

Political Evil – Warping the Moral Landscape

Stephen de Wijze

Manchester Centre for Political Theory (MANCEPT)
Politics, University of Manchester

dewijze@manchester.ac.uk

Abstract:

This paper examines a neglected issue within recent philosophical discussions of a secular concept of evil. The notion of ‘political evil’ seeks to explain the profound normative social influence that malevolent ideologies have on the behaviour of individuals and the development of their characters. The recent scholarship on secular evil focuses on either evil acts and/or evil persons/characters largely ignoring the social dimension or context in which large scale evils such as genocide occur. A concept of political evil better explains the warping of the moral landscape that takes place, providing the normative framework within which genocide, wide spread torture and mass murder occur. The paper argues that a notion of political evil is an important part of our moral vocabulary without which we cannot adequately understand or describe horrific events such as the Holocaust from a normative perspective.

Key Words:

Political evil
Secular evil
Genocide
Holocaust
Ethics

DRAFT – Please do not quote without permission.

Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*¹ begins by relating an incident in World War II involving a certain Captain Wolfgang Hoffmann. Hoffmann was the commander of one of the three Reserve Police Battalions 101 whose task it was to deport and murder tens of thousands of Jewish men, women and children in Poland. While Hoffmann was engaged in mass murder he received an order from German high command which he deemed morally objectionable and consequently refused to obey. The order was that every member of his company signs a declaration undertaking not to steal, plunder or take any goods without paying from the local Polish population. Hoffmann strenuously objected to this order since it questioned the honour of decent German soldiers. He pointed out that he and his men adhered to German norms of morality and conduct and did so out of their 'own free will and is not caused by a craving for advantages or fear of punishment'.

I begin this paper with this incident as it offers a striking example of how malevolent political ideologies can warp² what I call the 'moral landscape'. Hoffmann's behaviour is both baffling and horrifying. Here we have a man who considers himself to be honourable and acting within a strict moral code. He strenuously objects to being thought of as a potential thief yet at the same time he is daily committing the horrors of genocide - the wanton torture and murder of tens of thousands of helpless Jewish men women and children.³ The Hoffmann example takes place during the Holocaust when Germany was in the grip of 'political evil', a notion which has not been a focus of the recent plethora of philosophical papers and books on the concept of secular evil.⁴ By 'political evil' I refer to an account of

¹ Goldhagen (1997).

² The terms 'distort' and 'invert' could also usefully describe this phenomenon but the notion of 'warping' offers the best way to understand the deleterious changes to fundamental and commonplace moral principles in such situations.

³ For considerable detail on the members and activities of Reserve Police Battalion 101 see Browning (1998).

⁴ For a taste of such scholarship see Arendt (1963), Baron-Cohen (2011), Calder (2011), Card (2002), Cole (2007), de Wijze (2002) and (2009), Formosa (2008), Garrard (1998), and (2002), Garrard and McNaughton (2012), Haybron (2002), Kekes (1990) and (2005), Kramer (2011), McGinn (1997), Morton (2004), Neiman (2002), Perrett (2002), Russell (2006), (2007) and (2009), Scarre (2012), Singer (2004), Steiner (2002), Svendsen (2010), and Zaibert (2012).

secular evil which applies to ideologies or world views; that is, to those which have a profound and malevolent effect on the behaviour of individuals and the shaping of their characters through warping the moral landscape.

This addition to our understanding of the broad notion of secular evil seeks to extend our understanding beyond the usual analysis that focuses on either evil *acts* and/or evil *persons/characters*. It is my contention that an account of political evil is needed to properly comprehend Captain Hoffman's views and to fully explain from a normative perspective the phenomenon of large scale evils. Here I have in mind genocides such as the horrific cases of the Holocaust and the mass murder of nearly one million people over a hundred days in Rwanda. While a great deal has been recently written to explain and clarify a notion of secular evil within moral philosophy there has been very little attention given specifically to groups or collectives.⁵ This gap seems deeply problematic given that a great deal of the worst kind of human suffering and harm has been caused by, for example, nation states, ethnic and tribal groups, religious sects, multinational companies, and cults where their members perpetrate evil acts in the name, and for the benefit, of their group. My argument is that a proper understanding of political evil is necessary if we are to fully understand the important role a secular account of evil plays in our moral vocabulary. The phrase 'political evil' refers to a malevolent ideology that is not simply morally problematic or bad but qualitatively different. Its aspirations and actions go beyond certain moral boundaries and the proper ascription for such a collective is 'evil'.

⁵ One notable exception is recent work done by Scarre (2012). Scarre's paper entitled 'Evil Collectives' is rightly concerned with the lack of philosophical analysis on whether groups in themselves can meaningfully be called 'evil'. Scarre focuses on examining the different forms of collectives – aggregates (unstructured collections of individuals) and conglomerates (groups with a discernible form of organisation and structure appropriate for achieving certain goals or ends) – and asks whether it is plausible that they can be said to have evil intentions and the right psychology to be properly called evil. However this is not the salient issue when examining the notion of political evil.

I begin this paper by setting out some important background conditions that need to be understood in any discussion of a secular account of evil. I then argue that the use of the term ‘evil ideology’ by politicians (and others) plus the phenomenon of large scale evils are not properly understood if we rely solely on the dichotomous act/person analysis of evil that dominates the current literature. To illustrate why this is so, I explore and reject the ‘Aggregative Acts’ (AA) and ‘Malevolent Influence’ (MI) arguments which might be used to explain large scale evils. Both approaches fail to capture the *sui generis* quality of what constitutes political evil. I then outline Zimbardo’s notion of ‘situational evil’ to show why it fundamentally differs from that of political evil.⁶ Finally I turn to an explanation of political evil providing two conditions which underlie all instances of it; namely, the warping of the moral landscape and the relentless drive for power and total domination. Throughout the paper I focus on evil ideologies (or worldviews) rather than institutions, nations or economic systems. The reason is that ideologies provide the political and normative context or background within which institutions operate and economic systems are interpreted and embraced.

1. Some important background to a discussion of secular evil

Any discussion of evil, and the notion of ‘political evil’ is no exception, provokes a number of negative reactions and misconceptions which need to be addressed, if only to set them aside for the purposes of this paper. There is considerable scepticism and concern about the very possibility of investigating a secular notion of evil. It defies definition because it is either too complex and/or too ephemeral and/or too contaminated by its religious and

⁶ See Zimbardo (2007).

metaphysical origins. Consequently, any attempt is at best a ‘fool’s errand’⁷ fraught with potentially deleterious consequences.⁸

This paper rejects such pessimism and argues that we can and must examine certain kinds of ideologies in the analysis of secular evil. As Singer rightly points out, ‘clarifying the concept of evil, defining its nature, is a distinctively philosophical task’⁹ and *ipso facto* this also applies to the analysis of ‘political evil’. Since World War II there has been a plethora of books and articles examining the origin and causes of catastrophic events such as the Holocaust¹⁰, yet none of them as far as I know use the notion of political evil as a significant normative explanation for why so many ordinary persons behaved evilly. The role of ideology has been examined by historians and others but this is done outside of a discussion of secular evil. This is so in large part because the secular notion of evil itself has been under-theorised until recently and because it is seen as unhelpful given its religious origins and emotional condemnatory character. My account of political evil, then, seeks to supplement and enhance the range of explanations already offered for the occurrence of genocide and mass murder by identifying the pernicious effect of political evil; namely, the warping of the moral landscape.¹¹

⁷ Simon (2000): 24.

⁸ Another set of concerns about the use of the term ‘evil’ is firstly, that such a notion demonises others and places them beyond understanding. Evil persons are seen as monsters who are beyond our comprehension and as a result we respond incorrectly towards them and their actions. This results in a form of condemnation that obscures the proper understanding of their behaviour. As the much overused quote attributed to Dostoevsky points out, ‘Nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer; nothing is more difficult than to understand him.’ Secondly, there is a deep concern that despite claims to the contrary, the concept of ‘evil’ is simply empty. It has no explanatory power other than it saying that some act or person is deeply immoral. Hence it serves no positive purpose at all. Cole (2006) forcefully makes both of these points and as a result argues that the concept of evil ought to be abandoned. I mention these objections here in order to lay them to one side for the purposes of this paper. I believe that Cole’s objections have been addressed by Garrard (2002) and Garrard and McNaughton (2012). Consequently I shall assume for the purposes of this paper that a well worked out notion of secular evil is a useful and necessary part of our moral vocabulary.

⁹ Singer (2004) : 185.

¹⁰ For a taste of these attempts to understand the notion of evil, its causes, effects, signs and how to combat it see Arendt (1963), Baumeister (1997), Browning (1998), Goldhagen (1997), Kekes (2005), Rosenbaum (2002) and (1998), Staub (1989), Vetlesen (2005), Waller (2002) and Zimbardo (2007).

¹¹ It is my contention, as I shall argue in the paper, that all cases of political evil involve the warping of the moral landscape. Whether this warping takes place in all accounts of evil I leave aside here.

‘Political evil’, then, is a normative concept that describes and properly identifies a particular kind of immoral ideology which is correctly understood as evil. This notion of political evil is entirely secular and refers to those ideologies or worldviews with the very worst kind of goals and methods. These ideologies are contemptible, harmful and correctly described as evil. They are qualitatively distinct from mere immoral ideologies and hence cannot be adequately described by any other negative normative term.¹² The hope is that my notion of political evil will provide an additional conceptual tool for identifying, understanding such ideologies. In short, the exploration of political evil is a philosophical task that seeks to add to and clarify our moral vocabulary, enabling us to properly identify and label an important part of our moral reality.

2. Beyond evil acts and persons

The recent literature on secular evil explores two lines of analysis. The most common approach is the investigation into what defines evil actions without making any claims about the nature or character of the person so acting. In the last two decades there have been a number of substantive theories of evil that offer rival accounts of how to define evil actions. Formosa in my view rightly identifies four fundamental approaches that underlie such differences. The first focuses on the victims of evil and the harm inflicted upon them. The second approach explores the motives and intentions of the perpetrators of evil actions while the third looks to the horrified incomprehension and disgust of bystanders when witnessing evil actions. The fourth approach, which Formosa favours, is a combination theory of evil action that seeks to combine all three approaches.¹³ Defining evil actions still leaves the difficult issue of the relationship between evil actions and evil persons/dispositions. It might

¹² The use of the intensifier ‘very very wrong or immoral’ fails to capture the qualitative difference I have in mind when using the term ‘evil’.

¹³ Formosa (2004). For a taste of the range of different approaches see Morton (2004) for his ‘Barrier Theory’, Steiner (2002) for ‘Perverse Pleasure Account’, Garrard (1998) for her ‘Silencing Account’ and de Wijze (2002) for my ‘Disjunctive Theory’.

turn out that by committing a sufficient number of evil acts (crossing a certain threshold) a person is then correctly described as evil. Or, perhaps, evil persons are those who hold certain settled malevolent intentions or demonstrate an unconscionable joy and delight in the pointless suffering of sentient beings. However the settling of this issue is seen as secondary to first understanding what we mean by an evil action.

The alternative approach is to understand the notion of evil from the other direction, so to speak, by first focusing on what constitutes an evil person.¹⁴ This requires an analysis of the character, vices and dispositions of the person and it is an approach much favoured by virtue ethicists, although not exclusively by them. The notion of an evil person is ‘substantially inward-looking’¹⁵ and seeks to outline what would be the malevolent intentions and emotions that motivate him/her.¹⁶ Here questions about the consistency and extremity of a person’s dispositions and settled character traits are primary in the analysis of evil. Evil persons can be understood as the negative mirror of saints who continually engage in supererogatory acts.¹⁷

While my own substantive account of evil takes the path of identifying evil actions rather than persons¹⁸, I set this debate aside here since my concern in this paper is with a third approach to providing a secular account of evil – one that examines the influence of political ideologies on the genesis of evil acts *and* evil persons. My account of political evil does not take a side on whether it is correct to examine acts rather than persons (or vice versa) since in

¹⁴ Linfield (2007) points to Yvonne Vera’s account of Sabiso in *The Stone Virgins* as a paradigmatic example of an evil person. She describes such monstrous predator as follows. ‘Most striking is Vera’s portrait of Sibaso... He is a man who not only loves violence but who *needs* violence: “If he loses an enemy, he invents another.” He is good at what he does, for he has honed “all the fine instincts of annihilation.” Most tellingly: Sibaso is “a hunter who kills not because he is hungry but because his stomach is full, and therefore he can hunt with grace.” He is a man, in short, whose nihilistic violence foretells the civil wars of places like Liberia and Sierra Leone, as well as the madness of today’s jihadist groups. He kills not because he is oppressed but because killing suits him; his sadism is not a cry for help but a shout of joy.’

¹⁵ Haybron (2002): 265.

¹⁶ Here we find the motive and affect based account of evil persons. Haybron (2002): 269-272 combines the two approaches to form his affective-motivational account of evil persons.

¹⁷ There are, however, important asymmetries between these opposition ends of the moral spectrum. See Steiner (2002) and Barry (2009).

¹⁸ See de Wijze (2002) and (2009).

this context they are inextricably intertwined. However, a clearer view of this hopefully will emerge later in the paper.

3. Evil ideologies and large scale evils

The use of ‘evil ideology’ in common discourse

While there is very little analysis in the recent philosophical discussions on secular evil that specifically examines collectives, its use in everyday discourse is ubiquitous. Politicians, journalists, authors among others describe specific ideologies and their effects as evil and fully expect that their audience understand what they mean by such terms. Consider three recent examples in politics which cross ideological positions. In 2005 after four suicide bombers killed fifty two persons in London, the Prime Minister at the time Tony Blair gave a speech at the Labour Party National Conference. He referred to the bombers as under the sway of an evil ideology, specifically Al Qaeda’s Islamic extremism.

What we witnessed in London last Thursday week was not an aberrant act. It was not random. It was not a product of particular local circumstances in West Yorkshire. Senseless though any such horrible murder is, it was not without sense for its organisers. It had a purpose. It was done according to a plan. It was meant. What we are confronting here is an evil ideology.¹⁹

In 2006 William Dalrymple wrote an article in the *New English Review* with the heading ‘The Evils of Ideology’. Here he forcefully asserts that ideologised states and in particular communist states should be understood as evil. In communist societies such as in the USSR and in Cambodia under the regime of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge individuals behave in horrifying and brutal ways.

¹⁹ See Blair (2005).

Where the means justify the end, as they do for most ideologies, mass murder becomes more likely, perhaps even inevitable in ideologised states. The capacity for cruelty, and the enjoyment of cruelty, that lies latent in almost every human heart, then allies itself to a supposedly higher, even transcendent purpose. Original sin meets social conditioning. A vicious circle is set up: and eventually, viciousness itself is taken to be a sign both of loyalty and of higher purpose.²⁰

A third example I take from a post by Richard Searcy on the Georgia Green Party website. He writes a piece entitled ‘The Inherent Evil of Conservative Ideology’ which twice refers to what he believes are the properties of evil ideologies which he equates with conservative views in the United States of America.

There is deeply-rooted evil in any ideology where money is more important than the peace and well-being of human life.... There is something deeply evil about an ideology that glorifies war and mass-murder. Deeply evil. Conservatives have never met a war they didn't like. Even when their mass-murder has been conclusively proven to be based on lies and deception, they'll make excuses for it, and they'll never consider the precious lives and families they've destroyed. That makes sense in a demonic way because the only lives and families they see as precious are their own.²¹

The purpose of quoting the above examples is not to take a view on whether Blair, Dalrymple or Searcy are correct in their different claims. Rather, they illustrate that politicians from all sides of the political spectrum use the words ‘evil ideology’ with the expectation that this is a meaningful and coherent notion.²² Furthermore, the different uses do not claim to be referring to evil in a religious or metaphysical sense. If this is correct then it seems that an investigation into the notion of secular evil ought to give serious attention to what an evil ideology might plausibly and coherently mean. It might be that Blair and the others are simply mistaken in using the notion of evil in such contexts and, following Cole, they are saying nothing other than that such ideologies are deeply immoral. At best, nothing useful or explanatory is added by the use of ‘evil’ here and it is more likely to have the deleterious effect of obscuring a proper understanding of such phenomena.

²⁰ See Dalrymple (2006).

²¹ See Searcy (2011).

²² Blair is a social democrat on the centre left. Dalrymple is a conservative and Searcy is on the far left of the political spectrum.

However, the ubiquitous use of the term evil does present a *prima facie* reason to explore further, and it may turn out that there is a concept such as ‘political evil’ that fits with our moral intuitions about certain ideologies and which we can usefully employ as part of our moral vocabulary. Consequently a careful examination of what a concept such as ‘political evil’ might entail seems pressing and necessary if we are to fully understand a secular notion of evil.

Explaining ‘large scale evil’

There is another reason why we need a notion of political evil apart from our strong intuitions and the *de facto* common reference to the notion of ‘evil ideologies’. If a comprehensive account of secular evil rests solely on either an analysis of individual actions or identifying evil persons (or even a combination of the two) this leaves a serious gap in our analysis of what I shall call ‘large scale evils’. Given recent history it is hard to not be concerned about the high number of catastrophic events that have resulted in so much death and misery.²³ Consider the following account of just some of the horrendous events that have taken place in the last hundred years in Kekes’ recent book *The Human Condition*:

Between 1914 and 1918, the Turks massacred about a million and a half Armenians. In 1931, Stalin ordered the murder of prosperous peasants, called kulaks, and about two million of them were executed or deported to concentration camps where they died slowly as a result of forced labor in extreme cold and on starvation diet. During the great terror of 1937-38, two million more were murdered at Stalin’s orders. In 1937-38, the Japanese murdered about half million Chinese in Nanking. During WWII, about six million Jews, two million prisoners of war, and half million gypsies, mental defectives, and homosexuals were murdered in Nazi Germany. After India’s independence in 1947, over a million Muslims and Hindus were murdered in religious massacres. In the 1950-51 campaign against so-called counter-revolutionaries in Mao’s China about one million people were murdered, and the so-called Great Leap Forward of 1959-63 caused the death of an estimated sixteen to thirty million people from starvation.

²³ By focusing on the last hundred years I do not intend to suggest that there was less suffering and misery prior to this. However, for my purposes here I focus on recent events which have been of concern, especially during World War II and since. For an account of the worst atrocities and numbers killed in wars, the slave trade and other events see White (2011).

Pol Pot in Cambodia presided over the murder of about two million people. In 1992-95, about two hundred thousand Muslims were murdered in Bosnia by Serb nationalists. In 1994, almost one million people were murdered in Rwanda. To this list of mass murders many more could be added from Afghanistan, Argentina, Chile, the Congo, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Uganda, and numerous other places.²⁴

These terrible events described by Kekes are all plausibly cases of large scale evil. The question that arises is whether the disjunctive act/person analysis of secular evil suffices to explain the evil in such scenarios. The sheer scale of human misery caused and the fact that these events occur across a very wide range of societies suggest that an analysis of either evil acts and/or persons leaves the explanation of large scale evil underdetermined. To understand the problems with both of these approaches we need to examine each in some detail.

The 'Aggregative Acts' Argument (AA)

The AA argument seeks to explain the evil committed under, for example, the Nazi regime by establishing that in Nazi Germany there were millions of individual evil acts which when aggregated explain the Holocaust as a large scale evil. When a certain number of evil acts have been committed, thereby crossing a threshold, this then becomes properly classified as a case of large scale evil. This account purports to fully explain all there is to say about the evil in such a horrific and catastrophic situation caused by the Nazi regime before and during World War II.

While there is nothing mysterious about this aggregative method there is a troubling issue of how to establish the appropriate threshold to distinguish large scale evils from other lesser kinds which we commonly find everywhere. There seems to be no obvious or natural point at which we can say that a situation is now a case of large scale evil, but as the examples from Kekes, and our experience with many other concepts, suggest, we can

²⁴ Kekes (2010): 115-116.

intuitively recognise such cases when we see them. So in short, if one focuses on examining evil actions then large scale evil results from many people committing evil acts over an extended period of time.

However, whether aggregating evil actions can lead us to correctly label the ideology that underlies such actions as itself evil is not at all clear. A moment's pause reveals at least two important problems which undermine the AA argument. Firstly, in cases of genocide, mass killing, widespread torture, and so on, why do these terrible events they take place in certain societies at certain times and not in others? Why did Germany, Rwanda, Cambodia, Stalin's Soviet Union, Bosnia and many other places suddenly have an upsurge in evil actions and evil persons at the specific times that they did? There is nothing distinctive about the kind of persons that live in such societies – at least we can say with certainty that these individuals had previously lived for long periods without engaging in evil actions towards one another. Yet tens of thousands of ordinary people in these societies freely committed vast numbers of appalling acts of evil over a considerable length of time. This concern is not (and I believe cannot be) adequately addressed by the AA argument.

To put this point in a different way, why do some societies during a specific period have an exponential increase of evil acts committed by persons who ordinarily would not act in such appalling ways? Why does the number of loathsome malevolent individuals who obtain positions of prestige and power suddenly increase? Consider the recent genocide in Rwanda which reached levels of barbarity that shocked the conscience of the world. Here is Susan Sontag on the Rwandan genocide.

Ours is, appallingly, an age of genocide, but even so, what happened in Rwanda in the spring of 1994 stands out in several ways. In a tiny, landlocked African country smaller than the state of Maryland, some 800,000 people were hacked to death, one by one, by their neighbours. The women, men, and children, who were slaughtered were of the

same race and shared the same language, customs and confession (Roman Catholic) as those who eagerly slaughtered them.’²⁵

The Rwandan genocide was not carried out by professional killers or a sophisticated army with modern weapons or by hated foreign invaders. It was the work of ordinary men and women, in all respects normal people, who prior to the genocide lived as peaceful neighbours with those whom they later murdered without pity. What is also astonishing is the rate of killing that took place. At least 800 000 people were murdered in 100 days (Rwandans claim it was as high as 1 million) and, as mentioned above, this was done without sophisticated technology. Philip Gourevitch notes that over that 100 day killing spree the ‘dead of Rwanda accumulated at nearly 3 times the rate of Jewish dead during the Holocaust. It was the most efficient mass killing since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki’.²⁶ What then set the context and enabled this sudden explosion of uncharacteristic mass violence and cruelty? It seems that the AA argument cannot offer an explanation as it omits the social and political dimensions of evil that existed in Rwanda before and during the massacres.

Secondly, in explanations of complex human interactions, we generally accept that ‘the social’ or ‘societal influences’ strongly affect the behaviour of individuals. We see this in such slogans as ‘poverty causes crime’ or ‘Capitalism engenders selfishness and a breakdown in community’. There is no reason to think that there is any difference with regard to the causes for evil actions. Consequently, the asking and answering of questions about the social influences on behaviour seem particularly apt. For example, do particular social conditions or ideologies or religious beliefs encourage evil actions more than others? Why do some ideologies fail to provide individuals with the moral resources to reject evil actions when they have a choice to act otherwise? *Prima facie*, it seems that

²⁵ Susan Sontag in the preface to Hatzfeld (2005): vii.

²⁶ Gourevitch (2000): 4.

there is a rather complicated (rather than one way causal) relationship between the reasons for evil actions and the influence of social institutions, ideologies, and worldviews. Again the AA argument does not address this issue when exploring the appalling phenomenon of large scale evil.²⁷

The Malevolent Influence Argument (MI)

Perhaps the failure of the AA argument to account for large scale evil is due to the focus on evil acts rather than on evil persons. If we first establish who are evil persons and then trace their access to power and malevolent influence, we will find a good explanation for why genocide and mass killings occur in the times and places that they do. The Nazi horrors, it might be argued, were due to the malign influence of a small but distinctive group of powerful and charismatic evil persons such as Hitler, Himmler and Heydrich who led the Nazi Party.

However this argument is unpersuasive for at least three reasons. Firstly, evil leaders no matter how charismatic or brutal cannot achieve their aims and engage in genocide, mass slaughter, enslavement, systematic rape, mutilations and so on without the support of a significant number of the general population. This support can be overt when individuals are willing participants, or they can provide tacit consent through indifference or apathy to what is occurring.²⁸ The evidence from recent historical studies of the Holocaust and other

²⁷ This is not to say that the AA argument must reject the influence of social influences on individual behaviour. Rather, it is the concern that the AA argument does not focus sufficiently on the moral landscape within which individual decisions are made or moral characters formed.

²⁸ The title of Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* points to his core contentions that virulent anti-Semitism in German society motivated the vast majority of Germans to participate in the genocide of Jews. He insists that any satisfactory explanation of the Holocaust must focus on the causal role of Nazi ideology which resulted in so many ordinary Germans contributing to and supporting the genocide. Goldhagen's thesis is controversial. For criticisms of his view and an alternative perspective see Browning (1998) especially his 'Afterword' on pages 191-223. Browning's disagrees with Goldhagen on two central points. Firstly, he disagrees with the role Goldhagen gives to German eliminativist anti-Semitism in the

genocides is that the individuals carrying out the massacres, torture and rapes were not fanatical supporters of the prevailing ideology and in some cases even strongly disliked and disagreed with central views and the policies of those in power.²⁹ What is more, these individuals were not coerced and those few who did refuse to commit murder and other horrendous acts were not punished.³⁰ There is clearly a very complex story to be told from a social and psychological perspective about why people act as they do in such situations. But from a normative standpoint, as the Captain Hoffmann example illustrates, it seems that people in ordinary jobs or roles find themselves within a moral landscape that is warped or inverted. Hoffman's moral principles were distorted rather than erased and we need an explanation for why this occurred that goes beyond the claim that it was due to the influence of malevolent yet charismatic leaders. The MI approach in itself is unable to explain what causes this moral warping or inversion which affects so many ordinary people.

Secondly, the MI also fails to explain why in some societies at certain times there is an exponential increase in the number of evil persons. If we accept that the existence of evil persons is relatively rare why did Nazi Germany and Rwanda under the Hutu regime suddenly produce a plethora of ordinary individuals who are not simply swept along by the evil *zeitgeist* but actively encouraged and took pleasure in torture, murder and genocide? The

Nazi genocide against the Jews. Secondly, Browning disagrees with Goldhagen concerning the motivations of 'ordinary' German men who became murderers in the Holocaust.

²⁹ For example of such an individual, see Pauer-Studer and Velleman (2011): 340-345 for their discussion of Johann Paul Kremer who was a Dozent of Anatomy at the University of Münster serving in Auschwitz as a physician. Kremer was an opponent of Nazi racial doctrine so his participation in Auschwitz needs a different explanation.

³⁰ Browning (1998): 192, points out there is unequivocal agreement among historians of the Holocaust that there was participation by numerous ordinary Germans in the mass murder of Jews and others. Furthermore, these individuals were drawn from a wide cross section of German society and they did not kill because they were coerced and feared dire punishment for themselves and family if they refused. As Hatzfeld (2005): 210 points out, in the 40 years of post war trials of Nazis 'not one defence lawyer could cite a single case of a German who was severely punished for refusing to kill an unarmed Gypsy or Jew'. If there was pressure to commit murder it was social pressure from peers or the fear of looking weak and not doing one's duty as a soldier. All this is not to claim that coercion was not used by the Nazi state to force people to behave in ways they found repulsive and evil. There was a pervasive and systematic use of force and coercion by the Nazi regime. But this was certainly not the case for the ordinary German soldiers and civilians who took part in murder, enslavement and torture of Jews and others in Nazi Germany.

inventiveness of many Nazis in finding ways to humiliate and degrade Jews (and others) in their power is shocking and instructive. These were people who engaged in what Glover refers to as ‘The Cold Joke’, the ultimate expression of contempt and mockery on those who were suffering at their hands.³¹ They enjoyed and revelled in inflicting pain and humiliation on those unable to defend themselves without any conscience or regret.

While this terrible proclivity is partly explained by the psychology and character of some individuals, its expression and acceptance by those who refrained from such behaviour is due to external factors that either annihilate or seriously warp moral norms. Consequently an adequate explanation of such widespread cruelty by ‘ordinary’ persons needs to turn to, among other possible explanations, the influence of an evil ideology.

Thirdly, even if it were the case that evil leaders managed to manipulate and persuade a substantial number of persons to carry out their destructive and pernicious plans, the MI argument does not explain why there is no strong and widespread resistance to genocidal plans and activities. How does it become the case that murder, rape, torture, and enslavement become acceptable to persons who ordinarily would consider such actions abhorrent and impermissible? A plausible explanation needs an understanding of the nature of an evil ideology and the way it manages to exert its malign influence on individuals’ characters and actions. Evil ideologies both sanitise and encourage horrendous behaviour while giving political power to evil persons. Furthermore, the willing participants in evil actions tend to see the leadership as striving to achieve lofty and noble goals in the face of a powerful and

³¹ Glover (1999): 340-343. ‘The Cold Joke’ is seen in many different places where the enemy is dehumanised. The Nazis, as Glover points out, developed ‘The Cold Joke’ to an art form. For example, Fackler (2007) explored the many ways that Nazis used music in the death camps. One of its functions was to humiliate and mock those about to be murdered or tortured. As Fackler points out: ‘It was by no means unusual for singing to provide the macabre background music for punishments, which were stage-managed as a deterrent, or even as a means of sadistic humiliation and torture. Joseph Drexel in the Mauthausen concentration camp, for instance, was forced to give a rendering of the church hymn “O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden” (“Jesus’ blood and wounds”) while being flogged to the point of unconsciousness. Punishment beatings over the notorious flogging horse (the “Bock”) were performed accompanied by singing, and the same is true of executions.’

dangerous opposition. Evil actions become not only permissible but necessary and a duty to be undertaken by loyal citizens.

Given the significant problems with both the AA and MI approaches outlined above, and the widespread use of the phrase ‘evil ideology’ by politicians and others, the recent debates concerning secular evil appear to be missing an important dimension to their analysis. The recent dichotomy in examining evil through close attention to either actions or persons cannot provide a satisfactory account of the normative quality of large scale evils that distinguishes them from very bad cases of large scale wrongdoing. Consequently, we need to look for a notion of evil that focuses on malevolent social influences and ideologies themselves. To put it another way, we need to turn our attention to examining the particular kind of social milieu with its specific ideas and values that make up the background normative social context in the society at the particular time and place. We need to understand how such values and ideas can be evil and deleteriously influence the way in which ordinary people understand and carry out their lives within states, institutions and other collectives.

4. ‘Situational Evil’ – Zimbardo on the social influences of evil behaviour

My earlier claim that an analysis of secular evil needs to focus on the social may seem woefully ignorant of decades of research already done in this area since the end of World War II. The analysis of social influences has been the primary way in which social scientists (in particular sociologists and psychologists), historians, and economists have sought to explain the horrors of genocide and mass murder.³² One of the most influential accounts has

³² For a taste of this vast literature see Arendt (1963), Baumeister (1997), Browning (1998), Glover (1999), Goldhagen (1997), Katz (1993), Milgram (2005), Rosenbaum (1998), Staub (1989) and Waller, (2002).

been the work of Philip Zimbardo.³³ The difference between his position on the social influences that cause evil and my account of political evil is instructive.³⁴ Zimbardo revisits the idea of ‘situational evil’ by drawing on insights from his famous Stanford Prison Experiments of 30 years ago. His central aim is to place greater weight and emphasis on situational rather than dispositional explanations for human behaviour.³⁵ To understand evil actions we need to understand those social conditions framed by institutional arrangements which assign roles and responsibilities that are often blindly followed for a number of complex reasons. Zimbardo is clear about what constitutes evil behaviours and persons. He offers a psychologically based definition. Evil then

consists in intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanise, or destroy innocent others – or using one’s authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf.³⁶

For a variety of psychological and social reasons good and moral persons use their authority and institutional power to harm, demean and destroy innocent others. It is important to stress that for Zimbardo it is overwhelmingly situational forces which lead good persons to behave evilly.³⁷ His key concern is to identify and fully appreciate the situational conditions that generate and shape human behaviour patterns - in particular corrupting systems of power that underlie complex behaviours - and develop ways to resist them.

³³ Zimbardo (2007).

³⁴ See Zimbardo (2007); Ch.1.

³⁵ Dispositional accounts of human behaviour look to inherent personal qualities such as genetic makeup, personality traits, character, free will, and particular inner virtues or vices. Situational explanations focus on how a person’s character and behaviours change due to the powerful influence of social factors particularly powerful institutions. In these institutions, mechanisms are created to translate ideology into systems of power and operating procedures. See Zimbardo (2007): 5-11. Zimbardo’s situational factors are specific to particular institutions and differ from ideological influences in that the former need not be connected to general beliefs or evaluations of a worldview.

³⁶ Zimbardo (2007): 5.

³⁷ If there are dispositional reasons for why some people do evil this issue is of far less importance for Zimbardo as such cases of evil are relatively rare and most large scale evil is done by good people due to situational factors within institutions.

It is worth stressing that in cases of situational evil individuals may not notice that they are engaging in evil acts, and even when they do realize this many feel helpless to stop or change their behaviour. Social pressures and a strong sense of loyalty for example prevent many people from objecting to their institutional role. Furthermore, the institutions themselves may not be set up to do evil. However their effect on individual behaviour is insidious for a number of reasons such as a narrow focus on principles to detriment of consequences (or vice versa) or the demand that rules be applied rigidly and thoughtlessly. Situational evil often occurs when there is blind obedience to rule following coupled with a lack of knowledge and concern about how such actions contribute to the overall purpose and goals of the institution. The nature of institutional roles and the power that goes with them make individuals particularly susceptible this problem, and even socially laudable institutions (the police, prison services and schools) are not exempt. Inadequate oversight and poor management can far too easily result in situational evil. The giving of power and responsibility to those who are neither suited nor trained to properly use it, or the holding of unrealistic expectations and placing of inappropriate pressure on individuals, contribute to a social context in which good people will act badly.³⁸

Zimbardo's key concern is to alert us to the existence of situational evil and provide ways to help individuals resist such pressures by spotting its signs. This is valuable work but it does not offer an account of political evil; namely, the circumstances in which an ideology

³⁸ The effects of situational evil on individual behaviours take a number of forms. Firstly, situational evil can change banal activities into evil ones. Ordinary acts which are usually neither moral nor immoral can become evil within a certain institutional context. For example, the stop and search action by the police is usually an acceptable part of their job but when it is used against certain groups by an institutionally racist police force the actions can become evil in Zimbardo's definition of the term. Secondly, situational evil gives power to individuals to violate persons and principles in pursuit of important and cherished goals and in so doing often institutionalizes cruelty. Thirdly, situational evil often results in the inversion of truth and the flourishing of propaganda by the institution. For what at the time seem to be valid institutional reasons, the truth is either obscured or falsified and this leads to actions and projects that cause great harm to others. Fourthly, situational evil very often dismisses any attempts at criticism of the system or institution or ideology and marginalises or excludes those who try to do so. This undermines many individuals' ability and resources to identify and resist the pressure to commit evil actions. Situational evil then enables institutions to silence and if necessary destroy its opponents and invariably corrupts its own employees and supporters. Here, to use a theatrical expression, 'the mask destroys the face'.

can itself be properly labelled as evil; and what its role is, *qua* evil ideology, in generating evil actions and producing evil persons. Situational evil explains why social circumstances can make persons behave very badly but it does not identify those ideologies which are properly identified as cases of ‘political evil’. It is the task of the remainder of this essay to examine this issue.

5. Political Evil

My concern is to outline and defend a notion of ‘political evil’ which best identifies and describes from a normative perspective the very worst ideologies.³⁹ A notion of political evil is needed as part of our moral vocabulary in order to identify a new subject of evil. Large scale evils raise the question of whether, and in what way, there is evil in the *co-ordinated coincidence* of so many evil acts and persons at a particular time and place.⁴⁰ How are these situations different from cases of the mere coincidence of many evil acts? Is it the case that there is evil in the coincidence itself that is not derivative of the evil of the coincident acts? My account of political evil seeks to show that large scale evils are derivative of the evil of an ideology that realises its aims precisely in the facilitating of so many coincident acts.

The idea of political evil, then, identifies those ideologies which warp the normative framework within which it is possible and highly probable that a coincidence of the worst kinds of evil acts and persons will flourish. It normatively frames the coincidence of many evil people and acts that we identify as large-scale evils such as genocide. In addition, the

³⁹ The phrase ‘political evil’ has recently been used by Wolfe (2011). His account of political evil is quite different both in content and aim from account I am advocating in this paper. For Wolfe, what makes evil political is that those committing the evil actions - a group/nation/leader - have realisable political goals and, secondly, they are able to cause a very considerable level of harm. Wolfe offers the definition of political evil to distinguish it from ‘outsize evil’ of the Nazis and ‘everyday evil’ of those individuals who commit evil acts such as the lone killer. For Wolfe, political evil needs to be clearly identified because by doing so we enable political solutions to some cases of genocide, ethnic cleansing and torture. What sometimes seem to be cases of ‘outsize evil’ are actually cases of ‘political evil’ that can be solved with the correct political approach.

⁴⁰ I am indebted to Tom Porter for this way of articulating the difference and relationship between political evil and evil acts and persons.

idea of political evil provides a normative explanation of how such ideologies warp the moral landscape providing the moral horizons within which the participation in genocide, enslavement and torture come to be seen as morally acceptable and even a matter of moral duty.

Again it is important to make clear that I am not seeking to supplant the plethora of causal explanations - economic, historical, social and psychological - given by others as to why a particular genocide occurred in a particular place and time. These reasons for the occurrence of large scale evils are crucial for a proper and full understanding of such phenomena. Rather, my notion of political evil supplements these explanations with a richer and additional account of the permissive normative background to such horrific events. Political evil, then, refers to malevolent and deleterious political values, ideas and aspirations that frame social horizons and the context within which reality is interpreted. It produces societies or communities that encourage and celebrate evil acts whilst elevating into positions of power and influence those individuals who are ideologues, thugs, bullies, and psychopaths.⁴¹

Clarificatory points

Before examining the notion of political evil in detail some prior clarificatory points are necessary. Firstly, while political evil applies to ideologies and possibly institutions, I am not concerned here with whether collectivities in general can have intentions and motives in the same way as persons. Scarre argues that although we cannot ascribe minds to collectives,

⁴¹ Examples of top ranking Nazis with enormous power and influence within the regime who were by all accounts psychopathic are Theodor Eicke and Reinhart Heydrich. The Eicke was one of the key figures in the establishment of concentration camps and Heydrich remains one of the most brutal mass murderers in Nazi Germany who planned the Final Solution of the Jewish Problem at the Wannsee Conference in 1942. Both were killed during the war and given special burials as heroes of the Third Reich.

collective intentions do exist, and consequently can do evil.⁴² While I am minded to agree with Scarre I leave this issue aside as it is not relevant to my account of political evil.

Secondly, my notion of political evil applies to ideologies (sometimes referred to as evil moralities or evil worldviews) rather than institutions or states or economic systems. The reason is that an ideology provides the basic framework and background assumptions within which individuals and groups understand their goals and methods of achieving them. An ideology delineates the normative horizons and limits within which our interaction with others is prescribed. However the notion of ‘ideology’ is an essentially contested term. In this paper I adopt Sypnowich’s account and assume that an ideology is a set of ideas or views or beliefs whose purpose is not epistemic, but *political*.⁴³ An ideology ‘exists to confirm a particular political viewpoint, serve the interests of certain people, or perform a functional role in relation to social, economic, political and legal institutions’.⁴⁴ An ideology is an ‘action-oriented system of beliefs’⁴⁵ whose role is not to make reality transparent, but to motivate people to do or not do certain things. With this understanding of ideology it is appropriate to call, for example Nazi ideology or apartheid ideology, cases of *political* evil.

Paradigm cases and warping the moral landscape

Political evil, then, is a notion that primarily identifies evil ideologies. It is useful to point to some paradigm cases since the theoretical claims about the nature of political evil can be clearly identified in these examples. The paradigm case of political evil is found in the Nazi ideology. However, the views and aspirations of Al Qaeda’s radical Islamism, the

⁴² Scarre (2012): 86-67. Scarre puts it this way: ‘If it be granted that the disposition to form and pursue evil intentions justifies the description of their possessor as “evil,” then it follows that there are such things as evil collectives where the intentions that typify the collective are evil... Although collectives cannot be ascribed minds of their own or (*a fortiori*) minds that delight in the suffering of others, collective intentions might by extension be said to be motivated by hatred or malice when hatred and malice inspire the participatory intentions of the members’.

⁴³ Sypnowich (2010): section 1.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

racism of the Ku Klux Klan and ideology of apartheid South Africa, the extremist genocidal views of the Hutu Akazu and radical communism of the Khmer Rouge all fit within the scope of ideologies that are politically evil.

I have claimed that political evil identifies those ideologies which warp (or distort) the moral landscape. By ‘moral landscape’, I refer to the fundamental *moral preconditions* needed for the development and sustaining of a minimally decent and civilised society. Such values enable the peaceful management of conflict and establishment of normative boundaries within which respect and dignity between persons is made possible. The ‘moral landscape’ also alludes to that aspect of all decent moral theories which promote justice and the good, protect the weak from the strong, and prevent a world where needless pain, suffering and death are seen as preferable to joy, happiness and life.

As mentioned above the paradigm example of political evil is that of Nazi ideology. Here is a world view which deliberately substituted force, cruelty, and the threat of extreme violence, for compromise, negotiation and minimal procedural justice.⁴⁶ The Nazis single-mindedly developed a regime based on domination and subjection, where there could be no limits to what could be done and very few outrages forbidden.⁴⁷ It sanctioned and encouraged murder, torture and genocide as tools for achieving its horrendous ends. In addition, political evil identifies those ideologies to which we have a phenomenologically distinct response, one which includes horror, revulsion, lack of comprehension, a sense of defilement if associated with it, and very often despair. Political evil differs from Zimbardo’s situational evil in that it does not merely shape human behaviour by corrupting systems of power that underlie

⁴⁶ By a minimal procedural justice I am following Hampshire (1999) when he states that ‘any organised society requires an institution and also a procedure for adjudicating between conflicting moral claims advanced by individuals and by groups within the society.’ These institutions and procedures all involve fair weighting and balancing of contrary arguments and are underpinned by a minimum condition of *audi alteram partem* – ‘hear the other side’.

⁴⁷ The Nazi guard stating ‘Here is no why!’ when asked for the reason why inmates were not permitted to quench their thirst captures the sheer irrationality and cruelty of this genocidal ideology. I take this example from Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*. [Ref?](#)

complex behaviour patterns so that individuals within their institutional roles and duties act in evil ways (or become evil). Rather political evil engenders an evil normative background that becomes the *wellspring* or *origin* of evil acts and actively facilitates and encourages the creation of evil persons. Political evil allows and actively encourages the infliction of the ‘Great Evils’ on perceived enemies in pursuit of its reprehensible goals.⁴⁸ Mercy, compassion, political compromise and the pursuit of even minimal procedures of fairness for all are understood as weaknesses to be criticised and avoided.

Political evil – core features

Is it possible to recognize and clarify the specific evil-making properties that characterise political evil? If we can identify them, these properties would enable us to distinguish politically evil ideologies from merely bad ones and also from cases of situational evil.⁴⁹ Furthermore, from a philosophical perspective these properties would enable us to understand the qualitative difference between the different categories of moral wrongdoing. What follows then is an attempt to outline and comment on two evil making properties or conditions that are the core of all political evil. To what extent and to what degree each condition applies to a particular ideology differs. Some evil ideologies are worse than others. But in the case of the quintessential case of political evil - the Nazi ideology – both conditions are seen in their starkest forms.

1. Warping the moral landscape

⁴⁸ ‘The great evils are those states of affairs which are to be avoided for reasons that are independent of any reflective thought and of any specific conception of evil. Physical suffering, starvation, imprisonment, the destruction of one’s family or home, are felt as great evils by anyone in virtue of being a living creature with all the needs that are common to living creatures.’ Hampshire (1989): 106.

⁴⁹ The ability to make this distinction would clearly have public policy benefits since we would treat different categories of wrongdoing differently. Political evil, for example, would need to be confronted and eliminated whereas situational evil requires a restructuring of the institution or the imposition of certain safeguards to prevent individuals behaving badly.

Perhaps the core characteristic common to all cases of political evil is the manner in which these ideologies warp or distort the moral landscape. This constitutes a form of severe normative damage rather than complete moral annihilation although in some situations the latter can take place.⁵⁰ Typically when warping occurs, moral values are not rejected but profoundly distorted to enable the majority of individuals within the society to either actively participate in evil or remain indifferent bystanders to such actions and policies. While evil regimes do continuously employ violence and brutality to obtain their desired ends, and this no doubt enables them to frighten and force many opponents to comply with their wishes, such regimes would not be able to achieve the large scale evils without the active consent of a considerable number of willing participants. The slaughter of nearly one million people in a hundred days in Rwanda could not have been accomplished had there been systematic resistance to this genocide by the majority of ordinary Hutus. Similarly, the genocide of the Jews by the Nazis required the active assistance of a very large number of ordinary Germans who were needed to keep a sophisticated industrial nation like Germany functioning. The thousands of ordinary workers who, for example, kept the transport system operating were needed to enable murder on an industrial scale.

How then does the warping take place and how does it function? This process has two distinct phases. Firstly, there is a contamination of those contingent social factors which mediate between abstract moral principles, such as the Categorical Imperative, and their use in concrete situations. Herman calls these the ‘Rules of Moral Salience’ (RMS).⁵¹ These rules are learnt ‘as elements in a moral education, they structure an agent’s perception of his

⁵⁰ By ‘moral annihilation’ I mean the complete rejection of any normative concerns at all.

⁵¹ Herman (1993): 77-93. Herman develops her claims about RMS with reference to Kantian moral theory but it seems to me that her insights apply to all moral theories whether deontological, consequentialist or virtue based.

situation so that what he perceives is a world with moral features'.⁵² This perception enables agents to pick up on those important aspects of his/her circumstances or future actions that are subject to moral scrutiny and justification. In short, RMS ensures that an agent is aware of when the judgment and constraints of morality need to apply. The RMS are acquired in a process of socialisation early on in a person's life, typically in childhood. As Herman points out, they

constitute the structure of moral sensitivity. They may indicate when certain sorts of actions should not be taken without moral justification, or they may prevent certain kinds of actions from occurring to the agent as real options for him (functioning here as a kind of moral taboo).⁵³

The RMS pick out the morally relevant features of actions and indicate that they face a burden of normative justification. Lying, using violence, stealing, abusing others and so on require more than just prudential or instrumental justifications. Furthermore, as Herman rightly points out, it is not just any set of rules within a culture that count as RMS. Certain human actions are properly understood to be within normative constraints such as those which harm others, deal with issues of justice, and respond to human needs and wants.⁵⁴ Consequently when the Nazis sought to exterminate Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals and all perceived enemies of the Aryan race, they warped the RMS in two ways. Firstly, they altered the set of human actions that needs to be rejected out of hand by normative considerations so making way for the inclusion of the evils of torture, murder and enslavement. Secondly, they changed the way in which the RMS applied to central moral concerns such as justice, equality and respect for persons. These changes enabled individuals like Captain Hoffmann to carry out mass murder while thinking that he was working within a strict military code of honour. Here is the

⁵² Ibid.: 78.

⁵³ Ibid.: 78.

⁵⁴ Ibid.: 83-84.

reason why Hoffmann so resented the implication by the German high command that he and his men might be thieves when asking them to sign a declaration that they would not steal from the local population. This was perceived as a serious insult to his honour as a German soldier. However the mass killings of defenceless men women and children were seen as morally unproblematic and as simply fulfilling his duty. Similarly Eichmann, who was fully aware of Kantian moral theory and who could quote the Categorical Imperative with reasonable accuracy, claimed to be acting from duty when planning and taking part in the death of hundreds of thousands of Jews. The warping of the moral landscape in Nazi Germany allowed Eichmann to think (or at least claim at his trial) that he acted in terms of the Kantian Categorical Imperative (which ironically in one of its forms requires persons to be treated with respect). The reason he believed this is that he treated all Jews alike, rich, poor, influential, male female, young and old. Eichmann elevates his deliberate policy of equal treatment as the core moral issue to be considered. If this is indeed what Eichmann believed it is an extraordinary perversion of Kant's moral theory, and it is made plausible to him because of the contamination of the RMS. Eichmann's focus on a normative requirement of equal consideration for all Jews fails utterly to see that his actions towards them could never be morally justified in the first place.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ For further examples of this kind see Pauer-Studer and Velleman (2011): 329-356 whose excellent paper provides three actual account of the distortions of the moral landscape in Nazi Germany. 1. Johann Paul Kremer, a physician and academic who served at Auschwitz. Kremer describes sending inmates to the gas chambers as acts of 'medical idealism' to maintain the health of the slave-labour force and prevent epidemics in the camp. Gassing inmates was seen as humanitarian given that these individuals were going to die anyway. 2. Felix Landau, an officer in the *Einsatzkommando* which carried out mass executions of Jews and Poles in the Lvov District, saw his actions as simply a job albeit an unpleasant one. The unpleasantness was not due to the mass murder but rather that it was hard work killing and burying his victims. 3. Karl Kretschmer, a German pharmacist who served as a *Sonderkommando* participating in mass executions at the Russian Front. While feeling serious qualms about his activities and expressing severe doubts about such actions he nevertheless saw his views as weakness and/or stupidity on his part and continued to engage in mass murder. In all three cases, Pauer-Studer and Velleman demonstrate how the political evil of the Nazi ideology warped the normative focus of these three individuals making them either into mass murderers themselves or complicit with such activities.

The second way in which the warping occurs is through the ideologically motivated gross perversion of the facts which feed into the normative principles. Political evil takes advantage of the change in the RMS by creating a false account of who are enemies, and then demonising them through propaganda using the major and trusted institutions of the society. The Hutu ideologues, who called the Tutsi cockroaches, and the Nazis insisting that the Jews were a contaminating virus on the body politic and persons of lesser value,⁵⁶ are examples of this perversion. When the claim is made that these groups pose a severe risk to society and need to be eliminated, mass murder and genocide become equated with safeguarding the State and preventing infection of the ordinary members of society. Murdering thousands of Jews or Tutsis is not murdering human beings but vermin. This is a tough and brutal job but it needs to be done for the sake of the nation. Once this perversion of the facts is linked to the warping of the RMS it becomes easier for ordinary persons to commit mass murder and think of such actions as laudable and a matter of duty for honourable men and women.

However despite warping normative boundaries it is still not easy to make ordinary persons commit mass murder without them having serious qualms about their actions. Consequently there is a need to ensure that the victims are demonised and dehumanised and that their fate is deserved due to the threat they pose. The ordinary individuals who become perpetrators of mass murder need to feel that their actions are necessary, unavoidable and despite being distasteful and hard will bring about a certain desired utopian future.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ See Steiner (1995): 138. Steiner examines the arguments that a Nazi might have made for the elimination of the Jews starting with the assumption that they are persons of lesser value.

⁵⁷ Maynard (2012):8 offers six justificatory mechanisms that facilitate atrocities such as mass murder. I have mentioned them in my discussion of the warping of the moral landscape but his list neatly sums up the various mechanism of which the first three apply to victims and the latter three to perpetrators. They are: (i) Dehumanisation (ii) Guilt-attribution (iii) Threat-construction (iv) Deagentification (v) Virtuetalk (vi) Future-bias. The need to dehumanize to enable mass murder with a clear conscience is clearly seen in the strenuous attempts by the Nazis to dehumanise inmates in the death camps. By stripping individuals of their names, possessions, dignity, and even hair and forcing them to live in filth and squalor, enabled the lie that they were less than human to seem credible to those who were carrying out the genocide.

It is important to add here that the above analysis of how warping takes place does not provide exculpatory reasons or excuses for those who engaged in genocidal activities. It might be thought that those acting under warped RMS and fed the gross distortion of facts combined with the justificatory mechanisms to dehumanise the victims were not responsible for their actions. However, as Herman rightly points out, individual Nazis and ordinary Germans (and this also would apply to Hutus in Rwanda) were in a position to see who was and wasn't a person and also to know 'what kinds of things it was morally permissible to do to persons'.⁵⁸ The Judeo-Christian heritage and ethos was present in both Germany and Rwanda for a considerable period before the genocides took place and here (as elsewhere) it should have made it clear that the enslavement, torture and mass murder of people, especially defenceless women and children, is morally forbidden.

Political evil, then, by warping the moral landscape shapes and alters the social and political horizons within which individual evil acts are justified. The elevation of evil persons to positions of power and influence, and their project of mass murder, enslavement and genocide, are seen as necessary, natural and right. Warping the moral landscape enables immoral and repugnant views and actions to seem normal and widely acceptable. The effect on society is that very many mostly good or morally neutral persons will either commit, or be complicit with, evil. What is more, those individuals who have a predisposition to be evil will celebrate the flourishing of their worst vices and proclivities. The warping of the moral landscape enables cruelty, envy, fanaticism, hatred, jealousy, prejudice, rage, and ruthlessness to be seen as virtues by many ordinary persons in the society.

2. The pursuit of unlimited power and domination

⁵⁸ Herman (1993): 91

A politically evil ideology typically pursues unlimited domination and power. Evil ideologies remain in a state of perpetual conquest and conflict due to their deep hostility to any perspectival or pluralist views or beliefs. As a consequence, such ideologies accept no legitimate opposition to their various goals or the methods they use to achieve them. Toleration is perceived as weakness and any groups or persons who stand in their way are forced to comply with the ideological position or be eliminated. In order to do this, politically evil societies sanction brutality and violence in the place of fair adjudication of social conflict between groups. The judicial system is either ignored or illegitimately used in the pursuit of revenge. Loyalty to the powerful takes precedence over impartiality, and justice is understood and defined as that which is in the interests of those in power. Furthermore, the use of state power requires no justification beyond the issue of its practicality or instrumentality. As Hampshire notes, the Nazis' fervour to dominate had a definite target, one that 'encompassed reasonableness and legality and the procedures of public discussion, justice for minorities, the protection of the weak, and the protection of human diversity'.⁵⁹

Given this unrelenting pursuit of power and domination that includes warping the moral landscape, political evil inevitably embodies further outrages against persons, values and moral principles. Firstly there is a patent disregard for the most basic conditions of respect for human dignity and wellbeing.⁶⁰ Such regimes hypocritically pay lip-service to what appears to be the trappings of legality and justice. The use of show trials with carefully

⁵⁹ Hampshire (1989): 71-77. For Hampshire, what made the Nazi ideology unique was not that it was evil (he thinks it was to the extent that it had racist principles and a single-minded pursuit of domination) but rather that they dismissed all moral constraints in public life. I think that Hampshire is mistaken here since, as I have argued in this paper, evil ideologies warp rather than obliterate the moral landscape and the Nazis were no exception to this. However Hampshire is right to claim that Nazi ideology is instructive for moral philosophers because it is 'a historical embodiment of pure evil both in aspiration and achievement'. The Nazi drive for unlimited power and world domination was evil without any counterbalancing good and, as I have argued, the quintessential case of political evil.

⁶⁰ This is not a point about liberal rights or the rejection of a liberal society with its liberal freedoms. Evil ideologies undermine basic fundamental respect for human dignity and well being that would be part of any decent non-liberal society.

appointed judges loyal to the regime is one of the more sinister examples of this violation and abuse of the justice system.

Secondly, the normatively unrestrained pursuit of power involves a deliberate obliteration of the public/ private distinction where all activities become public in order to control individuals and inculcate and enforce the regime's ideology. An example of this process was evident in Apartheid South Africa with the passing of the so called 'Immorality Act' in 1950 by the newly elected Afrikaans Nationalist Government. The 'Immorality Act' made any sexual relationships between racially mixed couples a criminal act. The police invaded homes to catch people in the sexual act, separated families and even confiscated underwear and other personal items as forensic evidence to demonstrate that a crime had been committed.⁶¹ The secret police of politically evil ideologies such as the Gestapo, Stazi, NKVD, to mention just three, all crossed, and at times obliterated, the boundaries between the public and private in order to terrorise and dominate their own populations. Thirdly, the drive for domination inevitably results in the infliction of disproportionate harms on various groups and individuals. In politically evil societies the harms at first are confined to those external perceived enemies but in time are visited on their own supporters who are perceived to be a threat in some way. Political evil fatally undermines the restraints that morality ought to have on the abuse of power. When this happens disproportionate harms are used to drive home the lesson and implications of total dominance. The Nazi destruction of the Czech village of Lidice in retaliation for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich is a case in point. Not only were the entire population either killed or deported, but the Nazis decided to eradicate the town itself.⁶² They destroyed the graves in the cemetery, filled in the lake, and

⁶¹ Those found guilty of violating the Immorality Act No 21 of 1950 were sent to jail and Blacks typically received harsher prison sentences than whites. For a comprehensive account of the segregationist legislation passed in Apartheid South Africa see *South African History on Line* at <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/segregationist-legislation-timeline-1950-1959>

⁶² See 'The Massacre at Lidice' <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/nazioccupation/lidice.html>

diverted the stream running through the village to demonstrate that they could and would erase the village from history if their quest for total domination was opposed. This disproportionate response was intended to prevent further resistance but it also sought to make clear to the occupied Czechs that the Nazis had no compunction in using their power in any way they pleased. In short, Nazi power was free of moral or legal constraints and would be used to ensure complete and unconditional domination.

6. Concluding remarks

This paper has argued that a notion of political evil is both necessary and coherent. It identifies the normatively worst kinds of ideologies whose evilness is not satisfactorily explained by the act/person dichotomy within the secular debate on evil. Political evil occurs when there is a warping of the moral landscape by ideologies which are relentless in the pursuit of absolute power and unconditional domination of other groups. The notion of political evil offers a credible normative account of how such ideologies frame the conditions within which large scale evils such as genocide occur and offers a corrective to the way the phrase ‘evil ideology’ is commonly used. The notion of political evil when properly understood in the correct secular sense provides a useful normative identification and moral assessment of the worst kinds of ideologies which rightly shake the conscience of the world.⁶³ It hopefully will also enhance our ability to properly identify and understand the process by which ordinary individuals become complicit with evil. With this in mind we can tackle this particular kind of secular evil that has long plagued us and still plagues us today.

⁶³ An issue I have not discussed in this paper is whether the identification of political evil brings with it moral duties for those in decent societies. Clearly such ideologies need to be confronted but would this create a duty to interfere in the affairs of another country for example? Must political evil be destroyed rather than accommodated by those who could destroy it? In short, there is the difficult question of whether there is a moral duty to intervene in societies where there is political evil.

I conclude with and powerful testimony of a person who suffered under the political evil of the Khmer Rouge regime and is now managing its political and social after effects. Hor Nam Hong, the current Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for the Kingdom of Cambodia⁶⁴ writes the following in response to criticism of the Khmer Rouge tribunal that has been trying former Khmer Rouge officials.⁶⁵ He identifies many of the key aspects of a politically evil regime and makes clear the catastrophic consequences they have for those who suffer under them. We do very well to heed his words.

‘It is difficult to define the legacy of murderous regimes. While it is easy (and just) to unleash a torrent of the bitterest denunciations of the Khmer Rouge, stepping back, language always fails to rise to the occasion. The most appropriate way to describe the legacy of the Khmer Rouge was the utter nothingness that was left in the wake of the regime.

Indeed, everything lost meaning. The cornerstones of marriage and family were desecrated, and the faculties of reason were silenced. The economy was left in shambles and vast swaths of the population were sick, dying, or dead.

Even our understanding of truth had changed. A whole new vocabulary built on an extreme communist ideology had warped Cambodian thinking and culture. A culture of suspicion, fear, and secrecy enveloped Cambodian discourse and thought. While this culture of suspicion, fear, and secrecy is a relic of the regime’s dark past, its shadow continues to linger in subtle ways that color our present.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ See Hong (2012) and the article by Giry (2012) that prompted his response.

⁶⁵ Hor Nam Hong was a prisoner of the Khmer Rouge and is now a member of the present government is in the process of dealing with their legacy.

⁶⁶ I am indebted to many people who have made suggestions on how to improve earlier drafts of this paper. My thanks to:

- Colin Farrelly and participants of Queens University Ontario Philosophy Reading Group for their insightful comments when I read a very early version of this paper in 2011.
- Derek Bell and Graham Long for their useful comments at the Newcastle Politics Seminar in 2012.
- Michael Neu, Thomas Zoglauer, Cecile Hatier, and Demetris Tillyris for discussions on the my paper at the 2012 MANCEPT Workshops.
- Dario Castiglioni, Iain Hampsher Monk, Robert Lamb, and Mike Cailles for their comments at the Exeter politics reading group 2012.
- Helen Beebee and Chris Daly who provided many insights on the nature of causality and political evil.
- My thanks also to Paul Formosa, Adam Morton, Luke Russell, Matthew Kramer, Jonathan Maynard, Tom Porter, Harry Lesser, Hillel Steiner, Steve Cooke, Garvan Walshe, and Richard Child for their critical and insightful comments at the ‘The Idea of Evil: Secular Approaches’ conference in 2012 at The University of Manchester.
- Finally, I am especially indebted to Eve Garrard who first encouraged me to write this paper on political evil and has also sent me extensive comments saving me from many errors.

References

- Arendt, Hannah. 1963. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press.)
- Baron Cohen, S. 2011. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty* (New York: Basic Books).
- Barry, Peter Brian. 2009. 'Moral Saints, Moral Monsters, and the Mirror Thesis' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 46 (2): 163-176.
- Baumeister, Roy. 1997. *Evil: Inside Human Cruelty and Violence* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Co.).
- Blair, T. 2005. 'Blair speech on terror' *BBC News*, Saturday, 16 July, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4689363.stm>
- Browning, Christopher R. 1998. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins).
- Calder, Todd. (2011) Is evil just very wrong? *Philosophical Studies* (published on line 2011)
- Card, Claudia. 2002. *The Atrocity Paradigm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Cole, Philip. 2006. *The Myth of Evil* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- Dalrymple, Theodore 2006. 'The Evils of Ideology' *New English Review* 6 September, <http://archive.frontpagemag.com/readArticle.aspx?ARTID=2729>
- de Wijze, Stephen. 2002. 'Defining Evil: Insights from the Problem of "Dirty Hands"' *The Monist* 85: 210-38.
- de Wijze, Stephen. 2009. 'Recalibrating Steiner on Evil' in Stephen de Wijze, Mathew H. Kramer and Ian Carter (eds.) *Hillel Steiner and the Anatomy of Justice* (London: Routledge): 214-232.
- Formosa, Paul. 2008. 'A Conception of Evil' *Journal of Value Enquiry* 42: 217–39.
- Fackler, Guido. 2007. 'Music in Concentration Camps 1933-1945' *Music Politics* URL <http://www.music.ucsb.edu/projects/musicandpolitics/archive/2007-1/fackler.html>
- Garrard, Eve. and McNaughton, David. 2012. 'Speak No Evil' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXXVI: 1-17.
- Garrard, Eve. 2002. 'Evil as an Explanatory Concept' *The Monist* 85: 320-36.
- Garrard, Eve. 1998. 'The Nature of Evil' *Philosophical Explorations* 1: 43-60.
- Glover, Jonathan. (1999) *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape).

- Giry, Stéphanie. 2012. 'Necessary Scapegoats? The Making of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal' in *NYRBlog* URL: <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/jul/23/necessary-scapegoats-khmer-rouge-tribunal/>
- Goldhagen, Daniel Jonah 1997. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books).
- Gourevitch, Philip. 2000. *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda* (London: Macmillan).
- Hatzfeld, Jean. 2005. *A Time for Machetes. The Rwandan Genocide: The Killers Speak* (London: Serpent's Tail).
- Hampshire, Stuart 1989. *Innocence and Experience* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press).
- Hampshire, Stuart 1999. *Justice is Conflict* (London: Duckworth).
- Haybron, Daniel. 2002. 'Moral Monsters and Moral Saints' *The Monist* 82: 260-84.
- Herman, Barbara. 1993. *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press).
- Hong, Hor Nam. 2012. 'The Legacy of Murderous Regimes' *NYRBlog* URL: http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/nov/17/Cambodia-Foreign-Minister-statement-Khmer-Rouge/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=November+27+2012&utm_content=November+27+2012+CID_96b16ab4f6bd63e1b41b00a078bd93e9&utm_source=Email%20marketing%20software&utm_term=The%20Legacy%20of%20Murderous%20Regimes
- Katz, Fred. 1993. *Ordinary People and Extraordinary Evil: A Report on the Beguilings of Evil* (Albany: State University of New York Press).
- Kekes, John. 2010. *The Human Condition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Kekes, John. 2005. *The Roots of Evil* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).
- Kekes, John. 1990. *Facing Evil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Kramer, Matthew H. 2011. *The Ethics of Capital Punishment: A Philosophical Investigation of Evil and Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Linfield, Susie. 2007 'Zimbabwe's slow suicide' *Dissent: A Quarterly of Politics and Culture Fall* url: <http://dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=950>
- Maynard, Jonathan Leader. 2012 'Ideology and the Justification of Atrocities' unpublished paper on file with author.
- McGinn, Colin. 1997. *Evil, Ethics, and Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Milgram, Stanley. 2005. *Obedience to Authority* (London: Pinter and Martin Ltd).
- Morton, Adam. 2004. *On Evil* (New York: Routledge).

- Neiman, S. 2002. *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Pauer-Studer, H. and Velleman, J.D. 2011. 'Distortions of Normativity,' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 14: 329–356.
- Perrett, Roy. 2002. 'Evil and Human Nature' *The Monist* 85: 304-19.
- Rosenbaum, Ron. 2002. 'Degrees of Evil: Some thoughts on Hitler, bin Laden, and the hierarchy of wickedness'. In *The Atlantic Monthly* (February) URL www.theatlantic.com/issues/2002/02/rosenbaum.htm
- Rosenbaum, Ron. 1998. *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil* (New York: Random House).
- Russell, Luke. 2009. 'He Did It Because He Was Evil' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 46: 267–82.
- Russell, Luke. 2007. 'Is Evil Action Qualitatively Distinct from Ordinary Wrongdoing?' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 85: 659-77.
- Russell, Luke. 2006. 'Evil-Revivalism Versus Evil-Skepticism' *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 40: 89-105.
- Scarre, Geoffrey. 2012. 'Evil Collectives' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXXVI: 74-92.
- Searcy, Richard. 2011. 'The Inherent Evil of Conservative Ideology', The *Georgia Green Party*, 19 January, <http://www.georgiagreenparty.org/content/inherent-evil-conservative-ideology>
- Simon, Robert L. 2000. 'Serial Killers, Evil, and Us' *National Forum, Phi Kappa Phi Journal* 80(4).
- Singer, Marcus G. 2004. 'The Concept of Evil' *Philosophy* 79 (2): 185-214.
- Staub, Ervin. 1989. *The Roots of Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Steiner, Hillel. 2002. 'Calibrating Evil' *The Monist* 85: 183-93.
- Steiner, Hillel. 1995. 'Persons of Lesser Value: Moral Argument and the "Final Solution"' *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 12: 129-41.
- Svendsen, Lars Fr. H. 2010. *A Philosophy of Evil* (Dalkey Archive Press).
- Sypnowich, Christine, 2010. 'Law and Ideology' *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/law-ideology/>.
- Vetlesen, A. J. 2005. *Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Waller, James. 2002. *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- White, Matthew. *Atrocitology: Humanity's 100 deadliest achievements* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books).

Wolfe, Alan 2011. *Political Evil: What It Is and How To Combat It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf).

Zaibert, L. 2012. Beyond Bad: Punishment Theory meets the Problem of Evil' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXXVI: 93-111.

Zimbardo, Philip. 2007. *The Lucifer Effect: How good people turn evil* (London: Rider Books).