The Abuse of Evil

The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11

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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.

I want to thank John Thompson for encouraging me to write this book and Jean van Altena for her splendid editing. I also want to acknowledge my gratitude to Louis Menand and Farrar Straus Giroux for permission to cite passages from *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*.

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