

BOOK REVIEW

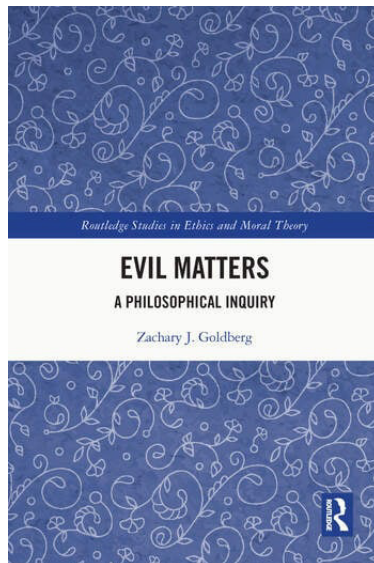
**Zachary J. Goldberg, *Evil Matters: A Philosophical Inquiry*, 2021,
New York: Routledge Studies in Ethics and Moral Theory, 254 pages,
ISBN: 978-0-367-89402-3 (hbk); ISBN: 978-1-032-05242-7 (pbk);
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Zachary J. Goldberg is a Ph.D. holder in moral philosophy from Arizona State University. For the present moment, he is an “Ethics Innovation Manager” at Trilateral Research, a UK and IE-ethical AI software-based enterprise. His research interests are applied ethics and moral, political, and social philosophy. In this landmark study, *Evil Matters: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Zachary Goldberg presents the findings of his long-term research project entitled “Components of Evil: An Analysis of Secular Moral Evil and its Normative and Societal Implications” at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich.

Distant from any religious contextualization of the concept of evil, Goldberg, in this

volume, delivers a complete study on evil action by revisiting previous philosophical studies on evil acts and their relation to human understanding. The context of this volume focuses solely on evil performative actions and does not discuss evil personhood. This book engages an interesting philosophical and intellectual commentary on the complex philosophical speculations which require on the one hand amendments in some cases and on the other, further explanations. This philosophical chef-d’oeuvre is divided into six chapters; each centered on different metaphysical questions whereby the author is keen on bringing forth precise and meticulous arguments in favor of his conclusions.

In the introduction, Goldberg surveys three philosophical approaches to evil. In



line with the necessity to conceptualize evil far from the fictional and mythical atmosphere, the first approach argues for the inevitability of scrutinizing evil matters from the perspective of morality. Otherwise, the concept of evil cannot be considered a part of secular philosophy thus ought to be rejected. To achieve this end, Goldberg asserts the need not to dehumanize an evil character even if evil is often conceptualized as “the morally worst character or action” (17). Fallen by the same token, “evil need not entail inhuman monstrosity; it can properly refer to the worst of what humans do to each other” (17). Still, he is tremendously aware that perpetrators of genocide -specifically- “demonize their victims, by labeling them as evil and therefore worthy of eradication” (15). Here, suppose we heed the utilized terminology “victims”. In that case, it implies innocent people who powerful groups have hunted; thereby, perpetrators of genocide ought to be out-casted from the good human nature since they initially work towards “othering” certain people and enhancing worldwide violence against them. In this section, evil is negotiated as a political weapon that serves the side that can argue better. Indeed, through revisiting *Reading the Holocaust* (1999), Goldberg tries to solidify his vantage point with that of Inga Clendinnen’s that notably irrationalized the categorization of Nazis within the “evil” block. The two scholars voice their concern that this classification may automatically consider the Nazis as monstrous individuals; ipso facto, they do not fit the ordinary human conduct. Once proved, “irrational creatures” cannot be punished since their fundamental nature is good (16). What is intriguing in Clendinnen’s argument is his

conservative arguments and justification that the Nazis were solely ordinary people with a specific motivation to evil rather than perpetrators of evil.

The second approach to the evil he uses in his exploration relates to the Socratic method. There is a great possibility for this Greek thinker to know the nature of concepts through analyzing their “surrounding conditions,” as he refers to it. By analogy, Goldberg assumes that we can only understand the source and nature of evil if we draw on the conditions and reasons behind it. For Socrates, evil entails not only wrongdoings but also harmful antecedent motivations. This understanding implies that predicting evil actions before their occurrence is not merely halfway to preventing them from happening but also offers the opportunity to detect their enhancements. The third approach solidifies Socrates’ assumption that the nature of evil results from various motivations. This is illustrated by Wittgenstein, who, instead of searching for the single source of evil, believed in looking for “similarities and relationships” that contribute to the making of evil manifested in inconsistent alterations (19). Hence, evil could only be defined after it happened. In this sense, The Wittgensteinian approach disregarded evil predictions to identify a specific wicked circumstance. It identifies evil as a series of related conditions contributing to the making of evil that manifest consistent alterations. In selecting Wittgenstein’s approach, Goldberg is keen to support his claim that evil is not human nor a static vice but the aftermath of wicked factors.

In the first chapter, the author offers a secular definition of evil. He departs from Kant’s conceptualization of radical moral

evil and three contemporary critiques of his philosophical position. However, his aim is not to confirm Kant's evil fallacy as such but to provide evidence that Kant's theory could continue to be relevant within contemporary academic circles if amended. Kant's theory of radical evil claims that people are naturally either good or evil. Kant argues that it is one's choice to prioritize their inner proclivities over what is agreed to be the moral law out of self-love. The first body of criticism argues that the Kantian accounts of evil fail to distinguish evil acts from mundane wrongdoings. In fact, Goldberg assents to these critiques viewing that Kant's theory did not pay much heed to the various shades of motives to "wrongdoing" existing namely "malice, hate, greed, boredom, ambition, revenge, fear, and obedience" including evil standing at its highest wicked degree (41). The second point of criticism rejects Kant's narrow understanding of the nature of evil. He limits it solely to self-love and disregards the potential violation of other moral laws. In his defense of Kantian self-love, Goldberg argues that it involves egoism and all immoral acts resulting from prioritizing desires over moral law. The last circle of critiques stresses the gap in Kant's theory of evil as it silences one of the crucial sides of evil acts, the victims. In general, their main concern is that victims are not recognized as having suffered either physical or psychological harm. Goldberg defends Kant by claiming that Kant was interested in describing "the vices of culture" and not the specifics of the damage they cause. Although he deems that Kant's accounts did fuse evil with all immoral acts,

he still endorses this theory as apt for constructing the body of knowledge to understand evil.

The second chapter provides the missing pieces to Kant's theory. Goldberg explores in these chapters the moral-psychological factors and harm degrees associated with conducting a variety of evil acts. First, "Naïve Harm Accounts" provide a simple explanation of evil as simply immense harm committed by any individual, not necessarily someone who is born evil. These accounts distinguish between the immense harm and mundane wrong act. Thus, the less harm an act generates, the less it could be considered evil and vice versa. However, as Goldberg asserts, the absence of specification towards evil agency -human or non-human (natural disasters or unfortunate circumstances) deprived this theory of relevance. Second, "Perpetrator Accounts" advocates try to figure out the characteristics of evil from examining the psychological state of the perpetrator(s). They claim that evil acts are performed primarily by individuals who find pleasure in causing pain and humiliation to others. These accounts neglected the reality that emotionless people could perform evil actions; thus, Goldberg assumes sadism is only one motive for evil, not its ultimate cause. Goldberg argues that while the two analytic accounts are related, it is imperative not to abandon them but to move to a third: the "Nuanced Harm Accounts". These accounts focus on both agents of evil actions, victims, and perpetrators. The nuances, here, are explored in Card's intolerable harm (2002), John Keke's "undeserved harm", Luke Russell (2014), and Paul Formosa's "combination conception of evil" (2008).

Linked to the previous chapter, the third chapter, "Beyond Nuanced Harm Accounts: Evil and Vulnerability", seek to alleviate the Nuanced Harm Accounts to a complete evil theory. The author explores the asymmetrical relationship between the perpetrator and victim that fashioned a new undeveloped feature of evil action. For him, evil cannot be an outcome of haphazard action. Before the committed action, victims and perpetrators reveal a sort of interactive relation. In this relation, Goldberg highlights the various vulnerabilities that assist in performing an evil act. He states that evil action is characterized by exploiting ontological, moral, or characteristic vulnerability, keeping in mind that these kinds of vulnerabilities stimulate dependencies on perpetrators of evil. This power asymmetry occurs when one side is vulnerable due to the corporeal human nature's capacity to be harmed physically (needs food to survive), described as "ontological vulnerability" (95). On the other hand, moral vulnerability represents our incapacity to accept harsh feelings as humiliation, embarrassment, or disgrace (96). Moreover, our incapability to perform certain acts and interests because each person has a particular deficiency embodies the "characteristic" type of vulnerability. Furthermore, "situational vulnerability" occurs in a specific condition (natural, political, social, or economic) that prevents an individual from acting accurately or suffering from pain. Be that as it may, evil is not represented through these vulnerabilities. Goldberg clarifies that their exploitation by external agents triggers evil harm. Recalling the Holocaust, the My Lai Massacre, the Rwandan genocide, the mass rapes in Bosnia, and the

torture at Abu Ghraib; evil is accordingly accurately incarnated in prisoners' vulnerability in wars exploited by soldiers, such as executions, sexual abuse, suffering, and several other advantages acquired after being in the powerful position.

The fourth chapter delves into Peter Strawson's moral responsibility. Strawsonians have a paradoxical view of evildoers' position, which prompted Goldberg to debate the Strawsonians' exclusion of evildoers from the moral community. Strawsonians acknowledge that individuals are morally responsible if they receive reactive attitudes (compassion, blame...) involved in interpersonal connections. For Strawson, this responsibility partaking creates a sense of morality within a community; if there is no interpersonal dialogue with evildoers, they are inevitably expelled from the moral community. As Goldberg argues, a moral community capable of being manipulated by powerful agents, or "desk perpetrators", who call for genocide is not moral (126). For instance, leaders accountable for wars in Yemen and Burma and genocidaires at Omarska and Babi Yar who tortured, raped, and murdered did receive reactive attitudes based on their hegemonic position and justified motives to perform certain crimes within the international political arena. Nevertheless, this end does not deprive them of full responsibility for the immense harm that millions of innocents have experienced. Similarly, Garry Watson (1987) argues how paradoxical our engagement and attitudes would be to negotiate the accountability of evildoers while their evil is basically a decision. With this regard, Goldberg thoroughly refutes the Strawsonian moral community.

The fifth chapter explores the immoral community created by those who perpetrate evil as a squad after establishing distinctive awareness of the Strawsonian moral community. To track the shift to collective evil, it is worth acknowledging Goldberg's choice in early chapters to select evil perpetrators as groups in making illustrations regarding evil agents instead of individuals. Indeed, it was a step towards explaining that serving collective purposes inevitably generates the power and ability – those individuals cannot manage to do separately- to perform immense harm. Goldberg's examination departs from three philosophical accounts of collective agency: Michael Bratman's account of joint action, Peter French's analysis of corporate agency, and Larry May's discussion of mob action and agency. Goldberg deduces that the vested power beneath collective evil involves joint action, corporation, and solidarity of the mob. This analytical triad frames the group's moral psychology and their capacity to harm. Then, it follows that a group of perpetrators can be more brutal than an evil act performed by an individual.

The sixth chapter raises the question of whether forgiveness or vengeance is the morally best-accepted response to evildoing. Bishop Butler believes that resentment needs to be changed because it may exacerbate the situation and result in vengeance. Nonetheless, many cases cannot forgive their perpetrators, and though it could be accomplished, it is often unrealistic. Despite its justification, vengeance still embodies a reversal of a convicted evil act in the same way that the initial action is deemed evil. Finally, according to Goldberg, none of these possibilities are effective; in-

stead, he recommends enduring resentment to avoid the occurrence of similar violent events.

Finally, in the appendix, he emphasizes the inexistence of an entirely moral community, whereby good and evil are vital constituents of our human coexistence. To face evil, according to Goldberg, it is imperative not to rationalize it and not to try to justify it precisely within the genocides' context. His ultimate philosophy behind this book is to urge humanity to understand evil psychology and inspect perpetrators, eventually confronting evil actions.

In his *Evil Matters: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Zachary Goldberg provides a well-grounded protocol for understanding evil as primarily an act rather than an enduring human trait. The book answers many questions about evil action and its perpetrators. He considers numerous studies and theories, but he missed discussing evil acts from a singular perspective, hence discussing perpetrators of evil as individuals. He focuses much more on evil performed by a group of perpetrators in a war context that could harm a whole community. There is no severe novelty about this book though it elaborates in detail on previous studies. Still, new speculation about evil performed by an individual agent could make his book more relevant in evil studies for the present time. I strongly recommend this book to new researchers, academics, and students interested in evil matters as it functions as a manual for their field of study.

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