# Being Evil

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# EVIL

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a philosophical perspective

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# The Philosophical Puzzle of Evil

Does evil exist? To answer that question we first have to know what 'evil' means. What do you think of when you hear that word? Is it a stereotypical villain from the movies or from literary fiction—Voldemort from *Harry Potter*, Ramsay Bolton from *Game of Thrones*, or the Emperor from *Star Wars*—the kind who actively seek to destroy others, who delight in inflicting suffering, and who cackle while contemplating their malicious deeds? Perhaps instead you think of superheroes who are called to use their power for good, not evil. Maybe what springs to mind is Google's former corporate motto: Don't be evil. When people use the word 'evil' in these contexts they seem to be indulging in playful hyperbole. Evil is scary and bad, but it is so exaggeratedly scary and bad that there is something unrealistic, even ridiculous, about it. Evil, in this sense, teeters on the edge of the comical. The character of Dr Evil from the *Austen Powers* films steps right over this edge. How silly, how childish, we might say, to be frightened of eeeevil. If we were to focus on examples like these, we might conclude that there

is no room for the concept of evil in serious thinking about morality.

For some people the word 'evil' carries a different set of connotations. Rather than belonging in the realm of fiction, it sounds distinctly religious. When we look to Christianity, for example, we find plenty of references to evil. In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and gained knowledge of good and evil. When Christians say the Lord's Prayer they ask to be delivered from evil. Thomas Aquinas says that we should do good and avoid evil. The idea here seems to be that evil is simply the opposite of good. Elsewhere in Christianity, a more radical—some would say outlandish—conception of evil appears to be in play. The Gospels contain repeated references to Satan, an evil supernatural being who causes illness and enters into the hearts of humans, leading them to sin. The Book of Revelation describes Satan in the form of a giant dragon engaging in a cosmic battle with God. To those of us who do not believe in the existence of God or malevolent spirits, this supernaturalist conception of evil seems to be just as fanciful as the kind of evil that is depicted in *Harry Potter* or *Star Wars*. Moreover, it appears to be dangerous to believe that this kind of supernatural evil exists in the real world. We should not forget the terrifying witch trials of the 17th century, in which thousands of innocent people were tortured and burned at the stake, all because of misguided beliefs in evil spirits and demonic possession. Contemporary politicians who use the language of evil are sometimes accused of fostering exactly this kind of moral atmosphere; of demonizing their opponents, of whipping up the angry mob, of

inciting wanton destruction. Some philosophers survey this landscape and conclude that we ought to be sceptical of the existence of evil. Evil seems to be an outdated concept, and a dangerous one, at that.

But should we, on the basis of these examples, rush to the conclusion that evil is not real? According to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, a common cause of philosophical disease is 'a *one-sided diet*: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example.' Consider an analogy: if you want to understand the nature of politics but you focus only on Western liberal democracies, you will fail to grasp the distinctive features of monarchies, communist states, dictatorships, and so on. Similarly, if you want to understand the nature of music it would be misleading to focus only on heavy metal and simply ignore classical symphonies, African drumming, jazz, and so on. When conducting a philosophical investigation we are best able to gain knowledge by considering a diverse range of cases. Those who hope to understand the nature of evil by focusing only on fantasy, science fiction, and religious texts are consuming just this kind of one-sided diet. Instead of limiting our focus in this way we should also look at the broad range of real-world scenarios in which ordinary people are inclined to use the word 'evil'. Unfortunately this is a grim task, and is prone to induce disgust and despair. It is hard to think clearly about the worst moral transgressions in human history. Nonetheless, this is what we must do if we are to figure out what evil is supposed to be, and whether it exists. After considering these examples some of us might still conclude that there is no such thing as evil. It could turn out that

people who believe in the existence of evil are falling into some kind of confusion, are exaggerating, or are mistakenly projecting onto the world something that, in reality, is not there. We should not prejudge the matter either way. Let us begin by taking note of what ordinary people say and what they believe about evil, and then we can move on to ask whether their claims and beliefs are correct.

When we survey the wide range of cases in which people say that things are evil, we notice something quite surprising. Sometimes we use the word 'evil' simply as a synonym for 'bad'. When we do so 'evil' need not have any connotations of extremity. Just as there can be minor or trivial bad things, there can be minor or trivial evil things, in this sense of the word. Suppose that you face a dilemma, and you have to choose between two bad options. You might explain your ultimate decision by saying that you chose the lesser of two evils. When you use the word 'evil' in this way, you are not implying that both options were extreme and horrific. You are simply indicating that you chose the least bad of the two. When the word 'evil' is being used merely as a synonym for 'bad' it can be applied to things that are blameworthy moral wrongs, such as malicious assaults, but it can also be applied to things that are bad without being immoral, including the pain that you suffer when you stub your toe. When we consult the *Oxford English Dictionary* to discover the etymology of the word 'evil', we see that it grew from the Old English word 'yfel', meaning 'over' or 'beyond', and that for centuries the word 'evil' was used simply as a synonym for 'bad', 'troublesome', and 'painful'.

These days it might sound odd to use the word 'evil' to mean nothing more than bad. A restaurant critic who gives a negative review is unlikely to say that the food was evil, for instance. Nonetheless, we can find contexts in which this old-fashioned use of the word 'evil' to mean 'bad' persists. This usage will be familiar to anyone who has encountered what philosophers and theologians call the Problem of Evil. The Problem of Evil is a challenge that arises for theists, who believe that the world was created by an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God. If this is what God is like, and if God loves us, we might expect that God would create a world filled with good things, in which we would live perfectly happy lives. Yet when we look around us we cannot help but notice that the world contains many bad things. Much suffering is caused by human wrongdoing, and might thus be thought to be our fault, rather than God's fault. Even so, a great deal of undeserved suffering is caused by illnesses, including cancer, arthritis, and tuberculosis. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and floods take the lives of countless innocent people. Some babies die painful deaths, and their parents' lives are filled with grief. The animal kingdom is also drenched in suffering due to injury, predation, and starvation. The so-called Problem of Evil is the problem of how to reconcile belief in a benevolent and all-powerful God with the knowledge that the world contains so many bad things, or, as it is usually put in this context, so much evil. Many people think that the Problem of Evil gives us a good reason to be atheists. According to this view the ubiquity of undeserved suffering counts as strong evidence that the world was *not* created by

an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God. In response theists have tried to explain how it could be that a good God created a world that contains so many bad things.

My aim in this book is not to address the theological Problem of Evil. Nor is it to focus on this maximally broad and inclusive usage of the word 'evil' to mean simply that which is bad. My target is not that which is bad in a non-moral way, such as toothaches and broken bones. Nor is my target that which is morally bad but only trivial or minor. What I aim to understand is that which is not merely bad but *evil*; that which is morally bad or wrong in some extreme sense. This, I believe, is the concept of evil that is in play when philosophers, historians, psychologists, and journalists are arguing about whether evil really exists. Obviously we need to say more about exactly what it means to call something evil in this extreme and moralized sense of the word. I think that we can get a better grip on the concept of evil by returning to consider the things that ordinary people might say are not merely bad, but evil. This time let us keep in mind that there are heated disputes about whether anything really is evil in this more extreme sense. A philosophical analysis of the concept of evil must be able to make sense of the fact that some intelligent and well-informed people believe that evil is real, while others believe that evil is a myth or a dangerous fantasy. If we want to identify the concept of evil that is in play in these disputes we should start by focusing on the contested examples. As we work through these various examples I encourage you to try to keep an open mind. Rather than rushing to judgement, slow down and probe your own thoughts. Think

about the similarities between these cases, and see if you can identify any interesting differences between them. Ask yourself whether some are morally worse than others, and whether some share a distinctive feature that marks them out as particularly egregious.

Let us start by looking at terrorism, perhaps the most obvious set of real-life examples in which people make claims about evil. All of us are familiar with the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, in which a group of conspirators, motivated by political animosity towards the United States, flew passenger jets into office buildings and killed thousands of innocent people. Who can forget the images of the planes slamming into the towers, the billowing smoke, the panicked workers fleeing the scene as the falling bodies rained down? If any politically motivated act counts as terrifying, surely this is it. The actions of these terrorists were not ordinary, everyday wrongs. To many shocked observers this seemed to be wrongdoing on another level. It is no surprise that 9/11 prompted extremely strong moral condemnation, and some of those who condemned it chose to use the language of evil. In his State of the Union address in 2002 President George W. Bush declared that 'Evil is real, and it must be opposed.' Going far beyond the 9/11 attacks, Bush also described the nations of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an 'axis of evil'. Bush's regular references to evil in the wake of these attacks were contentious at the time, and remain so. No doubt this is partly due to the view, common amongst his critics, that Bush was a simplistic thinker, a rigid religious conservative, and a dangerously hawkish president. Critics

of Bush's subsequent war on terror might be inclined to reject his use of the language of evil precisely because they see this language as an expression of the mindset that led him to invade Iraq and Afghanistan. On the other side of the political fence, supporters of the President and of the war on terror applauded Bush for condemning the terrorists in the strongest possible terms, and for taking a clear and unambiguous moral stand.

The controversy over Bush's statements about 9/11 led to a resurgence of philosophical interest in the topic of evil. Regardless of what we think about President Bush's subsequent policy decisions, philosophers invite us to address some basic moral questions about 9/11. Did the terrorists perform evil actions on that day? Were the terrorists evil people? One possible reason for answering no to both questions is the belief that the so-called terrorists' actions were not even morally wrong, let alone evil. We might reach this conclusion if we accept the idea that 'One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter', and that there is no objective fact as to what is right and what is wrong. If nothing is morally wrong, then it makes no sense to condemn the 9/11 attacks as evil. Another way to support the claim that the terrorists' actions were not wrong would be to claim that US citizens deserved to be attacked and killed as a result of morally corrupt US foreign policy. But, of course, these claims themselves are highly contentious. Many of us think that the 9/11 attackers committed mass murder of innocent civilians, and that their actions were clearly and objectively morally wrong. The challenge that I will focus on comes from philosophers who agree that the 9/11 terrorists'