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# Evil: Ordinary or Extraordinary?

By **John Shand**

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The answer to the title question is neither. Much thought has been put into whether the doing of, and going along with, horrendous and ghastly immoral acts is an ordinary or exceptional trait of human beings. Whether the perpetrators are banal<sup>1</sup> or exceptional, whether what they do can follow from an ordinary way of life, or whether their actions have to be derived from rare extreme motivations.

‘Saying that evil is banal does not imply that some evil actions are ordinary and unremarkable, but that some evil actions come from ordinary motives, and are performed by people who are not radical outliers in terms of human psychology.’<sup>2</sup>

We already feel ourselves lost with the vague but highly fiery infused-with- connotations word ‘evil’. After you say something is ‘evil’, it is hard to know where to go to say any more about it. It tends to be reserved for the apogee of terrible acts, after which, verbally we have nowhere to go, we have run out of higher-level words to express how bad something is. Hence, we tend to say things like an act is ‘just evil’ – the ‘just’ revealing our drying up of further normative moral description. Evil is a word both empty and full.

So, setting that aside as a discussion for another day, let us just think of our subject as the variety of acts of systematic extreme cruelty and awfulness directed at other human beings leading them to suffer. Acts which counter the injunction not to use other people merely as a means, but also always as ends, and in the most callous ways, ways that lead to humiliation, pain and death. To treat others as if they are things. Thereby to set aside or suppress what would usually act naturally as a blocking constraint for such behaviour.

Think of whatever examples suits you. I shall not present a list of examples here because they may be contentious, and then we will be lost and sidetracked into evaluating the validity of cases as ones of unspeakable ghastliness, for reasons and excuses are always available if one but only takes a certain stance. I have found, by way of example that most people can gather in a moral consensus of condemnation around, the gratuitous torturing of babies. I will leave it at that. As I say, pick your own case, for the question remains: are such acts performed by extreme and exceptional personalities or are they something that might be done by ordinary people as everyday acts given that circumstances conspire in a certain way? Are the perpetrators of wicked acts monsters or are they just like us? This debate has gone to

and fro. But I think there is a way out of it, out of the seeming inability to resolve it, as it is the consequence of a logical, one might say, fallacy or slip.

Are the people who perform evil acts ordinary or extraordinary? Just like other people or exceptional people?

One suggestion is that we should not regard such people as weird monsters, in the end incomprehensible to the rest of us, but should regard them as just like us but embedded in certain circumstances, leading them to act in certain ways that they otherwise would not. The benign aim of such a view is to render evil people comprehensible, not as individuals we just throw our hands up at as beyond our understanding, as essentially they are just like the rest of us. This potentially gives us a warning that everyone is capable of such evil acts.

But we do not have to conclude that everyone is capable of such acts to still take heed. The idea that there are not people who are naturally disposed to evil more than others is clearly false and absurd, as is the idea that that all ordinary people are in the right circumstances equally capable of the same gross evil. Such circumstances are often, starting off modestly, proceeded to by small steps, steps of ever-greater awfulness. How do we square the thought that although a propensity to gross evil is neither exceptional nor something that we are all equally capable of with the thought that each of us might be capable of such evil? A denial of the first claim gives us dubious comfort that such gross evil is something we are unlikely to commit, while denial of the second claim suggests uncomfortably and dubiously that all people are capable of gross evil in certain circumstances. Neither seems plausibly true. But yet *we* still may be capable of such evil. Others too.

The logical fallacy leading to confusion here lies in the saying that people who do evil acts if they are not exceptional must therefore be just like *everyone* else. The confusion is between *everyone* and *anyone*. It is entirely plausible and realistic to think there is a sliding scale of dispositions of people willing to participate or propagate awfulness and evil. So not *everyone* is likely to perform such acts in the same circumstances. But it is nevertheless true that *anyone* might do it *because they do not know whether they would or not until they are tested*.

And most people in normal civilized life never get tested. Most people do not know what kind of person they are, or would be, put in the circumstances where ghastly cruel and fatal acts are performed. We have only a poor idea where we stand in the scale. Not everyone is equal in their potentiality for evil. We would like to think we would do the right thing – but it is incredibly hard to stand up against a crowd for example, not to copy or go along with what everyone else is doing. You are only as good as your last test.<sup>3</sup> Would you have the courage, the guts, to act rightly, not to follow, or be an accomplice, if social circumstances involving informal and formal coercive pressures were heading towards things you thought were wrong, quite possibly evil? – could you stand up and out? You do not know it of yourself. You do not know it of others.

So that is how the debate is resolved. For the way it is usually conducted sets up a false dilemma between odd exceptional people capable of evil or there being no such people, only unexceptional people who are just like everyone else thrust into circumstances where they find themselves performing evil acts while regarding them

as banal, every day, ordinary. There are people who are more predisposed to evil, they may not even need much to get them going at it, but that does not mean we should not think we surely could not behave as they do: *anyone* could, but not *everyone*. It is just that we only know with uncertainty whether we are one of the anyones or not as we have not been tested. You cannot know you are not one.

Correspondingly, just as there are those who need little to get them to perform evil, there may be those who are incapable of evil in almost any circumstances. A sliding scale, as has been said. It is a matter, to put it in different terms from *everyone* and *anyone*, of *all* and *some*: only *some* – and it may be quite a large some – are highly disposed to perform great evils, but we thereby should not comfort ourselves into thinking that as not *all* that can perform such acts, we do not fall into the cohort of *some* – until put in testing circumstances we will not know.

So what can we do? In brief, one galling thing is people who have the luxury of getting their beliefs in order, or well thought through, so they truly make them their own in unexceptional peaceful times, but do not bother, but rather still believe things that if times were different and dangerous are beliefs that could easily be turned to awful ends. Being clever and logical is not enough to avoid this, indeed it may make things worse, leading one to think one could not possibly succumb to wrong beliefs, as a good proportion of the reasons people believe potentially dangerous things, or might come to, is because of nonrational psychological causes, not the result of a reasoning process at all, though they may be deluded in thinking they are a result of rational thought.

So the lesson for this is, in good times, prepare your thinking for the bad times, you never know when they will turn up, you never know when you will be tested.

[Dr John Shand](#) is a Visiting Fellow in Philosophy at the Open University. He studied philosophy at the University of Manchester and King's College, University of Cambridge. He has taught at Cambridge, Manchester and the Open University. The author of numerous articles, reviews, and edited books, his own books include, *Arguing Well* (London: Routledge, 2000) and *Philosophy and Philosophers: An Introduction to Western Philosophy*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2014).

Contact information:

- Dr John Shand, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, MK7 6AA, United Kingdom.
- <https://open.academia.edu/JohnShand>
- <http://fass.open.ac.uk/philosophy/people>

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1. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, a five-part article, 16 February -16 March, *The New Yorker* 1963. ↵
2. Luke Russell, *Evil: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). ↵
3. Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were well-aware of this. As is existentialism generally. This is superbly illustrated in Jean Paul Sartre, *Roads to Freedom (Les chemins de la liberté)* trilogy (respectively published, 1945, 1945, 1950) of novels. ↵