

**Peter Barry**

*Evil and Moral Psychology.*

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This short book is an effort in “conceptual analysis” concerning the idea of evil, an attempt to define evil by drawing on ordinary usage of the word and basic intuitions about evil: “how we actually use terms like ‘evil’” (8). Barry aims to separate the concept of evil from its supernatural, religious associations, though without going to the opposite extreme of rejecting the concept of evil altogether. The aim of the book is to “naturalize” evil, with a small dose of “experimental” philosophy as well as the resources of psychology to give us a “psychologically rich conception of evil personhood”.

Barry begins with a minimalistic claim about evil that he describes as a “modest proposal”: that “evil people just are *the worst of us*—that is, the evil person is the worst *sort* of person” (16). The analytic style of Barry’s approach is demonstrated in his attempt to state this claim as a “formal proposition”:

(MP): for any person,  $x$ , if  $x$  has some counterpart,  $x^*$ , in some nearby possible world and  $x^*$  is a morally worse sort of person than  $x$ , then  $x$  is not evil. (id.).

Barry claims that Dante, poet of the *Inferno*, is an “adherent” of MP, though it is a little hard to know on what basis he makes this judgment. But he thinks that Kant and Augustine reject MP given that they “find evil everywhere” (24), seeing a propensity to evil in all people. Barry argues that this position cannot be accepted, since it “runs counter to the common intuition that evil people are rare” (26).

This conclusion is rather too quick and the purported evidence for shared intuitions thin (Barry cites several philosophers in a footnote). After all, the Augustinian view on human nature as corrupted by Original Sin has dominated the Western world for two millennia. Barry’s argument against the Augustinian position is that it runs counter to common intuition, but isn’t the Christian conception itself strong evidence of a very different and very influential sort of common intuition? One worries that what Barry means by “shared” intuitions is those intuitions held by a rather select group—contemporary secular philosophers, perhaps.

More plausible is the idea that the term ‘evil’ is multiply ambiguous and can be used in different ways depending on the context (thus resisting any neat formal definitions via the analytic method). Barry’s response is to “stipulate that the sense of ‘evil’ under investigation is the extreme one” as opposed to the “ordinary” one (13). This is fair enough, but it is not clear that it accurately tracks common intuitions. When the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition refers to the “evil inclination” in human nature, this use of the term seems to encompass both the extreme and the ordinary sense of evil: it refers to evil in the full-blown sense, but does not imply that all people are equally likely to succumb to it to the same degree, nor does it deny that those who do are subject to special opprobrium.

At issue is whether ‘evil’ constitutes a separate category that is qualitatively distinct from mere badness:

Augustine highlights a *quantitative* difference between evil people and the rest of us, *not* a qualitative one. Being evil is a matter of suffering from vices to a greater degree or more intensely than those suffered by merely bad people. And that fails to capture what it is to be evil in the extreme sense. (24).

There is surely no doubt that there is *one* usage of the term evil which suggests a qualitatively different quality of character; it is the way people use the word when describing such extreme cases as Hitler, bin Laden, or Ted Bundy. Nonetheless, we also regularly use the word ‘evil’ such that the difference is one of degree, not kind; on this view extreme evil may simply mean an extraordinary level of evil. Compare the use of the term ‘astronomical’ to describe extremely large distances; clearly the difference is quantitative, even if the distinction can feel like a qualitative one. It is far from clear that ordinary usage is committed to a clear sense of evil that is qualitatively distinct.

In fact, it may be that the distinction between ‘extreme’ and ‘ordinary’ evil is just what Barry needs to critique. Perhaps the “extreme” sense of evil is a legacy of just the supernatural or demonic conception of evil that Barry dismisses. One of the problems with using the term evil is that it entails that there is a category of monstrous people, wholly alien from us – i.e., it demonizes the Other. It will not do merely to “stipulate” that one is considering only extreme evil; this risks begging the question as to whether this is a genuine category. This issue is all the more urgent in that the practical upshot of Barry’s argument is to develop a set of criteria to determine which criminals are to be legitimately subject to the death penalty on the grounds that they are certified by philosophers as genuinely evil (see below).

Here is the official, philosophical definition of evil that Barry provides:

A person, *p*, is evil just in case i) *p*’s action-issuing mechanism, *M*, is both weakly receptive and weakly reactive to moral reasons for action, ii) *p* is strongly and highly fixedly disposed to act wrongly and to autonomously transgress what morally decent people suppose are prohibitions against such actions in those circumstances, and iii) when faced with choices that a morally decent person would find painful, *p* tends to lack any affective state correlated with a painful phenomenology expressive of contrition (87).

This definition of evil, despite its surface complexity, is disappointingly thin. It basically says that evil people are those who do a lot of bad things and don’t feel remorse; this is hardly surprising and not particularly helpful or precise, let alone psychologically rich. Further, the notion of being “weakly receptive/reactive” to moral reasons is problematic. It seems to be an attempt to hold both that the evil person recognizes what is right and wrong and so can be held morally responsible, and yet at the same time he doesn’t really recognize right and wrong, since he has a fixed disposition to disobey moral rules without remorse. It is far from clear that one can have it both ways by saying he is “weakly” receptive. It is also unclear how can one be both “highly fixedly disposed to act wrongly” while at the same time be said to do so

“autonomously”. Finally, this definition does not sit well with Barry’s claim that evil is qualitatively different. Everyone transgresses moral rules at some point and feels less remorse than one ought; it is unclear in what respect evil people are different in kind rather than degree.

Barry’s chapter on capital punishment, the one chapter on practical implications of his theory, is officially neutral on the question of whether the death penalty is ever justified. He takes the position that “if capital punishment is ever morally justified, *then it is justified as a response to evil*” (143). Barry suggests that the definition of evil offered in his book could be used in sentencing hearings in capital cases to determine whether the defendant should be subject to the death penalty, by a “separate sentencing entity with some expertise in these matters—say a pool of select psychologists and psychiatrists, perhaps even philosophers!—to determine whether the defendant is evil” (157).

Barry’s taking a neutral stance on capital punishment while simultaneously offering a mechanism to identify who should be eligible for it is troubling. One might defend his approach by noting that, so long as we do have the death penalty, even those who oppose it should try to make sure it is at least carried out in a non-arbitrary manner. However, things are not so simple. For one thing, Barry does not take a completely neutral stance; he discusses at some length and with apparent approval Matthew Kramer’s “purgative” defense of capital punishment, according to which the perpetrator deserves death because his life is “imbued with defilement” (149). Many philosophers will find this account obscure and unconvincing (for a general critique of similar retributive theories, see my *Honor and Revenge: A Theory of Punishment* [Springer 2012]). But equally important, Barry’s working assumption that there exists a separate, qualitatively distinct category of “extreme” evil risks reifying the concept of extreme evil and thus indirectly supporting the institution of capital punishment. This is an ever-present danger with the method of “ordinary language” philosophy, that in adopting a purportedly neutral moral stance it may implicitly support whatever moral assumptions are already present in one’s contemporary society. In this case, that means supporting the belief that evil people are real and must be eliminated: surely this is a proposition that requires a great deal of moral reflection, not merely conceptual analysis.

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