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In what ways, if any, does Evil-Doing differ from Wrong-Doing?

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Introduction

In a forest clearing near Minsk in 1941, Heinrich Himmler set up a firing squad, as part of his attempted liquidation of Jews during the annexation of The Soviet Union. As the firing order was about to be given, Himmler stepped in and calmly asked one young Jew if his parents had also been of a Semitic background. When he replied "Yes," he enquired of his larger family, whom the man admitted was also Jewish. Finally, when the young man admitted that *all* of his family had been of Jewish descent, including his ancestors, Himmler solemnly remarked: "Then nobody can help you." This, then, is the testimony of "arguably one of the most evil men of the Twentieth Century." (Steiner, 2002:43) But what exactly *is* 'evil' in terms of moral value and in what ways, if any, does evil-doing differ from *wrong-doing*? In this essay, I shall reason that despite the ostensibly minute nuances between the two terms, the difference lies principally in issues of 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' variance, with some exceptions. I shall achieve this by defining 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' in respect to evil and ultimately show that while the terms of 'evil-doing' and 'wrong-doing' are essentially similar, 'evil-doing' could be viewed simply as a more intense form *of* 'wrong-doing': that is a 'sub-division.'

§1 The Qualitative Approach

Was Himmler, then, one of the chief Nazi architects for the "Final solution", that sent millions of Jews into the Polish concentration camps, purely *bad* in terms of moral evil, or just plain *wrong*? Hiller Steiner and Stephen De Witze both argue that evil is significantly different from simple wrong-doing in a *qualitative* way (2002:212). They are not defining the actual actions themselves as essentially different per se, as it may be difficult to judge the moral slant of any particular deed purely on its face merits, but what they are referring to is the *motive* or *intent* at the back of the act, to distinguish it. As Gerrard states, "there is a qualitative and not merely quantitative difference in evil" (Gerrard 1998:21).

For example, if one witnesses another simply turning off the flow of a water pipe, in an everyday scene, it may appear to be entirely amoral in terms of evil or wrong. And again, if turned off by accident and causes flowers to dry up as a consequence, it could be conceived as simply 'wrong.' The person doing the act was not necessarily aware of what he was doing, or its consequences, which had simply been in error. But the outcome causes it to be called wrong. Now, again if this paradigm is placed in the context of an African village, however, in a drought ridden corner of the Western Sahara, with deliberate intent and by an individual who is knowingly cutting a village off from its only supply of treated water, then it perhaps could be viewed to some extent, as 'evil'. When the act is seen in a singular aspect, though, it is simply the act of turning off a tap. This view is compounded by and at a tangent to Adam Morton and other moral theorists who do not recognise the innate difference between the two concepts and as in Morton, offers instead an alternate proposition that evil and wrong-doing feel differently to the degree with which one contemplates and *suffers* through the act. This therefore would be a *qualitative* view (Morton, 2004:11).

Morton and Witze propose that the suffering of, and pondering on evil-doing, produces a distinct difference in the manner of emotional response or *feeling*. This contrasts with that of wrong-doing. To succinctly illustrate this, Witze states of evil that it "[l]eaves behind a moral residue that if it is feasible to remove, requires a special ritual of purification" (Witze, 2002:213). It is considered relatively self-evident

to many people that evil *does* feel different to simple wrong-doing, especially by those who perhaps postulate evil in an even more simple way – that of a sub-heading, or sub-category of wrong-doing itself. In other words, as a heightened or more intense type of wrong-doing. And by this rather primal or emotionally-tactile litmus test, can one learn to differentiate. But considering the reality that all people react and respond differently to various stimuli, this may be difficult to establish, at least in terms of 'normalisation', for how does one standardise emotional stimuli? That which creates shock, dread or other forms of antipathy in one person, may not necessarily generate it in the next and as can be seen from principles of relativism, there are different responses to different situations depending on which culture one was born or raised in. Cannibalism would *not* be considered evil for members of certain Polynesian Island states well into the middle of the nineteenth century, yet judged evil and inhuman in the West. And there is the whole aspect of attitudes towards sex, which have altered exponentially from 'evil' to entirely acceptable within only the last 50 years. How does one come to terms with a highly 'mutable' theory that can change in relation to consumer tastes and fashions? Other critics of this hypothesis may therefore argue that in this way, both evil-doing and wrong-doing are one and the "same thing and that there is no clear distinction" (Neiman, 2002:32). And yet by categorising it beneath the sub-heading, it is, as was stated at the beginning of this discourse, if not a totally separate category, then at least a separate nuance of one complex and overlapping principle.

§2 The Quantitative View

Scarre in his article, 'Evil', asks the question: "[s]hould we distinguish, within the deep of human wrong-doing, a lower deep of *evil*-doing, in which human beings are at their worst and most depraved?" (2010:590). In effect, this asks if there a moral Rubicon which, once crossed, establishes an act as within an entirely new realm of evil and outside the point of simple wrongness. One manner of regarding this is to view actions that could be deemed evil, not so much by the *degree* of their harm, but by the *amount*. This quantitative aspect has come into the sphere of philosophical consciousness largely from the middle of the Twentieth Century onwards and has been defined mostly in terms of two distinct world events in the main: The Holocaust and the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001. "Events of such unparalleled violence or destruction that one cannot ordinarily expect to deal with seems to be the only way that such events can be defined" (Morton 2004:57). And it is precisely this degree of *evil*-doing, as Scarre reflects, which is at the lowest possible nadir of Human wrong-doing, almost to the point where men become close to 'animals in nature and moral worth.' At any point lower, one would potentially move away from 'wrong-doing' altogether and his ability to reason would go and we would have a case of 'diminished responsibility' in place of 'wrong-doing'. By the terms of 'Act Consequentialism' an act must be able to fulfil its obligation to generate maximum good and if it does not, it must be bad. This can naturally be inverted to suggest that an act will be bad not only by the most harm it creates, but by also failing in its function to create good. It could be argued subsequently that the execution of a murderer "may create some amount of good in the way it has protected the society" (Haybron 2002:9) from further murders by that individual. And, therefore, the wrong-doing factor would also be low, in the way of state law-enactment. Act Consequentialism, therefore, could deem such a legal sanction as 'good' in certain instances.

Perhaps this principle could be applied to 'war' also on certain levels; in spite of the unqualified damage it creates, at least ones which are fought (and to some degree, *achieve)* their objectives in generating *some* degree of good, commensurate to its harm. It could be argued on one hand that it took WWII to remove the threat of Hitler from the world, and the potential for Nazism to prevail. Similar arguments could be

further postulated towards the Napoleonic Wars, for removing the dictator Bonaparte, and likewise, the Second Gulf war for taking away Sadam Hussein. But, of course, the situation would have to be objectively assessed and we would only see the 'positive' view in terms of the larger world picture and not for the individual stories of casualty and harm. To assess this again using the 'litmus test' of evil-doing vs wrong-doing, one would have to say, "[t]hat there could be acts deemed only 'wrong,'" (Neimam 2003:76) during an armed conflict, which was in some way *lesser* in quantitative degree than that declared 'evil', but perhaps not by our definition, that which would lead to death. Considering 'War' is largely defined in terms of little else, then it could be applied to the fumbling politicians instead, who blundered the methods of diplomacy that led to the conflict. But with the grievous death tolls of so many innocent and important lives in the 911 attack and by the hands of the Nazis in the concentration camps, we see only largely harm and on a massively progressed scale. "There would be little here to describe as simply 'wrong-doing'" (Haybron, 2002:44). Further, it produced separate and parallel harm by lacking in any good as a ramification. We only saw the demise of valuable people like businessmen, artists and useful citizens who if still alive would certainly have made a valuable contribution to society. Act Consequentialism could only therefore pronounce such acts as creating *no* good and only mass harm so, by definition, almost entirely evil. What therefore if we are viewing this moral conundrum in an incorrect way? What, as Morton suggests, in his 'Barrier Theory' that if we are simply failing to take into account that the permutations here are so discreet that when we think we are looking at a quantities case, it is actually, *qualitative* again? Take the scenario then that only "culpable wrongs could count as evil actions" (Morton, 2004:112). The burden of Morton's testimony here is that an action is only deemed evil if it was committed purposefully by the active suppression of that which would have morally stopped him. In other words, he/she was ignoring their "conscience and chose to do something that they knew or at least *thought* was wrong" (ibid.). It is interesting to note however that Morton's theory does not take account of those that *accidentally* committed a crime. The Law courts tend to take an interesting view of this latter point however, especially for example the relatively common scenario of causing an injury whist driving a car whilst under the influence. As far as the defendant is often concerned, he knew nothing of the event as was too drunk for it to register. But is this really a believable retort? As it was no accident that he put several pints of alcohol prior into his body? Morton further conjectures that sometimes the dividing line between qualitative and qualitative is almost too vague to distinguish. If two people were judged for a crime and both suffered from different degrees of jealousy or apathy, in different degrees, then what might at first glance seem quantitative could well prove to be qualitative instead. So where exactly does this leave us?

§3 Moral Exclusions

Whilst this essay has so far charted the path for qualitative and quantitative approaches to 'Evil-Doing' versus 'Wrong-Doing' it can be seen that by the very subtle differences of the terms themselves, they are susceptible to disagreement and the fact that not every theory fits every situation, every time. In this light, we shall now explore the exceptions to these rules and address the way we can think of 'Evil' by different means. The first issue that needs addressing if we are at all to fathom these seemingly complex issues is to look into the very meaning of the terminology itself, to see if we can gain any helpful inkling. Semantics have always been fundamental to philosophy and it is paradoxical that some of our allegedly most common or simple terms, can sometimes prove the most problematic. The word 'Evil', has been used or rather *misused* by a multitude of successive generations down the millennia and across the gamut of religious, political and derogatory situations. It has been employed, or rather *deployed* as both a descriptive term and

control-word since the dawn of knowledge to describe a whole host of often emotively-charged issues and dogmatic tenets, from Predestination and the causes of 'original sin' in Christo-Judaism to the present time and George W. Bush successfully exploiting the collective national anger of America to attack the Al-Qaeda after 9/11. But it is crucial to gain a standardised form of the word and in current idioms that is then synonymous with "the worst possible, of everything and anything", As Kekes stated, the word is often exploited and used as a rhetorical 'expedient' in the place of perhaps a more appropriate expression (1999:17). In more real terms stamping the label 'Evil' on a person, group or organisation as a means for religious-politico advantage, is, according to Adam Morton, a way to split up friends and create divisions in society that will alienate people. It is this arbitrary employment which is possibly behind the varying connotations of the 'evil-doing' versus 'wrong-doing' problem. As Scarre points out, there is also the question of whether an act falls into the bracket of 'Moral Evil', or 'Natural Evil'; whether it was perpetrated by an individual or "by an act of God?" (2010:585). If two injuries were caused by electric shock and the first by someone deliberately employing faulty wiring, it would be a case of Moral Evil. And if by a lightning bolt on a stormy night, then by an act of nature, or of God.

Concluding Remarks

In this essay, we have discussed the issue in what ways, if any, does 'evil-doing' differ from 'wrong-doing'? And we have tended to view the matter with respect to either 'qualitative' or 'quantitative' answers. With the qualitative view, we see that evil has a different type of quality to simply wrong-doing and that this can be demonstrated by the different feeling one has as a response to a particular bad evil and that in essence it is not the deed or crime itself that one should view, rather the *intent* or motive behind the act. Then we have viewed evil-doing as a potential sub-category of wrong-doing not so much in regard to the intensity, but simply to its amount or qualitative approach. If one, for instance, shoplifted or stole just once it might be thought of as 'out of character'. But, if the behaviour is repeated successive times then it may be evil. Finally, we have tried to explain for this subtle permutation of 'essence' and realised that the semantic difficulty, in defining 'evil' alone could be one of our biggest stumbling blocks to understanding the problem at all. That the two terms are so distinct in meaning, belies the fact in the final analysis, that both qualitative and quantitative are essentially different horns on the *same* beast.

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