968: 451). The SS, who supervised the camps, were perversely brilliant in corrupting all forms of human solidarity. They succeeded in making questions of conscience questionable and equivocal.

When a man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or of sending his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their death; and when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family, how is he to decide?

The alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder. Who could solve the moral dilemma of the Greek mother, who was allowed by the Nazis to choose which of her three children should be killed? (Arendt 1968: 452)

But this is not yet the worst. There is a third step on the road to total domination – and it is here that we come face to face with the core of radical evil.

After the murder of the moral person and annihilation of the juridical person, the destruction of individuality is almost always successful . . . For to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man's power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events. (Arendt 1968: 455)

The camps served the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing. There was a systematic attempt to transform human beings into "living corpses," to fabricate human beings who were not quite human – who were at once human and inhuman. This is what Arendt takes to be the quintessence of radical evil; this is what she means by making human beings as human beings superfluous. Arendt is referring to those living corpses who were called *Muselmann* – so graphically described by Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz.

Their life is short, but their number is endless; they the *Muselmänner,* the drowned, they form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty

to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.

They crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen. (Levi 1986: 90, emphasis *added)*[2]

When Arendt described radical evil in *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* she focused on describing the phenomenon – the systematic transformation of human beings into something less than fully human. She didn't explicitly explore the motivations of the Nazi perpetrators, although she did speak of the absolutely cold and systematic destruction of human bodies. This was the clear intention of those who administered the camps. But the question of motives and intentions became much more problematic for her when she reported on the trial of Adolph Eichmann. Arendt called into question one of our most central and entrenched moral and legal convictions: namely, that people who do evil deeds must have evil motives and intentions. They are vicious, sadistic, or wicked. She claimed that Eichmann was not a sadistic monster. He was "terrifyingly normal"; he was "a new type of criminal who commits his crimes in circumstances that make it wellnigh impossible to know or feel that he is doing wrong" (Arendt 1965: 276). His *deeds* were monstrous, and he deserved to hang, but his motives and intentions were banal. One of the clearest statements of what Arendt means by the "banality of evil" is in her 1971 lecture "Thinking and Moral Considerations."

Some years ago, reporting the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, I spoke of the "banality of evil" and meant with