

Deliver us from Evil: The Case for Scepticismⁱ

Phillip Cole
University of the West of England Bristol
phil.cole@uwe.ac.uk

Word count – 7451

Notes on contributors:

Phillip Cole teaches Politics and International Relations at the University of West of England, Bristol. He is author of *The Myth of Evil*, published by Edinburgh University Press in 2006.

x

1. Introduction: The Myth of Evil

In a review of Matthew Kramer's book *The Ethics of Capital Punishment: A Philosophical Investigation of Evil and its Consequences* (Kramer 2011), Carol J. Steiker contrasts Kramer's response to learning of the horrors of the Holocaust as a child with her own. As an eight year old, Kramer started to develop what ended up as a 'purgative' rationale for the death penalty as a moral duty in the face of extreme acts. It seemed obscene to Kramer that the rest of humanity should have to devote resources to keeping leading Nazi perpetrators alive indefinitely. Steiker's own response as a "standard American Jewish teenage girl" was to wonder "how many Germans (and others) could have come to see an entire people (*my* people) as not really people at all – as something less than human" (Steiker 2015: 367). She would later explain her work as a public defender in law:

"I viewed the representation of (allegedly) heinous criminals as an extreme civil rights work – the championing of the rights and dignity of exactly those people that right-thinking folks are inclined to view as 'not really people' at all. I argued

that by zealously representing those whom we are most inclined to hate, I was keeping the world safe for whoever else might at some point fall into that category – Jews, blacks, gays, etc. I hoped that by contextualizing my clients’ offenses and giving voice to their stories – especially when they were in fact guilty as charged – I was working against our collective tendency to ‘dehumanize’ others, by combating this propensity in its most compelling form” (Steiker 2015: 367-8).

For her, the challenge of the Holocaust was “to resist the human tendency towards the dehumanization of others, even (maybe especially) wrongdoers” (Steiker 2015: 368).

These contrasting responses – the first focussing on an account of the agents who carried out these extreme actions and what should be done to them, the second focussing on understanding the conditions that can give rise to dreadful persecution on the scale of the Holocaust, especially the “collective tendency to ‘dehumanize’ others” – can be seen in the range of philosophical responses to human ‘evil’. My own response is the same as Steiker’s, and it is this collective tendency and its power that I describe in my book, *The Myth of Evil* (Cole 2006) which, in the United States, was given the subtitle *Demonizing the Enemy*. However, when I set out to research and write that book I had a very different intention – but three interesting things happened during my encounter with the concept of evil: the first was about how I understood evil and agency; the second about my relationship with two great moral philosophers, Kant and Nietzsche; and the third to do with philosophy itself as a discipline.

When I decided to write a book on evil, I was convinced that philosophy, in its dominant form, was importantly mistaken about a key issue to do with agency. The view taken by the great moral theorists Hobbes, Hume and Kant was that a human agent could not will

'pure' evil – that is, to bring about human suffering for its own sake. Where an agent willed human suffering, it was for the sake of some other goal, such as power, pleasure, out of fear – this is 'impure' evil. But pure evil lay outside the realms of the human. I decided this was a radical mistake – in the face of a human history filled with obscene atrocities at all levels, it seemed futile to deny that human beings could will pure evil. So I set about collecting evidence for my argument, looking at some of the worst cases of human cruelty – child murderers, torturers, terrorists, serial killers, including the perpetrators of the Holocaust. But then came my first surprise. Despite researching deeply into these events, I could make no sense of the idea of pure evil. Not only that, even the idea of impure evil ceased to make sense – in fact, the concept of evil itself began to dissolve into incoherence. By the time I wrote the book, I had arrived at a conclusion completely opposite to the hypothesis I began with – a form of 'evil scepticism'.

This is not scepticism that the concept of evil exists – it clearly does. And while in Philosophy there are subtle and sophisticated theories of evil, my concern was that these conceptions have very little purchase on political and public discourse. The fact is that the concept of evil which dominates popular culture and politics is what I term the 'monstrous' conception. This conception holds that some humans can freely and rationally choose to make others suffer purely for its own sake, but these people have crossed a boundary beyond the human – they are monsters in human shape, different from you and me and the rest of humanity. This conception is a powerful source of inspiration in fiction, where monsters with extraordinary powers, whether from folklore or outer space, are filled with malevolence towards us and want to destroy us for no reason other than this is what they want to do. But this conception has often crossed from the world of fiction into people's understandings of reality. The popular

media are quick to identify murderers, rapists and others as monsters, and political leaders have also deployed the monstrous conception. To portray an other as an evil enemy is to close off any possibility of communication and negotiation, indeed of any need to understand anything about them. The only possible form of defence is their complete destruction.

The second surprise was about my relationship with Kant and Nietzsche. As an undergraduate student I encountered Kant's categorical imperative in the form: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end", and this was a transformative moment in my philosophical and political life. This principle has underpinned my political thinking and action ever since. However, as I dug deeper into Kant's encounter with the concept of evil, I saw my favourite moral philosopher become entangled in ever more complex knots with very little result (Cole 2006, pp. 58-66).ⁱⁱ I realised that it was Nietzsche who pointed the way forward, because he asked the right question – not, "how do we explain evil in the context of moral philosophy?", but "why do people want to use the concept of evil in the way they do?" (Cole 2006: 66-76). This brought about the third surprise, that philosophy may not be best placed to answer this question. And so despite devoting my life to philosophical teaching and writing, very early in this book I stopped doing philosophy. I travelled through politics, psychology, psychoanalysis, literary and film theory, cultural theory, all of which told me much more in answer to Nietzsche's question than philosophy. Even then I ended up in a surprising place, concluding that evil is not a philosophical concept, nor a psychological one, nor even a theological one - it has its home in mythology.

Drawing heavily on the work of Neil Forsyth (Forsyth 1987 and 2003), I argued that the figure of the evil person in the contemporary discourse of evil is mythological. Just as Satan is a meaningful figure only in the context of the Christian mythological world history and makes no sense outside it, the evil figures that stalk our contemporary world have a similar role. When we describe someone as evil, we are not saying anything about their character or their motivations -- we are instead making them a figure in a story in which they play a specific and prescribed role. And in making them such a figure we do away with any need to understand their history, their motives, or their psychology. Narrative characters have no such features, or rather they simply have the history, motives and psychology ascribed to them by the narrative plot, those required to drive the story forward. If we were to look beyond the myth of evil, we may discover people very different to those we have constructed.

2. The Philosophy of Evil

I was rejecting any philosophical theory of evil persons, a theory that claimed to be able to identify the properties that make a person evil, and/or claimed to be able to offer an explanation for their evil agency. In their paper "Speak No Evil" Eve Garrard and David McNaughton respond to this rejection by describing it as a kind of 'error theory' (Garrard and McNaughton 2012). What they mean is that if there is no such thing as evil agency, then there can be no evil acts, and so the kind of moral horror we experience in response to the terrible things people do must be some kind of error on our part. This, they argue, is implausible. What a philosophical theory can do is enable us to understand this phenomenological experience of moral horror. A philosophical concept of evil action "categorises together those acts to which we respond with moral horror; the pressing task of a theory of evil is to provide an account of what features it is of such

actions that justify our horror, and explain why they do so” (Garrard and McNaughton 2012: 17).

In their account, part of the role of a philosophical theory of evil action is to make sense of our experience of moral horror. That is, of course, to make *normative* sense of it, not psychological sense. The theory can tell us when that response is appropriate or inappropriate by telling us when we are confronted with an act that is properly evil. We can make mistakes – we can experience moral horror when we shouldn’t, or fail to experience it when we should. For Garrard and McNaughton the theory of evil fills in the details of the experience – without it, or at least without the concept, there would be no experience of moral horror. “What the phenomenology delivers is not that acts are evil because we find them horrifying; rather it’s that we find them horrifying because they are evil” (Garrard and McNaughton 2012: 15-16). There are two possible claims being made here – first, that we will not experience moral horror without a concept of evil action; or a second, that we cannot make normative sense of our experience of moral horror without a philosophical theory of evil agency (allowing that a concept of evil action need not be a full-blown philosophical theory of agency). Whichever of these claims is being made, I would argue that we do not need a concept of evil action in order to experience moral horror, and we do not need a philosophical theory of evil agency in order to make normative sense of that experience.

There are different levels of experience to which the concept of evil has been historically applied. The first is the fundamental experience of extreme suffering in the world, in particular the suffering of innocents (traditionally this has specifically been human suffering); the second is the cause of that suffering, which can be either natural activities like disease or earthquake, or social, the results of human activity; the third is

to human actions or inactions that cause suffering; and the fourth is to the human beings and their reasons, motivations or dispositions which are taken to explain why those people carry out such actions. It is at the fourth level that philosophical theories of evil agency are supposed to do their work, focusing on the characteristics or dispositions or reasons that lead evil persons to carry out evil actions. And it is at this level that evil functions as an *explanatory* concept, such that our philosophical theory offers an explanation of why evil persons carry out evil actions. An explanatory concept of evil makes no sense at the first two levels without a theological or mythological framework, and while philosophical theories of evil action apply at the third level, such theories can only tell us what properties make an action evil, not why it happened, and so again there is no explanatory role for the concept of evil at this level.

There are two points of crucial importance here. The first is that any idea of evil at the third or fourth levels is parasitic upon the first two levels, and in the end all are parasitic on the first – the unjustified suffering of innocents is the core idea of evil. The second is that there is more than enough scope for the experience of moral horror at these first two levels without the need for any concept of evil action nor any philosophical theory of evil agency. Not only that, there is expansive space here for illumination and explanation. These first two levels include the fact that human beings have done dreadful things to humans and other animals and caused terrible suffering. The important task is to understand the conditions under which such terrible events occur – a *situational* rather than a *dispositional* approach. These are conditions that Garrard and McNaughton say can play a part in explaining human action alongside the concept of evil, such as social, psychological, historical and neurological conditions (Garrard and McNaughton 2012: 10), to which I would add political, economic and cultural conditions. This is to widen the second level beyond a simple binary between the

natural and the human as causes of suffering, and to take in the social, political, economic, historical, cultural, neurological and psychological complexities of the human condition. Certainly the other frames I explore in *The Myth of Evil* of psychology, psychoanalysis and politics can contribute to our understanding at this level, as can economics, criminology and other disciplines. And I do strongly believe that philosophy can contribute to our understanding here also. In that sense, my scepticism about philosophy is limited to those accounts that claim to provide theories of evil action and evil agency, and which claim to be explanatory.

But it is this kind of theory that Garrard and McNaughton believe is needed to make sense of moral horror. They use an example from the conflict in the Congo: “a combatant who disembowelled and dismembered his adversary, and forced the dead man’s wife to gather up the dismembered body parts into a heap, on top of which he then raped her” (Garrard and McNaughton 2012: 14). We experience deep moral horror here, and if Garrard and McNaughton are right we need a philosophical theory of evil agency to make sense of the normative content of that horror, to make it *moral* horror. Their example comes from a report by Adam Hochschild, ‘The Rape of the Congo’. Towards the end of that report, Hochschild asks how people could do such terrible things to others, and provides an account, talking of brutalized and exploited soldiers as well as the complex and longstanding chaos in the Congo. He says: “... looking at people I meet, even an entire encampment of gold miners who are almost all ex-combatants, do I see those who look capable of killing hospital patients in their beds, gang-raping a woman like Rebecca Kamate, jabbing a young man’s eye with a bayonet? I do not.” He asks: “What turns such people into rapists, sadists, killers? Greed, fear, demagogic leaders and their claim that such violence is necessary for self-defense, seeing everyone around you doing the same thing—and the fact that the rest of the world pays tragically little

attention to one of the great humanitarian catastrophes of our time” (Hochschild 2009). He does not use the word ‘evil’ at any point in his article, and although this does not prove anything concerning the arguments here, it seems significant to me that this is a report from a journalist in the field, who has born witness to the events and to the people involved, and experienced moral horror at first hand. Yet it does not seem to occur to him to use the word ‘evil’ or the idea of evil people to make sense of it. Rather, he takes Carol J. Steiker’s turn in emphasizing the processes that have led these soldiers to see their victims as less than human. The crucial point is that moral horror is entirely appropriate and comprehensible at this situational level of analysis.

In an earlier paper Garrard makes one of the most important and detailed attempts to arrive at a theory of evil agency (Garrard 2002). There she argues that the evil agent suffers a severe cognitive defect such that they are blind to reasons that count against the action they wish to perform. An “... account of evil ... which identifies the evil act as one in which the agent is impervious to reasons of the most conclusive kind against his act, is therefore apt for figuring in an explanation of the act in question” (Garrard 2002: 332.) Saying the act is evil will “amount to saying that the agent acted as he did because he was blind to the reason-giving force of (for example) the suffering of his victims – he just couldn’t see that as a reason for him to desist” (Garrard 2002, p. 332). This explains why he performed this act – “because he couldn’t see that there were overwhelming reasons against it...” (Garrard 2002: 332). “Because the proposed account of evil locates it in the agent’s motivational state (that is, in the reasons he saw and failed to see), attributing evil to an action will always partially explain why the agent performed the act, since it will always reveal something about what the agent saw as reasons for acting, and about what reasons he failed to discern altogether” (Garrard 2002, pp. 332-3). However, this account suffers the defects of any philosophical theory of evil agency,

in that any such theory will be derivative and parasitic. It will be derivative because the sense of evil as the presence of overwhelming and undeserved suffering delivers all the content of the concept, and it is parasitic as the concept of evil gets its explanatory force by becoming attached to something else that does all the explanatory work. With Garrard's account we might want to say: "This person is evil because they have a cognitive structure which leads them to perform evil actions." But the concept of 'evil' in this sentence plays no explanatory role. The cognitive structure has been identified as evil because of the actions and their consequences that flow from it, but describing that cognitive structure, or rather the person who has it, as evil does not give the concept any explanatory role to play at all. It is entirely parasitic.

In their later paper Garrard and McNaughton point out that other moral concepts do play an explanatory role and that the concept of evil "takes its place among the other moral concepts, both those which are features of actions and also those which are features of character. And these moral concepts all figure quite naturally in our explanations of human actions and reactions; indeed, we will be unable to adequately understand how our fellow humans are behaving without some reference to virtues such as courage, generosity, and honesty, or vices such as selfishness, cruelty, and hypocrisy" (Garrard and McNaughton 2012, p. 8). But this is a significant shift in the understanding of the concept and its explanatory power. Luke Russell distinguishes between two kinds of philosophical theory of evil agency – the first is where "...evil actions are marked out by a distinctive psychological feature that is comparatively unfamiliar and complex..." (Russell 2014: 36); and the second is a form of 'folk psychology' where evil actions are explained by an everyday psychological state we are familiar with such as malice or pleasure. The appeal Garrard and McNaughton make to concepts like courage, cruelty and hypocrisy is an appeal to that latter kind of 'folk

psychology', but the concept of evil Garrard develops in her earlier paper does not belong to this list – folk psychology concepts are relatively shallow and people who use them are making no claims about the deeper psychological structure of the agent described; Garrard's concept of evil as a specific cognitive defect has psychological depth. And so the appeal to 'shallow' concepts of folk psychology cannot persuade us that Garrard's 'deep' concept of evil makes philosophical sense.

3. The Philosophy of Dispositions

Russell has his own 'shallow' theory of evil agency as opposed to Garrard's 'deep' theory. This is a dispositional approach where evil persons are those who are strongly and highly fixedly disposed to perform evil actions under conditions of autonomy: "...an evil person is someone who is markedly likely to do evil when he is allowed to do what he wants to do, and whom we cannot easily change into a good person by using everyday techniques such as moral reasoning" (Russell 2014: 5). Evil personhood understood in this sense can act as a limited explanation of evil action: that a person has a strong and highly fixed disposition to perform evil actions is part of an explanation of why that person performed such an action in specific circumstances. If we are looking to philosophy to help, alongside other disciplines such as psychology and economics, in the project of understanding why human beings cause terrible suffering to their fellow humans and other creatures, Russell's approach represents one of the paths I described at the start of this essay. This is a view which Garrard shares, in pointing to the existence of a distinct type of human being as separate from the rest of humanity. This is not a complete explanation, but evil persons, as identified by the theory of evil agency, are going to be a very important part of the story.

This brings me to a second strand of my concerns about philosophies of evil and another ground for my scepticism. The first was to do with the coherence of such theories and their claim to provide an explanatory theory of evil agency. The second concern is ethical: even if we can overcome the coherence objection, we should still be very cautious about philosophies of evil agency, precisely because of their tendency to pick out a separate type of human being, marked out by specific characteristics, as evil persons. I have pointed to the power of the discourse of monstrous evil in popular culture and politics, and in *The Myth of Evil* I argue that this discourse is much more powerful and pervasive than philosophy, and, if given the opportunity, it will feed off philosophy for its own ends. If philosophy claims that it can identify evil persons as distinct and different, it may find itself co-opted in political and social projects it finds deeply dangerous and disturbing, with little or no power to resist that co-option. In this essay, I want to argue that some of the seeds of the monstrous conception are present within these philosophical theories of evil persons, and that if they are applied consistently, these philosophical theories can themselves lead to some deeply morally questionable practices.

We can see those seeds in Russell's theory, in his conclusion that "...there really are some evil persons, who are not only strongly disposed to perform the worst kind of wrong actions, but are beyond redemption, for practical purposes, and should be treated as write offs" (Russel 2014: 196). Todd Calder identifies two aspects of Russell's conception of evil personhood that get him to this conclusion – the fixity component and the autonomy component. The fixity component is designed to overcome the objection that, if we take Russell's definition of evil actions, then a great many people would count as evil persons when in fact such persons are comparatively rare. The fixity component tells us the evil person not only carries out evil actions, they also have a fixed

disposition to do so in the right conditions. The majority of people who perform evil actions do not have this fixed disposition, and therefore do not count as evil persons. This is to rule out the possibility of rehabilitation of evil persons, or at least make it very unlikely. They will not change their ways. Russell says: "...an evil person is someone who is strongly and highly-fixedly disposed to perform evil actions when in autonomy-favouring conditions, and hence ..., for practical purposes, an evil person is a moral right-off, whom we cannot expect to listen to our moral arguments or to be a suitable candidate for other attempts at moral reform. If this is what it means to demonize a person, then in judging that our enemy is an evil person, we are demonizing the enemy" (Russell 2014: 225). Russell refers here to the second component of his theory, the autonomy requirement, that people who perform evil actions in conditions where their autonomy is compromised in some way do not count as evil persons – evil persons are disposed to perform evil actions in situations where their autonomy is not compromised in anyway. This, again, meets the intuitive requirement that evil persons are comparatively rare.

But it also makes them distinct from the rest of the humanity. Calder comments that the fixity component is meant to capture the 'folk' intuition that evil persons are beyond reform and redemption, but asks whether these intuitions should be captured in a philosophical theory of evil personhood – just because they are strong 'folk' beliefs, we do not have to include them in our theory, and perhaps, morally, we ought not to. Calder suggests that they reflect a psychological desire or need to see ourselves as essentially good persons, quite distinct from evil persons such that we are incapable of participating in bringing about great suffering for others. Evil persons are utterly unlike us, they are inhuman monsters (Calder 2015, p. 353). This makes our dealings with such people simple: there is no need to negotiate or engage with them in anyway, or be

concerned about their rehabilitation – we should “destroy them or isolate them from civilized society” (Calder 2015: 353). This is a philosophy of monsters, hardly a stone’s throw from the monstrous conception that motivates popular and political conceptions of evil people, with all its dangers. Calder comments: “...while it may be true that many people have the intuition that evil persons are moral write-offs, beyond reform and redemption, these intuitions may be based more on desires to have and promote positive images of ourselves than on clear reflection about the concept of evil personhood and human psychology” (Calder 2012: 354).

Calder is also critical of the autonomy component of Russell’s account. As explained earlier, the component is there to allow us to limit the number of evil persons and not implicate the vast majority of people in evil personhood. Russell argues that the majority of people who took part in Stanley Milgram’s experiment, for example, were not evil despite performing evil actions. Russell expands this to what he describes as ‘Milgram scenarios’ in which people are being pressured and deceived, or “volatile and threatening political situations” (Russell 2014: 170). But Calder asks how we are meant to know when a Milgram scenario holds? “Is any circumstance where we are influenced by surprising situational factors a Milgram scenario? If so, we may be in Milgram scenarios all of the time” (Calder 2012: 355). And if we extend this to include volatile, threatening or coercive political situations, Russell’s evil person becomes very rare indeed. Calder’s view is that there is something wrong – conceptually and perhaps ethically – with trying to identify evil persons as a distinct kind. While most of us are not evil persons under ordinary circumstances, “most, if not all, of us have the potential to be evil persons” (Calder 2012: 357). Rather than combat evil by seeking to isolate or destroy evil persons, the more urgent task is “to avoid creating social environments that are conducive to the emergence of evil persons” (Calder 2012, p. 357), recognizing that

there is very little to prevent ourselves from being an evil person in those environments.

4. Beyond the Philosophy of Monsters

Calder here refers to the option of the destruction of evil persons, and of course Russell does not suggest this. In fact few philosophers of evil agency have anything to say about what should be done once we have used philosophical theory to identify evil persons. An exception is Matthew Kramer, in his book *The Ethics of Capital Punishment* (Kramer 2011). Developing what he calls his purgative theory of punishment, Kramer argues that, “among the countless crimes committed in any jurisdiction, some are so iniquitous that the continued existence of the thugs responsible for them is a blot on the moral order of the community in which those thugs are kept alive. Sparing such criminals from execution is wrong, for their lives are of negative value. So long as they survive (past the time necessary for fair legal proceedings against them), they sully any community with which they are associated” (Kramer 2011: 186). A community is tainted – “its moral integrity is lessened” – by the continuation of the lives of those who commit such crimes. “To avert or remove that taint, a community must devote some of its resources to terminating the life of such an offender” (Kramer 2011: 187). Such a theory of punishment, says Kramer, must be underpinned by an account of the nature of evil (Kramer 2011: 187).

The evil that underpins the purgative response has to be extreme or “extravagant”. The purgative rationale “extends only to instances of evil conduct that are so heinous as to render abominable the continued existence of their perpetrators” (Kramer 2011: 224). He uses two fictional case studies, of Richard and Joseph. Richard, a Satan worshiper, rapes, tortures and mutilates people before murdering them, his victims ranging from

infants to elderly women (Kramer 2011: 227). His crimes include cannibalism, eating people's body parts sometimes while they are still alive to witness it. Joseph does not murder, but kidnaps girls aged between seven and fourteen, amputates their hands and legs below the knees without anesthesia, and proceeds to rape and torture them (Kramer 2011: 227-8). The community has a moral duty to execute such people. This need arises from the normative relationship between the community and the rest of humanity. To keep such people alive is to use resources to support "a life that constitutes a gross rebuff to human kind" (Kramer 2011: 237).

For this to work, Carol J. Steiker argues that Kramer needs to provide a distinction between extravagantly evil acts and 'ordinarily' evil acts that is clear enough for us to be able to know when the purgative response is appropriate. She is sceptical – evil acts can be on a continuum from the less to the more extreme, but there is no clear boundary point that can carry the immense moral weight Kramer needs to place somewhere. Kramer is confident such a boundary must exist but Steiker is not convinced he provides us with the material to find it; and even if it does exist she is sceptical about our ability to identify who has crossed it. She says: "...the essential nature of people is more obdurately opaque than Kramer is willing to admit – especially the nature of evil doers, who by definition are exceptional and thus presumably not very much like us" (Steiker 2015: 370). We should also note that Kramer's examples of Richard and Joseph are fictional, and in fiction we can write in details of people's state of mind that we could never know in reality – Kramer's accounts are filled with the mental states of their experiences, giving us special access into the minds of these people which is not, in fact, available to us.

Behind Kramer's account, argues Steiker, is a strong view of self-authorship, something like Russell's autonomy condition, only perhaps much stronger. "Kramer acknowledges that offenders' genetic predispositions, impairments and environments may create 'constraints' and 'pressures' in their lives (241), but he insists that 'evil offenders are reflective agents rather than automatons' and that they 'form [...] their profoundly evil characters within the limits of their genes and environments' and are thus 'rightly held fully responsible for their heinous crimes against humanity' (243). This view stands in sharp contrast with the work of many medical and social scientists that locates the roots of violent anti-social behaviour in strong genetic predisposition, social deprivation, and situational constraints, rather than in autonomous character formation" (Steiker 2015: 371). In the end, says Steiker, "... Kramer's clarity on the issue of extravagant evil is founded on an implausibly rigid view of human character formation and agency" (Steiker 2015: 372).

Earlier I suggested that, if we are to illuminate and understand the conditions that give rise to great suffering that can be attributed to human activity, we need to look at the social, political, economic, historical, cultural, neurological and psychological complexities of the human condition. Philosophy can make a contribution to this project, but needs to find a way of doing so which works alongside this range of different approaches. If we return to Calder's concern about the scope of the Milgram scenario we can see this challenge clearly. Melissa Deary, in discussing the Milgram experiments and those of Philip Zimbardo, argues that their evidence challenges the dispositional thesis, by showing that any human agent, in the right conditions, is capable of evil action. We need to understand "the *situational* nature of the social context and the systematic nature of socio-political organization over the dispositional factors of individual psychology in the manifestation of evil" (Deary 2014: 182). Illumination and

understanding will come with an awareness of those social contexts and organizational structures. However, as Deary herself comments, this does not cover those who meet Russell and Kramer's autonomy component, who commit atrociously awful deeds without those social contexts and organizational structures, and it is perhaps in this space that philosophies of evil agency that seek to identify evil persons as distinct from the rest of humanity gain their hold.

But here we come to the final sceptical point – that the agents that Russell and Kramer, and others, identify as evil persons distinct from the rest of humanity do not exist: they are, once more, fictional or mythological. But surely, in the face of the history of human atrocities, this cannot be right? Garrard and McNaughton have provided us with a real case study, the soldier in the Congo who disembowels and dismembers his enemy and rapes his victim's wife on the heap of body parts he forced her to gather together. And surely Kramer has provided another – whatever the flaws in his fictional description of Richard and Joseph, we know such people exist. These are people who are fixedly disposed to commit such actions under conditions of autonomy, and for whom there is no prospect of rehabilitation.

But let us consider both of these cases more closely. In the first, if anything meets the conditions of the Milgram scenario or a volatile, threatening or coercive political situation, surely it is the conflict in the Congo. This is especially so when we consider that a large number of combatants are child soldiers who have suffered from particularly extreme traumas. The World Health Organization estimates that there are at least 250,000 child soldiers involved in conflicts around the world, and while rehabilitation of such children, some of whom have committed atrocities, is possible it is a lengthy and expensive process (World Health Organization 2009). Alexandra Stein

writes about a particular form of Milgram scenario, the cult, and about how people, including child soldiers, become members of cults, and how they can also escape and recover from them. She herself has been through that experience with others.

“Something we all understand – and wish we didn’t – is how an ordinary person can end up donning a suicide vest and killing themselves along with their unknown victims”

(Stein 2017, p. 2). Her most important conclusion is that “... people who find themselves

in cults, extreme groups or even totalitarian nations are ordinary people who did not choose that situation” (Stein 2017: 2). None of us are immune. “Cult recruitment is

primarily the result of *situational* vulnerabilities not *personality* vulnerabilities (what social psychologists call situational as opposed to dispositional factors” (Stein 2017:

59). The point is that these situational vulnerabilities can happen to anybody in the

form of a normal life ‘blip’ – some normal change in life situation such as leaving home for university, relationship breakup, or death in the family. All the research shows that

there is no personality profile here (Stein 2017: 60). But these ‘banal’ disruptions can

have explosive endings - “Endings of outsiders, of enemies, of followers, of children. We

see the genocides of totalitarianism from Hitler to Stalin to Pol Pot. Or the smaller

tragedies such as Aum Shinrikyo’s gassing of commuters in the Tokyo subway.

Propaganda films show a young Londoner turned ISIS/Daesh executioner beheading

hostages in Syria. Perhaps saddest of all are the children, from child soldiers to the

children who die in cults, sacrificed to the leader’s will” (Stein 2017: 3).

The search for a personality or disposition leads people to ask the wrong question:

“What is wrong with *those* people that they chose to join such a group?” (Stein 2017: 4)

– again an expression of the ‘folk psychology’ belief that they must be a distinct type of

person, not at all like us. On the contrary, Stein says: “We know that, in fact, most of

these followers were ordinary people, people who got caught up in situations beyond

their control” (Stein 2017: 4). This means that the right question is: “What was the situation that these people found themselves in when these things happened? What processes unfolded in that situation to cause such a tragic and seemingly incomprehensible result? What is this dangerous environment to which we are not well adapted? Why, in fact, are most of us vulnerable to these influencing processes, given the right circumstances at the right time?” (Stein 2017: 4).

But, it might be replied, this is to focus on the wrong people. We need to identify the cult *leader*, the one who dominates and directs these people. Here we will find a personality type, someone with a dispositional framework unlike that of the rest of us. To an extent Stein would say this is right – unlike their recruits, cult leaders have a psychopathology that can be identified and understood (Stein 2017: 108-9). But we will not find the evil person who meets Russell’s nor Kramer’s autonomy condition. Drawing on the work of Theodore Adorno on the authoritarian personality and on Edgar Schein’s findings that **totalist** leaders are anxious and insecure, Stein argues that such leaders display a specific kind of disorganized attachment that leads to aggressive and dominant behaviour, a form of disorganization which in children is over-represented in those with aggressive and controlling punitive behaviour disorders (Stein 2017: 111). These children have a background of maltreatment, especially controlling physical abuse. “This hostile or controlling-punitive form results from violent, frightening, controlling backgrounds, or what have been termed ‘hostile self-referential parenting.’ These children respond to this situation by themselves becoming hostile and controlling towards others” (Stein 2017: 111). Although we do not know much about the background of totalist leaders, in some cases we know that they fit this background. Stein discusses some of these cases, such as David Koresh, leader of the Branch Davidians, and Adolf Hitler (Stein 2017: 112). What we see is a set of attributes that fit

the model of the psychopath – shallow affect, lack of empathy, guilt or remorse, superficial charm, egocentricity, manipulativeness, deceitfulness, grandiosity and callousness in interpersonal relations (Stein 2017: 112).

In the final chapter of her book Stein looks at possible solutions, and these are similar to those suggested by Calder. Rather than seek to identify and isolate problematic personalities, we need to look at social organization and community life, to the building of positive communities in an age of fragmentation (Stein 2017: 209). We need a public realm “that works in our fragmented society, one that does not yearn for an idealized past and a closed vision of community, but looks forward to an open, welcoming, safe and diverse, pluralist view of community life where children are valued, universal human rights are valued and varied cultural expressions that respect these rights are valued” (Stein 2017: 211). Such communities would, says Stein, produce fewer potential totalist leaders and fewer potential victims, and by strengthening positive connections between people, “provide fewer situational factors for the development of totalitarianism” (Stein 2017: 208).ⁱⁱⁱ

This returns me to the central theme of this essay and the evil scepticism it expresses, that philosophies of evil are in danger of asking the wrong questions, and so rendering philosophy irrelevant when it comes to the key task we face when confronted by human atrocity. That key task is to understand the conditions – political, social, economic, cultural, psychological – that underpin such atrocities and make them possible, and through that understanding to enable societies to guard against them by ensuring that we learn the lessons of history. By directing our focus to the evil agent, by attempting to define them and explain their actions in terms of a distinct type of person, separate from the rest of us, philosophical theories of evil have us searching in the wrong place, asking

the wrong questions, with a danger that we will find ourselves lost in a world of folk psychology and folk beliefs about monsters that have their origin in mythology.

However, I am not denying that the concept of evil is rich in meaning and deeply significant for our understanding of our history or culture, nor that philosophy as a discipline can contribute to that understanding in rewarding and enlightening ways.

What I am suggesting is that what we will come to understand in exploring the concept, is not why human beings have acted and continue to act in ways that defy our moral comprehension, but rather our own conception of humanity and its limit, and how that conception – and especially the idea of the limit – has been strategically distorted, deployed and exploited, and most importantly how it contributes towards the dehumanization – the demonization – of others.

References

Burdman, Javier (2016), “Between Banality and Radicality: Arendt and Kant on Evil and Responsibility”, *European Journal of Political Theory*, forthcoming (available Online First <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1474885116640725> accessed March 22, 2018).

Calder, Todd (2015), “Evil Persons,” *Criminal Justice Ethics*, Vol 34, No 3: 350-360.

Cole, Phillip (2006), *The Myth of Evil*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

Deary, Melissa (2014), *Making Sense of Evil: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Forsyth, Neil (2003), *The Satanic Epic*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Forsyth, Neil (1987), *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Garrard, Eve (2002), "Evil as an Explanatory Concept", *Monist*, April, Volume 85, Issue 2: 320-336.

Garrard, Eve, and McNaughton, David (2012), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXXVI: 1-17.

Hochschild, Adam (2009), "Rape of the Congo," *New York Review of Books*, July 15, 2013: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/aug/13/rape-of-the-congo/?pagination=false> [accessed April 19, 2013].

Kramer, Matthew H. (2011), *The Ethics of Capital Punishment: A Philosophical Investigation of Evil and its Consequences*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Russell, Luke (2014), *Evil: A Philosophical Investigation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rae, Gavin (2019) *Evil in the Western Philosophical Tradition*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Steiker, Carol S. (2015), "Can/Should We Purge Evil Through Capital Punishment?" *Criminal Law and Philosophy* 9: 367-378.

Stein, Alexandra (2017), *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*, London and New York: Routledge.

Tanney, Julia (2009), "Reasons as non-causal, context-placing explanations," in Constantine Sandis, ed, *New Essays on the Explanation of Behaviour*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

World Health Organization (2009), "Healing Child Soldiers", *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, Volume 87, Number 5: 325-404

(<http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/87/5/09-020509/en/>: accessed March 21, 2018).

ⁱ Thanks for Roshi Naidoo for her comments on this paper.

ⁱⁱ For a close and sympathetic reading of Kant's treatment of evil see Gavin Rae's *Evil in the Western Philosophical Tradition* forthcoming in 2019 (Edinburgh University Press). Another very helpful account is Burdman (2016).

ⁱⁱⁱ It may be objected that this kind of situational approach means we cannot condemn *any* act we might consider to be immoral. I address this criticism in Cole (2006), pp. 169-173 and will not repeat those arguments here.