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Moral Evil as a "Thick" Ethical Concept

Abstract: The paper aims to propose a framework for understanding of the concept of moral evil. It argues that "evil" should be considered one of the so-called "thick" ethical concepts, characterized by their ability to be simultaneously descriptive and normative. To that effect, it examines the relationship between the concepts of moral wrongness and the idea of evil, with a view to explaining why moral evil should be understood as a "thick" rather than a "thin" ethical concept. Finally, it offers some reasons for cultivating thick ethical concepts, and suggests the conditions which have to be met if a thick concept of evil is to be helpful rather than harmful.

Keywords: moral evil, thin ethical concepts, thick ethical concepts

We are witnessing a revival of philosophical interest in the concept of moral evil. For a long time, until the middle of the 20th century, western philosophers did not have much use for it. To call something evil is to take an absolutist position on its badness or wrongness, and, with the ties between moral philosophy and the Christian metaphysics loosening, many thinkers became convinced that no grounds for moral absolutism exist. In time, some developments in meta-ethics (chief of them was G. E. Moore's radical critique of moral naturalism) made a renaissance of moral realism possible, but that was not how the concept of evil regained prominence. Instead, it was largely in reaction to the atrocities of

the Second World War that philosophers started to wonder again about the source and nature of evil.

The urgency of these questions (especially when asked in this context) may however obscure the fundamental problem of whether a distinct phenomenon of moral evil exists at all. When we describe an action as evil rather than wrong, do we do anything more than stress our disapproval? When we call a person evil, do we mean something different from "very, very bad"?[1] And if not, if the value of the term comes down to its expressive power – should we not rather refrain from using it, given that it can lead to "demonizing" the wrongdoers who are certainly, in the end, only human? In this paper, I will try to propose a framework for a meaningful use of the term "evil". Specifically, I will suggest that, unlike "bad" or "wrong", "evil" belongs to the group of so-called "thick" ethical concepts which put those capable of using them properly in a privileged position when it comes to moral reflection and practice. I will progress towards that by, first of all, examining the relationship between the concepts of moral wrongness or moral badness and the idea of evil. I will then explain why I think moral evil should be understood as a "thick" rather than a "thin" ethical concept; at the same time, I will offer some reasons for appreciating "thick" concepts, including the concept of evil. Finally, I will try to explain why I believe that, unlike many other "thick" ethical concepts, the concept of moral evil can and should be sustained.

Evil and motivation

A number of commentators find the growing popularity of the term "evil" problematic. As they point out, such terminology harkens back to the once predominant outlook, famously criticized by Nietzsche in his attack on Christianity, which branded as evil what most people feared and hated, be it supernatural or natural. As it is used today, the term "evil" clearly expresses moral horror and a degree of incomprehension, suggesting that the sources of what

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[1]   Todd Calder, "The Concept of Evil", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, access 28.05.2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/concept-evil/.

we so describe are mysterious and the remedies – unknown. As such, it can all too easily become a tool of a hostile rhetoric, through which, in an effort to distance ourselves from what we condemn, we suggest that it has demonic provenience, thus justifying our desire for merciless punishment. Given the fact that, unlike in the Middle Ages, this is now rarely meant literally, the tactics strike many authors as deeply ambiguous. It may help to convince the listeners that while not necessarily possessed, the perpetrator of a hideous act is hopelessly depraved, so revenge and punishment are the only appropriate reactions. It may also take away the perpetrator's motivation to turn his life around. As Luke Russell points out:

> it would be odd for a reformed criminal to describe his own past actions as evil, and much more natural for him to describe the actions as extremely wrong. His actions were wrong but not evil, perhaps, because he himself was not evil, and we can see that he was not evil by noting that his moral character was not fixed, but was open to reform.[2]

The rhetoric of evil does not, therefore, facilitate rehabilitation – if only – because it discourages soul-searching. A "devout atheist"[3] Philip Cole stresses that:

> [e]vil is always something asserted with confidence, with determination, never with an uncertain shrug of the shoulders, never with philosophical doubt.[4]

Talking about evil does not invite a nuanced scrutiny of the motives of the perpetrator or of the circumstances of the act – it is more likely to lead to closing off any possibility of understanding.[5] As such, Cole concludes, "[i]t is […] a highly dangerous and inhumane discourse, and we are better off without it".[6]

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[2] Luke Russell, "Evil-Revivalism Versus Evil-Skepticism", *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 40 (2006): 99.

[3] Philip Cole, *The Myth of Evil* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 2.

[4] Ibidem, 4.

[5] Ibidem, 9, cf. also Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 81.

[6] Cole, *The Myth of Evil*, 21.

Others have argued that these dangers are not specific to the term "evil" and are real also for other, much less controversial normative terms,[7] and that it is less dangerous to try to work on the right understanding of evil than to ignore the apparent need for the term.[8] But a more fundamental danger seems to remain. If by calling an act or a person evil we mean to express the strongest possible moral opprobrium and we justify this opprobrium by pointing to the ways in which what we are dealing with falls outside the norm, we risk undermining our own case. Does not moral responsibility require that the person be normal (as opposed to monstrous) and act on her own accord (rather than being influenced by evil forces or by her own compulsions)? If somebody is evil rather than just bad, does it not imply that her actions cannot be judged according to our standard rules of ascribing moral responsibility, and that she is not, in fact, morally to blame?

For all these reasons, many commentators have urged the avoidance of the term "evil". Others have tried to defang it by interpreting the difference between "bad" or "wrong" and "evil" as a difference in degree rather than in kind. As Eve Garrard explains:

> the term 'evil' [might be] just an intensifier, a way of saying that an action is very wrong, or a state-of-affairs very bad. On this understanding, the difference between evil acts and other lesser wrongdoings will be just a matter of degree. […] On this (rather uninteresting) construal of evil, evil acts can be understood as answering to the same constraints as wrong (or bad) ones, and what these are will depend on our theory of wrong (and right) action.[9]

The strategy used to show that by "morally evil" we mean nothing else than "extremely bad" or "extremely wrong" usually consists in pointing out that the label is given to acts and persons that we criticize for extreme forms of the same faults that we ascribe to wrong actions and bad persons.

Like any morally wrong action, evil action is an action undertaken for bad reasons. In the case of a morally wrong action, the faulty motivation may

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[7] Claudia Card, *Confronting Evils: Terrorism, Torture, Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

[8] John Kekes, *Facing Evil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[9] Eve Garrard, "The Nature of Evil", *Philosophical Explorations* 1 (1998): 44.

sometimes be a question of thoughtlessness or frivolity – we would probably not connect any of these traits with evil. But the fundamentally bad motivation seems to consist in following a desire (in the broadest possible sense of the word) which in a given context should not be given priority over other, more important considerations. Whether, in following this desire, we commit a wrong or an evil act, seems to depend on how greatly we violate the proper hierarchy of values: while wrong, to steal a candy bar from a vending machine is not evil, but nor is stealing drugs from a pharmacy in order to save your wife. However, terrorizing a librarian while stealing a vintage book in an attempt to make your life more exciting[10] may qualify as evil, as it shows an extreme lack of concern for her well-being. Garrard herself associates evil with a distinct pattern of motivation, in which important reasons for action get "silenced". As she puts it:

> [t]he evil act is done by one for whom (at least some of) the considerations that tell against his committing this wrongful act, are silenced altogether. The sufferings of his victims, along with other considerations such as their rights, play no part in his practical deliberations. They count for nothing at all. And it is this silencing, this inability to hear the victims' screams as significant, that accounts for the peculiar horror that we feel when we contemplate these evil acts and their agents.[11]

For Garrard, this represents a qualitative difference, but one could also point out that silence is often the endpoint of a gradual process of turning down the volume or losing the sense of hearing. The principle could very well be the same, and the difference between a wrong action and an evil action can still be seen as a question of degree.

A similar argument can be put forth if we consider the intention to harm. It is arguably a prerequisite for calling an action wrong that the agent be at least aware that what she does can cause harm. The more deliberate the harming, the more severe we are in our moral judgment, ready to speak of evil if the

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[10] Cf. the 2018 movie *American Animals*, based on the story of an actual heist which took place at Transilvania University in Lexingon, Kentucky in 2004.

[11] Garrard, "The Nature of Evil": 53–54.

agent is willing to cause great harm.[12] Here again, wrongness and evil seem to belong to the same continuum, the latter being the name for extreme forms of something commonplace and not particularly mysterious.[13] Accordingly, an evil person would just be a very bad person – at least as long as we stick to an action-based account of moral character.

But even if we agree that an evil action can be characterized by pursuing your desire above all else and by the willingness to cause harm, we also seem to want to say more. An evil action, many have suggested, is not just callous – it is done *for the sake* of doing harm, and doing harm is *precisely the source of pleasure* that the agent pursues. For an action to be called evil, claims Roy W. Perrett, "it must be a wrongdoing which is done *because* it is wrong".[14] But if that is the case, then not only are we dealing with a difference in kind rather than in degree, but we have to face the problem of reconciling this possibility with our common-sense picture of moral deliberation and of an agent capable of moral responsibility. *Can* one want to do what one believes is wrong?

Evil and description

The fact that, despite our puzzlement on this point, we are still tempted to talk about moral evil suggests that, rather than just stressing our disapproval, we are trying to describe a distinct phenomenon. The complicated relationship between evil and harm is a case in point. Most authors would probably agree with Russell that evil actions can be defined as:

> culpably wrong actions that have a certain kind of connection to extreme harms, in that they either produce extreme harms, are intended to produce extreme harms, contribute to extreme harms, or are acts of appreciation of extreme harms.[15]

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[12] Cf. Hillel Steiner, "Calibrating Evil", *The Monist* 85(2) (2002): 183–193.

[13] Cf. Luke Russell, "Is Evil Action Qualitatively Distinct from Ordinary Wrongdoing?", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 85(4) (2007): 659–677.

[14] Roy W. Perrett, "Evil and Human Nature", *The Monist* 85(2) (2002): 304.

[15] Russell, "Is Evil Action Qualitatively Distinct from Ordinary Wrongdoing?": 676.

We already suggested that wrong actions involve causing harm, and the more deliberate the harming, the more inclined we are to talk about evil. But for talking about evil to be justified, the harm must be significant; we would not call evil a single act of causing somebody inconvenience or hurting their feelings, no matter how deliberately (we could call it evil if we took it as a sign of evil character, but then we would not be concerned about an isolated incident, but rather about a pattern of abuse). In fact, the severity of the harm caused seems to be the very reason why we want to call some actions evil.[16] Therefore, when thinking about the nature of evil, the question seems to be what kinds of deliberate action tend to cause severe harm, and what we can say about the agents who commit them.

A preliminary answer to the first part of this question might be that an evil action is one which is done with the intention of causing grave harm. This is, however, very vague and can be interpreted in a number of ways. On the one hand, acting with the intention of causing harm may mean acting out of the desire that harm occurs or aiming at causing harm. Accordingly, an evil action would be one committed out of the desire to cause great harm. Why would anybody want that? Perhaps because causing harm gives them pleasure. Many commentators have in fact identified the pleasure in harming others as the mark of evil character.[17] Others, however, argue that while experiencing pleasure when harming others might be a common trait of many evil people, it is not the source of all evil actions. When the agent does not really enjoy harming anybody, but also does not mind doing it to get something else she wants, we might also speak of evil – if great harm is done in order to achieve something trivial, like when somebody kills a man to become famous. An agent capable of such actions is also a bit of a mystery to us, this time not because of an additional trait that most of us luckily do not have (the ability to enjoy causing harm), but because of what she lacks (the normal level of concern for others, or maybe the sense that, in an important way, we all matter). Still more

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[16] This is certainly the intuition behind Claudia Card's "atrocity paradigm", cf. Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[17] Cf. Lawrence Thomas, *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 76–77; Todd Calder, "The Prevalence of Evil", in: *Evil, Political Violence and Forgiveness*, ed. A. Veltman and K. Norlock (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2009), 23–27.

disconcerting is the possibility of "banal evil",[18] of great harm done dispassionately, as part of a daily routine. We are tempted to think that an agent who acts in this way must be a monster – alas, for all their methodological shortcomings, the experiments of Philip Zimbardo[19] and Stanley Milgram[20] suggest that in the right circumstances most of us would behave similarly.

The concept of moral evil does not therefore fit easily with our standard picture of the free moral agent who chooses to do what she thinks is best. In fact, it does not seem to be much interested in this idea at all. Rather, it simply points to the possibility of people doing horrible things and demands a reaction. The problem is that as proponents of the standard picture we cannot imagine what reaction is appropriate without an explanation of why somebody did what they did. With the demonic influence out of the question for most of us, this must be given in psychological terms – an evil agent has a skewered perception of reality, harbors abnormal feelings or desires, or lacks basic empathy. However, we surely need an explanation for that as well. In some cases it may be physiological, like in the case of psychopaths incapable of empathy despite sometimes being very intelligent. In other cases, the agent may be psychologically unbalanced. Sometimes it may be a question of a bad upbringing which conditioned the agent to be selfish, or cruel, or indifferent to the needs of others.[21] But with any of these explanations, are we not suggesting that the agent was in fact not free in her decision to cause great harm and therefore cannot be morally blamed for it?[22] When we call her actions and herself evil, is that not akin to deploring natural evils, like an attack by a wild animal or an earthquake? Is there conceptual space for moral evil at all?

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[18] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963 [1994]), 287–288.

[19] Cf. Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007).

[20] Cf. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974).

[21] Susan Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility", in: *Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions*, ed. F.D. Schoeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 46–62; cf. Cole, *The Myth of Evil*, 122–147.

[22] Cf. Thomas Nagel's analysis of "constitutive luck" in his paper "Moral Luck", in: *Moral Luck*, ed. Daniel Statman (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 57–71.

Evil as a "thick" ethical concept

In going through some language intuitions regarding the use of the term "evil", I was not trying to be exhaustive. There are many more ways in which both evil action and evil character have been conceived, and the picture could never be full without considering the ways in which institutions and social arrangements can be criticized as evil. What I tried to show is that the term "evil" is similar to the terms "bad" and "wrong" in being an expression of moral criticism, but different from them in its descriptive character. As such, I want to suggest that evil is a "thick" ethical concept.

In contemporary meta-ethics, "thick" concepts are defined in opposition to "thin" ones. The distinction between thin and thick descriptions was first introduced in the field of anthropology,[23] but it was Bernard Williams who first wrote about thick ethical concepts.[24] In the second half of the 20th century, some of the critics of moral theory found the distinction very useful for describing the crisis in modern moral consciousness. As, following Williams, they tend to present it, our particular moment is characterized by a rapid "thinning" of ethical language and, in consequence, by a gradual loss of moral certainty. Once upon a time, the story goes, people could confidently use richly descriptive normative terms like "honor" and "betrayal", "cowardice", "wisdom" or "impudence". Living in tightly knit communities defined by common practices and beliefs, our ancestors could count on the people around them to ascribe the same normative meaning to observable facts, and therefore had little use for thin, purely evaluative terms such as "good" or "bad". How that changed can be related in philosophical terms, as a history of the development of human self-understanding, with Descartes' *res cogitans*, Hume's is-ought distinction, Kant's idea of autonomy and Mill's calculus of utility as milestones on the road towards our present conception of free and rational moral agent. Or it could be explained as a function of economic and social developments in the West, with capitalism leading to social atomization, to liberalism and

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[23] Cf. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture", in: Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30.

[24] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London–New York: Routledge Classics, 1985 [2011]), 143.

to radical individualism.[25] Either way, nowadays there are less and less thick ethical concepts that we can confidently use, relying instead increasingly on thin ones like "good", "bad", "ought", "permissible", "right" or "wrong".

To deplore this state of affairs need not be a sign of nostalgia. It may come from realizing that for all their advantages (universality, flexibility, expressive quality), thin ethical concepts are not particularly suited to one important task of the ethical language which is action-guidance. Reflecting, as they are, our awareness of the gap between describing the facts in the world and moral evaluation, they do not provide us with the information about what qualities make a person good, or what features make an action right. Further reflection is always needed in order to arrive at an ethical interpretation of a given situation – which is necessary for moving to action. And while this reflection can make us more consistent in our ethical judgments and decisions (G. E. M. Anscombe, for example, thought that it has made consequentialists of all of us[26]), it leads us at the same time to recognize that this puzzle can be solved in a number of acceptable ways. It is therefore unlikely to result in certainty (although it often produces an increase in zeal – we do tend to overcompensate). Viewed from this perspective, the move from thick to thin ethical concepts can be interpreted in terms of a gradual loss of moral certainty; it seems to be what Bernard Williams had in mind when he famously, and provocatively, claimed that "in ethics, reflection can destroy knowledge".[27]

Thick ethical concepts, on the other hand, have an important advantage over thin ones because they "express a union of fact and value".[28] As Williams argues:

> [t]hey are characteristically related to reasons for action. If a concept of this kind applies, this often provides someone with a reason for action […]. We may say, summarily, that such concepts are "action-guiding." At the same time, their application is guided by the world. A concept of this sort may be rightly or wrongly applied, and people who have acquired it can agree that it applies or fails to apply

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[25] Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press, 1989).
[26] Elisabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy", *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1–19.
[27] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits*, 164.
[28] Ibidem, 144.

to some new situation. In many cases the agreement will be spontaneous, while in other cases there is room for judgment and comparison. Some disagreement at the margin may be irresoluble, but this does not mean that the use of the concept is not controlled by the facts or by the users' perception of the world. […] We can say, then, that the application of these concepts is at the same time world-guided and action-guiding.[29]

To a competent user, thick ethical concepts therefore open up the possibility of describing the reality in a way which is inherently normative. As long as she shares with her community a way of life and the outlook which comes from that (both considered to be prerequisites of being a competent user of thick concepts), she can draw guidance for action from mere recognition of the natural features of a given situation. And since this ability has social origins, it is both socially reinforced and a tool for building social cohesion, allowing the agent to engage in meaningful moral debates with the people around her.

It is plain that there are great advantages to being able to use a language rich in thick ethical concepts. But there are serious doubts whether we can sustain this ability. If indeed it was once a feature of our lives in "hypertraditional" societies,[30] we lost it at least partly because of the growth of reflexion, the same development which made us question these communities' myths, rituals, and relations of power. There is no going back to the relative innocence of not knowing that other ways of living than our own, and other ways of seeing the world, are possible. If we were to *put* ourselves in a situation in which such an outlook would again be possible, we would, it seems, have to consciously reject what we have found out about the complexity of the reality which surrounds us and our sophisticated self-knowledge, in favor of some founding myth we would have to be ready to impose on reluctant others – to achieve our goal, we need, let us not forget, a community. Even if such an endeavor could succeed, it is difficult not to have moral qualms about it.

I believe this clarifies many of the problems we have been having with the idea of evil. If, as I suggested, "moral evil" should be understood as a thick ethical concept, that would explain how the natural fact of somebody being

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[29] Ibidem, 155–156.
[30] Ibidem, 158.

harmed as a result of the agent's actions could be a necessary and often a suf-ficient condition for condemning both of these actions and the agent herself in these terms. "Evil" as a thick ethical concept is descriptive as well as being normative – it points to a fact in order to invite straightforward conclusions about values. However, while confronted with unimaginable hurt that people can cause, we are often tempted to take this step and talk about moral evil; we are uneasy with the implications. If we are honest to ourselves, we have to admit that for us, there does exist a gap between facts and values, between describing a state of affairs and passing judgment on what kind of reaction it warrants. We worry, therefore, that by adopting the rhetoric of evil, we are betraying the legacy of rationalism in ethics, choosing to ignore what we know about the complexities of the human psyche so that we can condemn and punish people on the basis of the harm they have caused. In doing that, we risk being unjust, but also regressing to a tribal form of morality, unin-terested in the reasons and motives of those we see as a threat to ourselves and our community.

These worries are real and should not be shrugged off too easily. If we want to talk about evil, we should be able to present reasons for believing that it could be an authentic thick moral concept, as opposed to an artificial one, manufactured in bad faith. We would need reasons to claim that there exists, for us, a communal practice which would make a confident use of such language possible. As we said at the beginning, it seems clear that one authentically thick, descriptive-normative understanding of evil, which tied wrongdoing to the influence of demonic forces, is one we can no longer share. Given the circumstances in which the concept of moral evil regained popularity, it seems that rather than by the fear of the devil, its use is now inspired by the horror at the atrocities of which humanity turned out to be capable. The rhetoric of evil suggests that this horror is universally felt, which is perhaps too optimistic. However, it is not the prevalence of this emotion that is crucial for grounding the thick concept of moral evil, but rather its relation to the motivation for action.

It was, I would like to suggest, not the fear of the demonic forces that used to sustain the Christian concept of moral evil, but a complex communal practice of culturally dominant religion of which it was an element. Striving for salvation, people were engaged with what was for them the reality of the

devil in their personal struggle against temptation, which translated into the way in which they treated each other. Their communal life was imbued with this concern, and even if their trust in God and their fear of His enemy did not stop them from doing very unchristian things to each other, it provided a shared understanding of the world and a basis for meaningful relationships. The answer to the question if we can and should now cultivate a thick concept of moral evil depends, I would like to suggest, on whether the need for it we have been experiencing has comparably deep sources. If feelings are all we share, we are unlikely to make a good cognitive and practical use of the concept of evil. If, however, the horror we feel in the face of what people are capable of is an aspect of our actual commitment to save and protect each other and everyone else from harm, or if it can bring us closer to make such a shared commitment, we might have a chance of developing a thick concept of evil which could help us make sense of the present moral landscape and find our way in it.

Conclusion

The revival of the interest in the concept of moral evil in the last decades demands philosophical examination. In this paper, I tried to discuss some of the problems this concept poses for our standard ideas about human action and moral responsibility, arguing that its character is first and foremost descriptive. The concept of evil is, I believe, closely related to the notion of severe harm. Since it is at the same time normative, I suggested that evil is best understood as a thick ethical concept and attempted to propose some reasons why, despite the difficulties in fitting this concept into our contemporary outlook and the dangers connected with its (over)use, it may be worth cultivating.

Bernard Williams, a great advocate of thick ethical concepts, was extremely suspicious of the tendency of the moral theory to eliminate such "rogue elements". In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, he wonders:

> [i]f there is such a thing as the truth about the subject matter of ethics – the truth, we might say, about the ethical – why is there any expectation that it should be simple? In particular, why should it be conceptually simple, using only one or two

ethical concepts, such as duty or good state of affairs, rather than many? Perhaps we need as many concepts to describe it as we find we need, and no fewer.[31]

Perhaps what we need now is a thick concept of evil. As we are trying to make sense of the mystery of moral evil, we should hope that the horrors which in the previous century made us come back to these questions did not just shock us or, worse still, awake our intellectual curiosity, but rekindled in us the will to protect and care about each other. If that is why we are no longer satisfied with just the terms "bad" and "wrong", our efforts to understand and confront evil might have a chance of succeeding.

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