

Evil

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Joel Feinberg (2003) has recently analysed the concept of evil as a complex array of different kinds of moral badness. He states that:

It is one thing to identify evils and quite another to understand or explain what we are saying when we pronounce a thing 'evil.' Few of us have any hesitation in judging things evil, but most of us find it surpassingly difficult to explain what we are doing when we make and support such judgments. (144)

"Pure" evil requires exclusion', Feinberg claims. 'It is evil undiluted, two hundred proof, served in an old fashioned shot glass and taken neat, without a chaser. It is all evil and nothing but evil, and its impact is unweakened as it ages' (142).

While such statements have a strong ring of truth to them, Feinberg's statement that 'Our strong tendency ... is to reserve the word 'evil' for

wrongdoing and harm causing that we cannot understand' (142) is counter-intuitive. He further avers that 'The apparent evil person is one whose conduct not only shocks and angers but also puzzles us' (142). He even refers to such puzzlement as 'part of the natural response to evil' (143). Indeed, Feinberg argues that 'at least one of the features that distinguish evil from other bad things is its capacity to generate puzzlement' (144) and '... evil typically causes puzzlement' (144).

Now it is one thing to suggest that evil of the pure variety (or what we might more commonly refer to as 'real evil') has the 'capacity' to cause puzzlement. And it is quite understandable to hold that such evil 'typically' causes puzzlement. But keeping in mind Feinberg's own historical examples of such evil, namely, 'the Holocaust and Stalinist mass murders' (142), one might argue that the *American* (Indian) Holocaust and the U.S. slavery of Africans also qualify as instances of pure evil. But then Feinberg's analysis of the nature of pure evil raises serious questions. He asserts that

A human action properly appraised as purely evil will be an instance of:

1. wrongdoing,
2. moral blameworthiness for that wrongdoing,
3. considerable harm to a victim, and
4. the unintelligibility of the actor's reasons or motives for her wrongdoing and for the elements that ground her moral blameworthiness. (144)

Moreover, he writes that, 'If we consider unintelligibility to be not merely a typical element of evil, but an invariable element, then the following definition of 'pure evil' is plausible: Pure evil is wrongful behavior or its upshot, for which the actor is blameworthy, done for no intelligible reason, and which people understandably find extremely perplexing' (144-45). Feinberg goes on to state that 'The evil person will glory in what in fact is something bad' (151). 'A person like that is evil if she values things that are bad in themselves, and values them because they are bad' (151).

However, there are at least two difficulties with Feinberg's analysis of evil. The first is that it wrongly makes puzzlement a necessary condition of evil. For one can commit an evil act, omission or attempt without creating puzzlement in the minds of others. For example, Feinberg's own examples of the Nazi holocaust of Jews and other 'undesirables' fits quite rationally into the scheme of Nazism and Adolf Hitler's quest for world power, just as the American holocaust of Native Americans is explicable in terms of former U.S. president Andrew Jackson's explicit goals related to 'manifest destiny' and the perceived necessity of the 'Indian wars'. Yet each is quite purely evil, however *unpuzzling* in the light of racist oppression. In fact, it is largely because such acts are not inexplicable or puzzling that makes

them more evil than if they were puzzling. For the motives or reasons for such acts are in themselves evil, 'bettered' only by the putting of such motives or reasons into action by their respective sets of evil agents.

But even if puzzlement were a necessary condition of evil, not every evil person acts knowingly in the sense that she believes her actions or doings to be evil, as Feinberg intimates when he characterizes an evil person as one who glories in doing something because it is bad or values things 'bad in themselves, and values them because they are bad'. Indeed, history is replete with evildoers who themselves believe that they are doing precisely what is morally right or good under the circumstances! Indeed, Hitler and Jackson each believed precisely that what they were doing genocidally was right and good. Yet what each did was evil if there ever was evil.

Moreover, what do we say of a putatively evil act if, at a subsequent time, we find an adequate reason or motive for it where at the time of the act and shortly thereafter it was deemed a puzzling act? Does the evil status of the act change, contingent on the perception or realization of puzzlement? If so, how many folk must be puzzled by an allegedly evil act and in what ways must they be puzzled by it in order for their puzzlement to count as sufficient for it to be an evil act, other conditions obtaining? Or, is an act evil or not independently of how it is perceived in terms of puzzlement? Given that Feinberg claims that evil persons can value things 'bad in themselves', it seems to be a confusion on his part to then imply that evil acts necessarily entail human puzzlement about the evildoer's reasons or motives for action, inaction, or attempted action, as the case may be.

While Feinberg seems to make the purely evil nature of an act contingent on how it is perceived in terms of its puzzlement regarding the reasons or motives of the agent, I prefer to analyse the nature of evil (even pure evil) in terms of extremely harmful wrongs, whether or not they puzzle the minds and hearts of people. After all, if one digs deeply enough into the context of a situation and the minds of most, if not all, evildoers, there is likely to be some reason or motive for their evil deeds. In general, the reasons and motives for pure evil become more apparent to us the more we delve into the depths of the circumstances of evil. I prefer to analyse pure evil in terms of the *degree* to which someone or something is extremely bad. The degree to which someone or something is purely evil is the extent to which the circumstances surrounding it harm self and/or others severely, regardless of the reasons or motives of the purely evil act, omission, or attempt.

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Reference

Feinberg, J. 2003. *Problems at the Roots of Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.