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The Uses & Abuses of the Language of Evil Today

Philosophy Department, Conference room A108
University of Sussex (Brighton)

March 24th, 2023

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CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

09:15h-09:45h: Registration

9:45h-10:00h: Welcome

10:00h-12:00h: First panel: Evil beyond Theology

3 speakers (25min presentation + followed by 45minutesr discussion with the panellists Q&A)

Chair: Lynn Alena Roth

Speaker 1: "The Thin Moral Concept of Evil" – Michael Wilby

Speaker 2: "Is it necessary to eliminate the language of evil? Arguments for evil-scepticism" – Adriana Joanna Mickiewicz

Speaker 3: "Spinoza's political concept of evil" – Oliver Toth

12:00h-13:00h: Lunch (*Student Union Catering – provided for the keynote & conference speakers*)

13:00h -15:00h: Second panel: Encountering 'Evil'

3 selected speakers (25min presentation + followed by 45min discussion with the panellists Q&A)

Chair: Denis Chevrier-Bosseau



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Speaker 1: “Five vignettes of evil inspired by Jean Rhys’s novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*” – Emma-Louise Jay

Speaker 2: “A Philosophical Analysis of Labelling Non-Binary Genders as Evil – Mervey Aslan

Speaker 3: “The Language of Evil and British Foreign Policy” – Irfan Chowdhury

15:00-15:15h: Coffee and Tea Break (*Coffee and Tea - Provided by organisers*)

15:15-17:15h: Third panel: Morality and the Moralisation of Evil

3 selected speakers (25min presentation + followed by 45min discussion with the panellists Q&A)

Chair: Thomas Godfrey

Speaker 1: “Having your cake and eating it too. Can we express the positive function of evil without its negative connotations?” – Markus Tschölg

Speaker 2: “Wrapping the moral landscape: Evil’s qualitative difference from mere wrongdoing” -Stephen de Wijze

Speaker 3: “Cruelty be thou my Good: An evil intention” -Bob Brecher

17:15h-17:30h Coffee and Tea Break (*Coffee and Tea - Provided by organisers*)

17:30h – 18:45h: Keynote Prof. Dr. Gavin Rae

Key note speaker (1x 45min/ 60min) + Followed by 30min to 45min discussion and Q&A

18:45h-19:45: Drinks at IDS



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20:15h: Conference dinner at The Walrus (*provided for the keynote & conference speakers*)



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LIST OF ABSTRACTS

PANEL 1

Speaker 1:

MICHAEL WILBY (Anglia Ruskin University)

The Thin Moral Concept of Evil. - Recent work on the Philosophy of Evil has revolved around the debate between 'evil-sceptics' and 'evil-revivalists' (Calder 2013; Russell 2016). The former argue that 'evil' as a concept is both descriptively and normatively outmoded; it is descriptively outmoded because it implicitly assumes a naïve, pre-modern outlook of dark forces and possessed spirits; it is normatively outmoded because it is used to score cheap political points and to scapegoat (Cole 2006).

In this paper, I defend the evil-revivalists position against the threat of evil-scepticism by arguing that evil should be understood as a thin moral concept. A thin moral concept is one that assumes little to no descriptive content. It is largely or purely evaluative (Kirchin 2017). Understood in this thin way, the descriptive challenge fades, because the concept of evil doesn't even purport to denote anything in the world (it is purely evaluative), and so does the normative argument, since the thinness of the concept means that, first, it is ineliminable anyway – it simply occupies a logical point at the far end of a scale of moral evaluations – and, second, its malleability allows for it to be used for progressive and constructive means. I finish by drawing connections between the concepts of evil, rights, and punishment, to show a revived 'secular' concept of evil could be used to strengthen our moral vocabulary and practices.



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Speaker 2:

ADRIANA JOANNA MICKIEWICZ (Jagiellonian University)

Is it necessary to eliminate the language of evil? Arguments for evil-scepticism. -

In my presentation, I want to conduct a philosophical examination of the concept of evil. My speech's purpose is to give arguments in support of the so-called "evil-scepticism."

I'll start by criticizing the way we currently view evil. I want to demonstrate how the Augustinian-Kantian paradigm has dominated European thinking about this phenomenon. As a result evil is often view as a the lack of good or/and as an inherent and irreducible predisposition of man. Similar ways of thinking can be observed in modern philosophy (see Hannah Arendt), as well as in art, popular culture, and public life. The discussion of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine serves as an example. I will be able to demonstrate how the aforementioned philosophical paradigm has permeated European thinking on the problem of evil through analyses of statements made by politicians, journalists, and anti-war demonstrators.

Next, I'll talk about the risks associated with this paradigm. I'll demonstrate how the prevalent perception of evil results in a feeling of powerlessness. The arguments I'll make are as follows:

1. Man interacts with a finite material universe. By viewing evil as a lack, man would have to oppose nothingness (which belongs to another order: infinite and non-material), in order to combat evil.

2. I shall object to the belief that extreme evil is man's unavoidable tendency for evil. I'll demonstrate the psychological harm this mindset causes.

- 3 I'll also talk about why, despite our continued acceptance of the idea of absolute evil, it is still so difficult for us to accept the idea of holiness in today's world. In light of this, I will provide an argument against the duality of good and evil.

In this case, the author will take a skeptical approach toward evil. My thesis will be that this category has to be rejected in favor of ideas like wrongness, which do not have as significant metaphysical and theological implications. I'll contend that letting go of the idea of evil will give us back our sense of agency and empower us to speak out against deeds we see as morally wrong.



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Speaker 3:

OLIVER TOTH (University of Graz)

Spinoza's political concept of evil. - In this paper, I argue that Spinoza's political concept of evil can serve as an alternative to the mainstream notion of evil and help us better engage with contemporary politics. Spinoza identifies evil with acting from the hate that emerges from political infringement. Although acting from hate is always evil, it is a sign of political oppression that allows the oppressed to recognize her position. Being evil can move the oppressed to reflect on her position and engage with politics rationally, i.e., lovingly.

To see the difference between Spinoza's and our everyday concept of evil, let's take the banal example of someone observing a kid drowning in a pond and doing nothing out of concern for her clothes. Spinoza holds that only the individual is evil because of this decision. The society that conveyed those values to the individual, which made her more concerned for her clothes than the innocent child's life, is good. His claim goes against our expectations which correlates moral responsibility with agency. If the individual decides not to save the child because of the values conveyed by society, society is more and not less evil than the individual. By contrast, Spinoza's point is that the subject is evil because her decision is guided by the values conveyed to her by society rather than by her own rational interest.

I argue that Spinoza's notion of evil is political because it construes evil not as a deviation from a formal or material norm but rather as the affective result of acting in someone else's interest. If an agent acts in her own interests, her affects are shaped by love toward others. By contrast, if an agent acts in the interest of someone else, her affects are passive and shaped by hate toward others. For example, the particular values conveyed to the individual by society bring about that the individual acts in the interest of the rulers of the given society. In this case, the rulers observe with love the individual acting in their interest. By contrast, the individual acts in the interest of the rulers and has a conceptually unarticulated feeling that what she does is not right for her. This feeling is hate, which can have many objects, e.g., the drowning child who has nothing to do with the cause of her hate. If she acts out of this hate, she is evil.

Hateful passions are generally considered to be irrational and destructive. Yet, when considered in their political context as evil, they constitute the necessary first step in social emancipation since it is only through being evil that the subject



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experiences her alienation from her action. By reflecting on her own evilness, the agent can recognize her being oppressed and act in her own interest, either by joining the rulers and adopting their aims or by rationally and lovingly changing the political order.

PANEL 2

Speaker 1:

EMMA-LOUISE JAY (University of Brighton)

Five vignettes of evil inspired by Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. – *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a post-colonial novel written by Dominican-British author Jean Rhys depicting themes of psychological complexity and in particular, various forms of 'evil'. The book was written with the intention of being a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* and in particular a response to the characterisation of the 'Creole' character Bertha. My paper will attempt to consider main characters described by Jean Rhys in her novel and present them as clinical case vignettes using the language of clinical and counselling psychology. I will consider some of the ethical issues associated with diagnosing and writing about 'evil' in this way, and some implications in terms of decolonising our discipline.

Speaker 2:

MERVE ARSLAN (University of Brighton)

A Philosophical Analysis of Labelling Non-Binary Genders as Evil. - Discourse is one of the most influential social dynamics in our lives. It shapes our social perceptions; thus, it has a wide range of effects on our attitudes and behaviours. In my opinion, one of the most important strategies a discourse uses on the social perceptions in a shaping and transformation process is labelling. However, if the dominant discourse uses negative labelling such as 'bad' or 'evil', it makes our social perceptions formed with negative separations. As a result of this, we see discrimination and violence in social life. Therefore, it is quite necessary to grasp what a negative labelling actually serves. With this motivation, in this study, I examine some of the negative examples of labelling of non-binary genders today. I aim to discuss these examples with their historical backgrounds. In my philosophical discourse analysis, I utilize the theories of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to shed light on the historical background of negative labelling and their problematic results today.



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Speaker 3:

IRFAN CHOWDHURY (University of Brighton)

The Language of Evil and British Foreign Policy. - In this presentation, I will discuss how the language of evil is used by the British state, and in media and academia, to demonise official enemy states, such as Russia and Iran, while painting Britain and its allies as occupying a moral high ground. I will argue that the purpose of this propagandistic framing of global affairs is to convince the British public that our government and military do not commit atrocities in the way that official enemy states do, and that Britain and its international allies overall constitute a force for good in the world, thus manufacturing consent for British military interventions abroad, and for Britain's crucial role in maintaining US hegemony. This is relevant to the conference, because it illustrates how the language of evil can be cynically misused in service of powerful interests, in a way that intensifies global problems, rather than helping to resolve them. The focal point of my presentation will be the British Army's perpetration of war crimes in Iraq, which is the topic of my PhD; I will demonstrate how the British Army's egregious war crimes during that military occupation, and the role of successive British governments in covering up the war crimes and shielding the perpetrators from accountability, expose the fundamental falsity of the dominant narrative, which is that 'our side' is good, while 'their side' is evil. In light of these war crimes, I will counterpose how Britain is spoken about in British military apologetics to how Britain's official enemies are spoken about in British military apologetics, and will deconstruct the assumptions that underpin this propaganda, which posit Britain as a benevolent champion of human rights, committed to defending democracy from evil forces.

I will explore how the language of evil has been frequently used to characterise Russia's invasion of Ukraine, wherein Russia is undoubtedly committing terrible atrocities; I will illustrate how this dominant discourse has not been similarly applied to Britain's own actions in Iraq, or to the actions of its close allies in their own theatres of conflict, despite the evidence illustrating that 'our side' certainly does not abide by the lofty values espoused in these moral denunciations of Russia. I will discuss how the language of evil can be useful, but that it should be applied in a way that brings to light the atrocities for which we as British citizens bear responsibility, and to encourage us to look in the mirror with regards to our own actions on the world stage, rather than in a way that fuels a self-serving narrative about our own innate goodness and benevolence, as opposed to the



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supposed unparalleled iniquity of our enemies. I will further explore how this selective use of the language of evil, cynically applied in order to bolster support for Britain's foreign policy, is itself a major contributing factor behind the perpetuation of evil – as perpetrated by Britain and its allies.

PANEL 3

Speaker 1:

MARKUS TSCHÖGL (University of Vienna)

Having your cake and eating it too. Can we express the positive function of evil without its negative connotations? - Evil Revivalists think there is something

positive worth preserving about the concept of evil. Being the “strongest one-word condemnation our moral vocabulary affords” (Kekes 2009), it is sometimes considered unique in the way it enables us to address, condemn, and conceptualize the most horrific actions and agents known to humankind.

Evil Sceptics, however, want to abandon the concept of “evil” altogether. They call into question its usefulness and explanatory power, claiming that it has nothing to add to our moral vocabulary other than metaphysical and theological connotations that can be abused in order to dehumanize—and even demonize—those who are referred to as evil. This suggests that, whatever positive function ascriptions of evil might fulfill, it might just as well be expressed using more secular language that does not harbor these potentially dangerous connotations. Now, I believe that we can preserve the positive function of evil without actually using the word. In fact, I believe that there are many ways in which we already do that. Perhaps Evil Revivalists are right in that we may not be able to do so using only a *single* word, but we have other devices at our disposal. Most notably, we can draw comparisons with paradigm examples of actions and agents we might otherwise have described as evil—without actually having to rely on that kind of language.

But here's the problem I see. I don't think that we can actually express the positive function we might want to preserve without also expressing at least some of the things that constitute the reasons for which we want to abandon the language of evil in the first place. If we want to preserve the positive function of evil, we can do so using other means of expression, but we will, thereby, also preserve part of its negative function. Now, what I claim is that all the dehumanizing and demonizing potential that makes “evil” so dangerous and susceptible to abuse is not actually connected to the word “evil”, but instead to the positive function it



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expresses, i.e., to the positive power of condemnation we might actually want to preserve. We cannot have one without the other.

I, thus, want to suggest that we should not so much discuss whether we want to abandon the language of evil, but whether actually want to preserve its function. And, if we are worried about this function that the language of evil fulfills within moral discourse, we should not just be worried about the word “evil”, but also about all the linguistic means we might want to replace it with.

Speaker 2:

STEPHEN DE WIJZE (University of Manchester)

Warping the moral landscape: Evil’s qualitative difference from mere wrongdoing. - For those engaged in a secular discussion of ‘evil’, there is a strong argument that if this term serves any purpose at all, it is as a descriptive intensifier of immoral actions or bad persons. One could just as usefully have used descriptors such as ‘very’ or ‘terribly’ or ‘unacceptably’ to describe the extreme nature of actions or persons we think evil. In this view, evil designates a *quantitative* rather than *qualitative* difference that distinguishes moderately immoral actions and persons from those which are extreme. However, my paper argues that if we accept this view we eviscerate what is useful and *sui generis* to the notion of ‘evil’. Evil describes the very worst actions and persons from a normative perspective and this is not merely a quantitative distinction from mere wrongdoing. Without a notion of evil we lose a valuable and important part of our normative vocabulary to accurately characterise a distressing part of our moral reality. My paper argues that the *qualitative* difference that we express with the term evil focuses on warping of the moral landscape within we engage in fundamental social and political interactions. We find this very widespread understanding of the concept of evil within our pre-cognitive responses, such as our emotional responses of revulsion, disgust and horror, to certain actions and persons. This phenomenology of our moral experiences when facing evildoing and/or evil persons and institutions, provides valuable data for understanding a concept of evil, which in turn gives this concept explanatory power and insight into why it is qualitatively different from the concept of ordinary wrongdoing. By warping our normative and rejecting pluralism and legitimate disagreement, evil eviscerates the very basis for civilised and moral social cooperation and coexistence. The widespread ordinary and commonplace violations of moral norms (lying, stealing, some forms of unjustified violence) are quite different from the fundamental undermining and warping of morality that endorses or ignores the infliction of what Hampshire calls the Great Evils - murder, torture, starvation



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etc. – along with the rejection of human diversity and legitimate disagreement. Evil acts and persons undermine any and all specific ways of life or conceptions of the good, through the destruction or perversion of the moral and social framework or boundaries. In this way, evil properly describes actions and persons that are qualitatively worse than mere immoral actions. Such acts do not just violate moral strictures but aim to obliterate the altogether. Hence, referring to evil persons and actions is not a redundant notion nor merely an intensifier but a valuable part of our moral vocabulary which identifies which actions and persons who do not merely engage in immorality but have a far more profound effect on our wellbeing with its destruction of the very fabric of our moral and social lives.

Speaker 3:

BOB BRECHER (University of Brighton)

“Cruelty be thou my Good”: An evil intention. - Phillip Cole’s *The Myth of Evil* remains an impressively convincing deconstruction of ‘evil’, a deconstruction given sustenance by Alasdair MacIntyre’s magisterial insistence in *After Virtue* that the life of moral concepts is dependent for their vitality – even their intelligibility – on the modes of life within which they historically arise. Yet notions of evil persist, despite having become largely detached from their western theological moorings: as the organisers of this conference note, ‘[T]he language of evil continues to be used and abused by politicians, the press, social media, literary works and in everyday speech.’

Contrary to the common philosophical view that ‘evil’, a theologically-rooted throwback, simply signals extreme cases, the sheer persistence of ‘evil’ as a category, I shall argue, suggests that the term is neither confused nor meaningless. Rather it indicates a need to describe some actions and/or people, not as just terribly wrong, or immoral, but as qualitatively different from more everyday instances of immorality. In brief, and taking my cue from Wittgenstein’s insistence that the meaning of a term is constituted by its use, I want to suggest that the concept can, and should, be retained.

So what might a secular conception of evil look like? Richard Rorty famously argued that cruelty is the worst thing we human beings do; and it is indeed hard to imagine what might be worse than cruelty. And so on a cognitivist view of morality, to act for the sake of cruelty is (even) more troubling -- because so deeply irrational -- than to employ cruelty instrumentally, as a means to some other end. Thus, for instance, while to use the cruelty of torture instrumentally is irredeemably immoral, to torture someone for the sake of doing so, for the pleasure of its cruelty, goes further. For to do that brings into question the



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perpetrator's very identity as a person, a rational being: hence it raises, for some, the question, "mad or bad?" and that of the futility of punishment. But my intention is not to address these issues here. Rather I want to suggest that the fact that they arise at all may be understood as bringing into question the perpetrator's personhood. As further examples will show, in adopting, whether explicitly or implicitly, a "principle" such as "Cruelty be thou my good", a person sets themselves rationally apart from any community of persons in a way that simply acting immorally, or wrongly, does not. Thus what was once understood as the loss of one's soul may now be seen as the loss, however rationally unaccountably, of one's personhood. And if that is right, then the substantial phenomenon remains; and – however inchoate and explanatorily limited -- 'evil' effectively names it.