

Evil progress

SELMER BRINGSJORD

★ draft 4.7.04 ★

J.A. Corlett (2004) has recently sought to supplant Feinberg's (2003) account of evil with his own, which he encapsulates as follows:

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. (2004: 83)

We really must put charitable emphasis on Corlett's use of 'attempt' here: Suppose Black₁ intends to incinerate all the denizens of London in a nuclear conflagration, and that he takes a series of human steps sufficient, *ceteris paribus*, to do so. He secures a PhD in physics, acquires the radioactive raw material, constructs the bomb, places it in an underground spot, . . . and attempts to detonate his devious device. However, a fluke movement of molecules outside his control prevents ignition. Absent this fluke, millions would have died, some in a blinding instant, some in the deepest agony; and Black₁ would have gloried in the carnage wrought by his handiwork. But because of the fluke (maybe a tiny drop of moisture throws the ghoulish plan awry), Black strikes out. Suppose, in addition, that Black₁ sustains a one-man crusade to kill on this scale (or even on a global scale, courtesy of many synchronized nuclear bombs), but that in each and every case, dumb luck prevails in favor of life.

Black₁ is black-hearted if anyone is, as he spends every waking hour toiling to torture, and yet no harm accrues because of his actions. In fact, we can even assume that Black₁'s activity stimulates the economy, and so while he intends magnificently massive woe, only weal results.

Actual harm is thus really quite beside the point when it comes to evil (at least evil *people*); harm is not a necessary condition for someone to qualify as evil. The upshot here isn't merely that Corlett's compressed account, to have a fighting chance, must be unpacked in the direction of *potential* harm, it's also that Feinberg's (2003) account, at least as it stands, for reasons not noted by Corlett, is indeed mistaken. That account, the one Corlett targets, is (neatening things up a bit):

Def 1 Person s is evil iff there exists some action a ¹ such that

1. performing a is morally wrong;
2. s is morally blameworthy for performing a ;
3. s 's performing a causes considerable harm to others; and
4. the reasons or motives for s 's performing a , along with "the elements that ground her moral blameworthiness," are unintelligible.

Black₁'s fortuitous impotence shows that we ought move at least to Def 2: Def 1 with clause 3 replaced by:

3'. s performs a in the hopes of causing considerable harm to others

¹Or omission.

I say *at least* because it would seem that one can be an evil person without even performing any actions that are *attempts* to harm: Suppose that Black₂ is like his just-described cousin, save for the fact that he is paralyzed (because of some accident; the etiology doesn't matter). Black₂ spends half his waking hours dreaming of a cure for his condition, so that he can make his nuclear plans (developed and savored in the remaining half of his time) reality — plans as detailed as the ones Black₁ formulates. Cases like this suggest that Black₁ qualifies as evil long before he begins toiling in and around London to configure his bomb. This means that further weakening of clause 3 is needed, along with weakening of clauses 2 and 4 as well, to produce (Def 3):

- 2' *s* is morally blameworthy for seeking to perform *a*;
- 3''. *s* seeks to perform *a* in the belief that doing so would cause considerable harm to others;
- 4' the reasons or motives for *s*'s seeking to perform *a*, and the elements that ground *s*'s moral blameworthiness for seeking to perform *a*, are unintelligible.

What of Corlett's core idea that an exclusive focus on harm (or potential harm) will suffice to yield a valid definition? His account would be (Def 1_{Cor}) *only*:

- 3''' *s* performs *a* in the hopes of causing harm — greater than or equal to degree *d* — to others

or (Def 2_{Cor})

- 3'''' *s* seeks to perform *a* in the hopes of causing harm — greater than or equal to degree *d* — to others

But there are at least three fatal problems plaguing these definitions. First, *s* may have his mindset implanted, via hypnosis or brain surgery or radio waves beamed into his brain, etc. Is someone evil if they are coerced by such means to perform (or seek to perform) some action in the hopes of wreaking havoc? Clearly not. If while you sleep I rewire your brain so that, upon waking, you seek to maim *a la* Black_{1,2}, I'm the guilty party; you're the automaton.

To see the second problem, assume that *d* is a threshold higher than what Corlett even has in mind. For example, set *d* to the destruction of the human race. However, suppose that the universe contains many, many planets on which intelligent, sentient life exists; that is, suppose that thousands (millions?) of planets in the universe each contain millions of (non-human) persons. Let Cal be some powerful alien person on one of these distant planets. Cal is in a horrible bind, because he knows that unless a certain supernova is extinguished, all intelligent life in the universe will end as a result of a cataclysmic chain reaction. He also knows that extinguishing the supernova in question can only be carried out by vaporizing planet Earth. Cal and his colleagues agonize over the decision, but in the end they see themselves as having no choice, in no small part because of the great value they assign to the continued existence of intelligent, sapient beings. Are we to say that Cal is evil? I don't think so. You may condemn him for being a cosmic consequentialist, but surely you can't judge him to be *evil*. The upshot is that Corlett's account is overthrown, and we see why clauses 1 and 2 were introduced by Feinberg in the first place.

What's the third problem infecting Corlett's view? It's that the concept of a high threshold of harm needing to be met is at odds with many paradigm cases of evil — cases of people who, pre-analytically, we would classify (if you will) as exemplars of evil, despite the fact that the sum total of their destruction is relatively mild. The cases I have in mind are at the heart of an account

of evil remarkably in line with Feinberg's: an account provided by psychologist M. Scott Peck (1983). One such case involves parents who lose one of their two sons, Stuart, to suicide. Peck gets involved in the case when the surviving son, Bobby, is caught stealing a car. Bobby has of late gone into an academic tailspin, and has started to engage in self-mutilation. Peck's first session is with Bobby himself. In the interview, Peck discovers that Bobby's decline started at Christmas, after he received his one and only present from his parents. Peck asks what the present was, and Bobby tells him, "A gun." Knowing that Stuart had shot himself with a twenty-two rifle, Peck, a bit dizzy at this point, asks Bobby if it was the same kind of gun his brother had used to kill himself. "It wasn't the same kind of gun," Bobby replies. "It was the gun." Later, when subjected by Peck to analysis, the parents grow flustered and confused when asked to consider whether it was a good thing to give such a present — and these parents otherwise seem to be perfectly articulate, educated, gainfully employed people. It's just that, by Peck's lights, they are evil. And part of the reason he classifies them as such is that he affirms a version of clause 4 as part of what it means, by his lights, for a person to be evil. His version makes reference to 'ambulatory schizophrenia;' the clause in Peck's definition of evil is:

intellectual deviousness, with an increasing likelihood of a mild schizophreniclike disturbance of thinking at times of stress. (1983: 129)

The stress is brought on when the evil person's reasons and motives are examined by cold hard logic under analysis.

If Peck's view is plausible (and he gives case after compelling case of seemingly evil people failing to do major harm), Corlett's core idea is defective on a third count.

But what about the Feinberg-Peck view that evil people have a psyche that is incoherent? *Is* this position correct? I believe that it is indeed correct, at least fundamentally.

In order to see why, we need to consider Corlett's direct attack on clause 4, an attack based on historical cases. He writes:

[O]ne 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.' 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 puzzling. (2004: 82–83)

Why is Feinberg fundamentally correct, despite historical cases like these that do seem quite at odds with Def 1–Def 3? Because the confusion, the incoherence, the unintelligibility — it's *hypothetical* in nature: It would be revealed *were* the evil person to be a willing interlocutor. So, we have to ponder a potential dialogue. When analyzing people and events from a distance, accurate ascriptions of conation and practical reasoning are notoriously inaccurate. For example, after fleeing Jewish persecution under Hitler's regime, the psychologist Erich Fromm (1964, 1974) spent the bulk of the rest of his professional life dissecting the evil of Nazism — but the level of precision and reliability he achieved is nowhere near what Peck (1983) reaches when talking directly to his patients. To sustain the intuitions underlying clause 4 (and 4'), we need to imagine the relevant interrogation. Some dialogues will reveal mindsets like those seen in Bobby's parents. In others, such as those that would unfold with Hitler on the couch, we'll find that though there is an initially coherent scheme to secure some goal (the "super-race" rules the Earth), either the badness of the

foreseeable side-effects of pursuing this goal register as unto a schizophrenic, or the goal itself is bad, and its badness fails to register as well (and is in fact be perceived as *good*). This yields:

- 4'' were *s* a willing and open participant in the analysis of reasons and motives for *s*'s seeking to perform *a*, it would be revealed that either
- (i) these reasons and motives are unintelligible, or
 - (ii) *s* seeks to perform *a* in the service of goal *g*, and
 - (a) the anticipatable side-effects *e* of performing *a* are bad, but *s* cannot grasp this, or
 - (b) *g* itself is appraised as good by *s* when it is in fact bad.

Corlett *is* right that *actual* puzzlement on the part of those who observe evil behavior is not something that should be built into an account of evil. This is easy to see by way of scenarios much less elaborate than the ones he offers: Take any action (or seeking, attempt, omission, etc.) that Feinberg believes is bound up with someone *s*'s being evil. Now assume that no one ($\neq s$) is aware of this action. Ergo, no one is puzzled about the reasons and motives underlying the action in question. Similarly straightforward scenarios support Corlett in shooting down the Feinbergian notion that for an action to qualify as evil, the perpetrator must glory in it (or in its untoward consequences): Simply imagine that immediately after the action in question, no one (for whatever reason; use your imagination) is around to glory in *anything*. (Of course, if Feinberg means by 'glory in' here what I describe in 4''.(ii).(b), then this part of his view withstands Corlett.) But despite these points, as we now know, Corlett's exclusive focus on harm is fatally flawed, while Feinberg and Peck, courtesy of the progress made above, are vindicated via a definiens composed of: 1, 2', 3'', and 4'', i.e., Def 4.

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
Troy NY USA
selmer@rpi.edu

References

- Corlett, J.A. 2004. Evil. *Analysis* 64: 81–84.
- Feinberg, J. 2003. *Problems at the Roots of Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fromm, E. 1964. *The Heart of Man: It's Genius for Good and Evil*. Harper & Row: New York, NY.
- Fromm, E. 1974. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. Vintage/Ebury: New York, NY.
- Peck, M.S. 1983. *People of the Lie*. Simon and Shuster: New York, NY.