

***Evil: The History of a Concept* (Oxford Philosophical Concepts series)**

Proposal to OUP, revised

Volume Editors: Andrew Chignell and *possibly* Scott MacDonald (Cornell)

Main Goal of Series

The main goal of OPC is to offer philosophically subtle and historically sound accounts of central concepts in the history of philosophy. Each volume will be a history of its concept in that it will offer a story about the most significant events in the life of the concept from its original inception through its transformations to its modern use. The point of this narrative is to deepen understanding of the concept and explore its role in the history of philosophy. Volumes will include the best international scholars, “extra-philosophical” material or Reflections, a lexicon mapping the relation between the concept and terms referring to it, and thorough indices.

Overview

The events of September 11, 2001 reintroduced the concept of *evil* into the contemporary political lexicon: al-Qaeda was “evil”; Osama bin Laden became “The Evil One”; Iraq, Iran, and North Korea constituted the “axis of evil,” and so forth. Journalists and academics reacted awkwardly at first to the use of a term that had been superseded in many vocabularies by social-scientific talk of harm, badness, damage, pain, negative utility, trauma, and the like. But the broad-based cultural response to the attacks, along with the rhetoric surrounding the wars that followed, confirmed that many “ordinary” people continue to think in terms of the existence of radically malevolent and perhaps even superhuman forces of evil. “Evil” (the concept) is by no means a discarded relic of a superstitious past.

This book project is motivated by the thought that understanding the *history* of a concept—the way it has been used in religious, philosophical, and political/legal reflection, as well as in literature, film, art, and psychology—allows us better to grasp its contemporary uses and (mis)applications. Historical understanding may also help us find new or better answers to ongoing philosophical questions about a concept and its objects. One of the themes that will be discussed in these essays has to do with whether evil is something *outside* personal psychology, intention, and

behavior—a kind of impersonal force, tendency, principle, or lack—or whether it is best thought of in terms of inner states of human persons or even non-human persons. This “inner” vs. “outer” question is still of contemporary interest, but it was also asked in nearly every historical context, and the answers offered by different authors framed their conceptions of related items such as nature, the good, morality, and God.

Philosophers’ and theologians’ interest in evil has traditionally centered on questions in metaphysics/epistemology, ethics, and the philosophy of religion. Here is a sampling:

1. Metaphysics and Epistemology of evil: what sort of thing or property is evil? Is evil a positive *something* or is it a mere *lack* or “privation” of something? Is evil different from badness? Is evil in the will different from the intention to cause gratuitous harm? What is “radical evil”? Can we know when something or state of affairs is genuinely evil? If so, how? Is evil the “opposite of Good” (as the OED says)?

2. Evil and Ethics: What is the connection between evil and moral wrongness? What connotations, if any, does ‘evil’ possess in various ethical traditions? Does it make sense to think of natural disasters, diseases, and their effects as evil? How does “natural evil,” if there be such, affect moral character, if at all? How can evil inclinations (if there are such) be overcome in the moral life?

3. Problems of evil and theodicy: Is the existence of ‘natural evil’ as well as ‘moral evil’ (especially in the amounts and kinds we encounter in the actual world) a logical or probabilistic reason to reject traditional theism in favor of some alternative? Is ‘natural’ vs. ‘moral’ the best way to frame this debate? What alternatives are available? Are meliorist, optimistic but *non*-theistic worldviews threatened by the existence of evil in the way that theistic ones are? Is the existence of evil also a problem for atheists? Is there a problem of good?

The essays in the proposed volume will sketch a history of answers to these

questions. With the exception of Marilyn McCord Adams, none of our authors has an overriding interest in positive theodicy, and the primary goal here is not to develop new resources for handling the ‘problem of evil’ narrowly-construed. Rather, the goal is to see how natural, moral, metaphysical, and even supernatural evil was understood in earlier eras and how that understanding motivated various philosophical and religious responses to it.

A subsidiary goal of the volume is to map some of the broader, extra-philosophical territory that surrounds this concept. Thus, in addition to the more traditional issues just mentioned we will encourage authors, where possible, to make reference to how the concept of evil is deployed in the broader religious, scientific, and artistic context of the relevant period or place. There will also be some interdisciplinary 1000-word “Reflections” that will supplement the work of the main chapters along these lines. Some of them will be accompanied by visual art, musical transcripts, or passages from literature that illustrate the roles played by evil in the contexts we’re considering. This variety and visual appeal should set the volume apart from traditional anthologies on evil, and make it attractive to people outside philosophy and theology.

Some of the themes that would be suitable for Reflections include:

(a) Personifications of evil in literature, art, film: the Devil/Lucifer/Satan/Ahriman, demons, hell/Hades/Sheol, zombies, werewolves, vampires, monsters, Iago, serial killers, Nazis.

(b) Evil as the self-conscious embrace of badness: Faust, Faustian bargains, *Heart of Darkness*, Dostoyevsky’s “Underground Man,” Satanism, witches, wizards.

(c) Evil, possession, and mental illness: The use of the concept of evil (or its avoidance) in neurophysiology, psychiatry, and psychology.

(d) Evil and technology: the fate of the ‘banality of evil’ thesis in political theory, art.

(e) Impersonal evils: e.g. Marxist conceptions of capital itself as evil, turning people into zombie-like consumers (see some of George Romero's films).

This list of possible topics for Reflections is merely suggestive, and we will wait to commission any actual Reflections until we hear from authors about how their own pieces are developing, and about what sorts of topics they recommend. Since these will be very brief pieces, they can be commissioned after we acquire a better sense of the content of the main chapters, as well as author recommendations, at the Workshop in April 2012.

Table of Contents

(Titles included where provided)

0. Introduction, Andrew Chignell (Cornell)

This introduction will discuss ways in which a study of the concept of *evil* (and its history) is important and valuable in the contemporary context. In addition to providing a précis of the contributions, this chapter will also provide a taxonomy of the various historical accounts of the ontology of evil (limitation, privation/imperfection, real property, etc.)

1. Evil and the Hebrew Bible, Carol Newsome (Emory, Religious Studies Dept)

It is possible to organize biblical reflection on the problem of evil into a logical typology. The wisdom tradition affirms that the cosmos has a divinely sanctioned order, but it is conflicted as to whether this order is intelligible and morally usable (so Proverbs) or whether it ultimately is not (so, in different ways, Job and Ecclesiastes). The skeptical wisdom tradition refuses, however, to suggest that either the human mind or the cosmic order is itself seriously flawed, only that they are an ill fit. Thus the wisdom tradition raises but does not resolve the problem of evil. Other biblical traditions avoid this impasse either by constructing a theory of a flawed human reason/will (so the mythic creation narrative of Genesis 2-3, the Deuteronomic traditions, etc.) or by constructing a theory of a cosmic disruption that accounts for the irruption of evil (so the various apocalyptic explanations).

2. Evil and Ancient Greek Philosophy, Rachana Kamtekar (Arizona)

This paper will take up the topic of why there is vice, but not evil, in Greek ethics, and why there is no problem of evil in Greek natural philosophy (until Plotinus). Issues about fate, purity, defilement, honor and shame will also play a role.

3. Evil and the Early Christian/Early Medieval period, Scott MacDonald (Cornell)

A paper on early Christian and early Medieval conceptions of evil as privation or imperfection as opposed to evil as a result of the will. A main focus will be on issues about the fall of the devil from Augustine to Anselm's *De casu diaboli*.

4. Evil and Islamic Philosophy, Nadja Germann (Loyola University-Maryland)

This paper will discuss competing positions on the source and nature of evil in the Islamic philosophical tradition, with an emphasis on the influential views of Ibn-Sina (Avicenna).

5. Evil and the Late Medieval Philosophy, Marilyn McCord Adams (UNC-Chapel Hill)

"Problems of Evil in Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham"

Late medieval philosophers had problems with evil, but they weren't of Mackie's atheological sort. For them, it was metaphysically impossible for God not to exist or for God to be otherwise than maximally perfect. Instead, they worried about an "ontological" problem of evil, of how or what evil could *be* given that being converts with good. Attempts to solve this problem included the "evil is a privation of being" strategy earlier championed by Proclus, Augustine, and Anselm. Aquinas takes up this strategy, which gets qualified by Scotus and finally de-emphasized by Ockham. Aquinas also deploys the "global good" strategy that finds the evil of privations in the parts being defeated by the greater good of the universe as a whole. They also focused on the soteriological or "sin" problem of how God could succeed in Divine cosmic plans, given the plot complications introduced by the sins of rational creatures. Medieval answers feature the saving work of Christ and the programs of grace-distribution that it funds. I will examine a variety of developments of this theme, reaching back to Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*, Abelard's *Romans*-commentary, and then on to the later authors.

6. Evil and Indian Philosophy, Parimal Patil (Harvard Divinity)

This paper will provide an account of the presence (and absence) of discussions of evil in the classical Indian (Hindu) philosophical traditions. One theme will be the ways in which non-Buddhist traditions portray evil as a positive force which has a connection with (and is possibly even inseparable from) the good. A brief discussion of what might be called “theodicies” in this context (though they are quite different from Western theodicies).

7. Evil and Early Modern Philosophy, Samuel Newlands (Notre Dame)

“Evil, Privations, and the Early Moderns”

Although the 17th and early 18th centuries contain numerous attempts to explain the goodness and power of God in the midst of an evil-soaked world like ours, one of their most lasting innovations was negative: they rejected an account of evil that had dominated Christian thought since the Church Fathers. Evil, Christian tradition had taught, was privative: evil had no positive reality of its own, but was instead the absence of an appropriate good. In this paper, I explore the neglected story of the rejection of privation theory as it occurred in the early modern period, a conceptual shift that nearly all contemporary philosophers of religion have also made. In conclusion, I ask whether this conceptual abandonment is as warranted and salutary as early modern and contemporary practitioners would have us believe.

8. Evil and Classical German Thought, Allen Wood (Stanford/Indiana)

“Evil, Selfhood and Despair”

Abstract: The theme of evil in the thought of Kant, Fichte and Kierkegaard is characterized by certain common ideas: The Kantian idea that evil is a failure of volitional rationality, the Fichtean idea that selfhood is constituted by self-directed volition, and the consequence that evil involves a failure of selfhood or a negative volition directed at the self that Fichte and Kierkegaard called ‘despair’ (*Verzweiflung, fortvivlelse*). Also to be treated is the role in evil of falsity or self-deception, which is bound up with evil both as a failure of volitional rationality and as a failure of selfhood.

9. Evil and Late Modern Philosophy, Susan Neiman (Einstein-Forum, Berlin)

“What happened to evil?”

Nineteenth-century philosophers -- from Hegel to Mill to Nietzsche -- were centrally concerned with variations on the classical problem of evil. When Russell wrote his "History of Western Philosophy", there were more entries for the word 'Egypt' in his index than the word 'evil'. By the early 20th century, the problem of evil was considered a theological problem, with no central connection to what were considered essential problems of philosophy. I will argue that the absence of 19th-century philosophy in 20th-century philosophy curricula - which unfortunately still persists - is a result of the refusal to take seriously the problem of evil, the guiding line that runs through 19th-century philosophy.

10. Evil and the History of Science, Eric Watkins (UC-San Diego), and Eric Martin (London School of Economics)

“Natural Science and Evil”

Natural philosophy and the natural sciences have examined evil on a number of fronts. For many early modern thinkers, the articulation of metaphysical systems that prominently appealed to laws of nature were largely motivated by attempts to address the problem of evil. The 1755 Lisbon earthquake, which became an exemplary case of natural evil, focused attention and criticism on many such doctrines appealing to the ultimate goodness or divine establishment of those natural laws. Evolutionary theorizing later raised particular concerns about evaluating the biological processes that are apparently premised on the winnowing out, and concomitant suffering, of weaker organisms - the so-called Darwinian problem of evil. While scientists have sometimes upheld an ideal of the neutrality of their descriptions of the world, other scientists and certain versions of their theories have also lent themselves to particular evaluative claims about the presence and significance of natural evils.

11. Evil and Jewish Thought, Avishai Margalit (IAS-Princeton) and Gabriel Motzkin (Hebrew University/Van Leer Jerusalem Institute)

“Radical Evil: Instigators and Compilers”

World War II's atrocities raise the question of whether participation in an act is a necessary component for a judgment that one has perpetrated a radical evil. On the one hand, there are those who set the process in motion. Then there are the bureaucrats who authorize evil acts without ever leaving their desks. And then there are the perpetrators in the field. Finally,

there are the witnesses, those who know and see, but are not directly involved. Physical perpetrators often raised the defense of obedience to orders. It turns out that perpetrators could always get out of participating in an act. Nonetheless, the defense needs to be taken seriously on its terms: if I commit an act of child abuse because you have ordered me to do it, is my responsibility or my being evil diminished? Am I less evil because I have received the motivation to perform an act from another? On the other hand, are those who order atrocities but never commit an act themselves less responsible, or in any sense less evil? Yet here too there is a slippery slope: suppose that initiating evil is a consequence of reading a book endorsing that evil, e.g. Nietzsche. If Nietzsche were alive, would he be just as evil as either instigators or perpetrators? Is radical evil a catchall, so that there is no diminished exposure, e. g. is saluting Hitler the same as rape or murder, since it is saluting Hitler? Is radical evil like a black hole that traps all and leaves no space for differences, or can one distinguish between different roles or positions with respect to exposure or participation in radical evil?

12. Etymology

A brief history of (the term) 'evil.' Hebrew, Greek, German, Sanskrit variations that are worth considering (German's *Böse* vs. *Übel* distinction, for instance) will be addressed here. Another possible topic is how terms like 'evil,' 'bad,' and 'wicked' became terms of approbation in the late 20th century.

13. Lexicon, Bibliography, Indices

Time Line

We've asked our authors to plan on a work-in-progress workshop in April 2012 and to anticipate a submission deadline at the end of that year.