1. Introduction

We can distinguish the evil person in two ways. One is to pick out some trait, or narrow cluster of traits, and argue that individuals are evil if they possess those traits to a sufficiently extreme degree. Call theories that characterize evil in this manner extremity views. The second method takes evil to consist in being vicious, not just in one respect, but thoroughly or consistently. Call this the consistency approach. Thus understood, evil persons lack any significant moral virtues, having no “good side.” According to stronger versions of the consistency theory, evil persons lack morally redeeming qualities of even the most modest sort. They are moved and motivated little or not at all, or even perversely, by morality and the good. In this chapter I will defend such a view of evil character.

Naturally, even consistency theories grant that evil involves a kind of extreme viciousness. But this is not the sort of extremity that requires having particular traits to an extraordinary degree, beyond those needed to lack virtues or redeeming qualities. Consistency theorists could require extreme vices in addition to those implied by the consistency requirement, but I will not do so.

What about extremity views? Extremity of vice in the present sense concerns the degree to which someone possesses a given vice. If a person’s viciousness consists in cruelty, then that individual earns the title of evil by having cruel propensities to the highest degree: tending to perform many cruel acts, and tending to perform the cruelest acts. The extremity method appears to be the standard approach among commentators in this area. For example, Laurence Thomas claims that to have an evil character is to be “often enough prone to do evil acts” (1993, p. 82). Someone commits an evil act if the individual “delights in performing a harmful act that has a certain moral gravity to it . . . and if the person is not animated by understandable considerations” (p. 77). Similarly, John Kekes has argued that evil persons are those who are

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1 This paper appears in Haybron (ed.), Earth’s Abominations: Philosophical Studies of Evil. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002.

Though different, these accounts exemplify a traditional action-based approach to wickedness where the focus is, naturally enough, on what the agent tends to do. Extremity theorists need not take this tack. Thus extremity theories include such views as a recent affect-based account by Colin McGinn that defines the evil person in terms of a tendency to feel pleasure at the suffering of others (McGinn, 1997). Still, the extremity approach and action-based views share a natural affinity: together, they afford a plausible explanation of our interest in the evil character. For those who tend regularly to commit serious harms pose a special danger to society. They are the people from whom we most need protection, whose depravity most warrants an active response on our part. Given this, we may naturally wish to reserve our harshest designation for such individuals. Less obvious is why we should do so for someone whose worst crime is a severe case of schadenfreude. (That said, I believe McGinn to be largely correct about the moral gravity of such a vice; see Haybron, 1999.) For this reason, and because of their close fit with commonsense views about evil, I will focus on action-based extremity views.

Such “frequent evildoing” accounts—as we may call them—may involve a consistency of their own. Then what marks these views as extremity, rather than consistency, theories? What distinguishes them is primarily what they do not say: they say nothing about the overall quality of the agent’s character, apart from whatever it takes to do a lot of bad things (perhaps with the right motivation or attitude). They do not exclude the possibility that the evil person is in other respects morally decent, even admirable. So long as a person has serious enough vices, that individual might qualify as evil whatever virtues are had in addition. Perhaps no one can have significant moral virtues while being disposed regularly to harm others. An old tradition asserts the unity of the virtues: a person cannot possess one virtue without having all the rest. This view strikes most contemporary ears as implausible, and I will assume its falsity. (Exceptions do exist. See, e.g., McDowell, 1979.) A bit more credibly, someone might consider it psychologically impossible to be a frequent evildoer while having significant moral virtues. This view too is false, and I will describe a counterexample to it momentarily. But the best defense of the “frequent evildoing” view is simply to argue that whether evildoers have a good side or not is irrelevant: they are still a menace to society. Indeed, such persons may be more dangerous because of their complexity, lulling those around them into a false sense of complacency.

Be that as it may, I do not think that frequent evildoing views, or any extremity views, can do justice to our considered intuitions about evil. At least, not without supplementation. To show why, I will discuss a pair of cases taken from recent fiction.
2. Two Kinds of Evildoer

I use the first example reluctantly, since it hails not from the canon of high literature, but from a mere television program—worse, a show about the Mafia. But the show is skillfully crafted and the character is notorious for exhibiting the traits I wish to discuss. The program is called *The Sopranos*. The chief protagonist of this series, Tony Soprano, is a crime boss in the New Jersey mob. Soprano appears to be a frequent evildoer: he murders, extorts, beats, robs, you name it. He executes one of his closest friends, the godfather to his children. He is a serial philanderer who has beaten at least two of his lovers. In fact he nearly strangles one of them—who is mentally ill—and promises to kill her if she follows through on a threat to contact his wife. Some of his victims must be considered innocent even by his standards. For instance, he and some fellow thugs silence African-Americans protesting racist hiring practices at an affiliated contractor by attacking them with clubs. A racist himself, he insults and threatens his daughter’s African-American boyfriend. He brings to ruin a black police officer who had the misfortune of pulling him over for speeding, and the temerity not to acquiesce to his intimidating and humiliating remarks. On another occasion, Soprano tries to bully his daughter’s soccer coach—whom he “likes”—into reversing a decision to leave town (for example, by briefly kidnapping the man’s dog as a means of threatening his family).

Soprano is, by any reasonable measure, a serious danger to society. He has extreme vices. And he is a regular source of undeserved harm, which he often appears to enjoy doing. Soprano appears, in short, to be evil according to the kinds of extremity views we have been discussing. One character, who has not met him, does indeed refer to him as evil.

Soprano may be a bad person, and he certainly ought to be locked up. But he is not credibly viewed as evil, and the character who calls him that comes across as distinctly naïve (though many of us would probably say the same given his knowledge). In fact, the viewer is sometimes tempted to defend him as being “basically” a good person. Gangster protagonists have a long history in film and television, but I believe this one differs from most. He is not merely charming or charismatic; nor does he seem to benefit from a romanticized depiction (as Don Corleone arguably did), or from the simple fact that he is the protagonist. What distinguishes Soprano are the equally vivid depictions of a strikingly normal (and sometimes admirable) home life and a frequently grotesque “work” life. To illustrate: the loving father drives his teenage daughter Meadow to Maine so she can visit a liberal arts college that interests her. Their interactions reveal that he is in many ways a caring and sensitive parent, and the two have a fine time together. While Meadow visits the campus, we are treated to a close-up of Soprano strangling a man to death (a Mob snitch whom he happened to encounter).
Someone might object that patently evil individuals are often nice to their families. Even psychopaths might love their mothers. This has something to it, but I think we should distinguish different bases for affection and kindness toward others. On the one hand, people might genuinely love and respect others as individuals distinct from themselves, and treat them accordingly. On the other, some individuals might cherish their spouses and children the way they cherish a valued possession: as theirs, or as reflections of themselves. Or as sources of pleasure or affirmation. Or out of some primitive, instinctual bond, like a duckling has with (whatever it takes to be) its mother. These latter relations all seem ultimately to refer back to the self—to be in some sense egocentric—and are perfectly consistent with the worst kind of depravity—with lacking any important “good side.”

Soprano is not like that. He may not be a good person, but he at least has a significant good side. For one thing, he does what he does less because he relishes evildoing than because his father was a Mob boss. Indeed, his job’s stresses, stemming partly from a semiconscious recognition of his moral turpitude, give him panic attacks and send him to a therapist. We get the distinct impression that he would rather be in some other line of work; and he does not want his children, from whom he tries to hide his vocation, to follow in his footsteps. More to the point, Soprano mostly knows right from wrong and takes (most of!) his moral obligations seriously. He worries about being a good father and husband; about raising morally good kids who will become respectable citizens; about giving his children the room to develop their own identities; and so forth. And he manifestly takes his family and friends seriously as distinct individuals. More importantly, his concern for his family reflects quite general moral sensibilities that naturally, and often do, extend to others. They are not anomalous and self-referential in the way that psychopaths’ affection for their mothers might be. What convinces us that he cannot be evil is not that he does some nice things; anyone can go through the motions of virtue. It is rather what lies behind his better behavior. It is that he mostly has the motives and sentiments of a good person. It’s the exceptions, and there are a lot of them, that are the problem.

Though Soprano’s capacity for goodness extends beyond his relations, friends and associates, examples of this are harder to find: he doesn’t much deal with “normal” people. Telling moments do crop up from time to time. In one episode, for instance, he reacts with palpable disgust when some fellow mobsters whom he is visiting in Italy administer a beating to an adolescent and his mother. (The boy had inadvertently frightened them with some firecrackers.) His reaction makes it apparent that he is bothered about the treatment of the boy and woman, not because the local gangsters were violating some code of mob behavior, but because these were innocent people being treated cruelly.

In another episode, Soprano does try to branch out and befriend some respectable professionals. However, their treatment of him is vile: for them he
is merely a sideshow attraction and an object for rude and condescending questions. This is not because they disapprove of him; if anything they are awed. (Why else would they bring a murderous sociopath along for a cookout and a round of golf? They weren’t looking to borrow money.) This is merely the characteristic behavior of ruthless social climbers who seem incapable of real friendship: their interest in others appears to extend only as far as they expect to benefit. In Soprano they saw nothing more than a tool for their amusement, a source of lurid tales with which to regale their—“friends” isn’t the right word—associates. Their spouses prove little better in their interactions with Soprano’s wife. The viewer is left wondering who have the worse characters.

Finally, note two interesting facts. First, we are seriously disappointed in Soprano on certain occasions, as when he “asks” an innocent friend, who wants no part of the Mob, to hire a thug in the kitchen of his restaurant. Soprano seems better than that somehow, and we expect him to respect his friend’s wishes. Yet evil people do not disappoint us, for we don’t expect anything good from them. Second, Soprano’s immediate family—I stress, his immediate family—is not merely likeable; though hardly perfect, all three are unquestionably good persons. If Soprano is evil, then why does he fit in with these people so well? He is not a black sheep, but just another member of the family. (The real misfit in the (extended) family is his mother. She is a threat to no one but Tony—whom she tries to have assassinated—yet her consistently self-centered and mean disposition makes her the better candidate for evil.)

We can have little doubt that a Tony Soprano might exist. Extremity theorists could make their accounts sufficiently restrictive to rule out a Soprano. Thomas might already have done so: he could argue that Soprano is usually motivated by “understandable considerations” and hence does not often commit evil acts on his account (1993; see also Calder, this volume). Maybe evil requires a greater propensity to do evil. Very well: so long as he retains his better nature, I doubt that anything he could do would make it credible to regard him as evil. (Though certain actions would cause us to seriously dislike him and lose interest in the show. Some who have seen the program may have had this reaction as it is. Network executives reportedly tried to eliminate the now-infamous garroting scene because they feared audiences would be turned off by seeing the protagonist in such a harsh light. Readers who doubt that Soprano really does evil are advised to consider his associates, some of whom can behave quite monstrously. But few if any of them are plausibly regarded as evil.) Perhaps some evils are so great as to make impossible the psychological and moral complexity of a Soprano. Torturing your children, say. But then we will have crossed into the territory of the consistency theorist.

Whereas a Soprano undermines frequent evildoing theories, he may pose no difficulty at all for other sorts of extremity views such as McGinn’s. So-
prano may take pleasure in the suffering of others to an unwholesome degree, but he is not especially sadistic or otherwise inured to the ill-being of other people. This is important, for we cannot easily imagine someone who frequently delights in others’ misery, while lacking in the usual sympathies, without regarding that individual as evil or insane. So perhaps the difficulty Soprano raises is not for extremity views *per se*, but for frequent evildoing accounts. What prevents him from counting as evil is not the fact that he has a good side, but that he has the wrong kind of vices.

This objection has something to it: having dulled or perverted sympathies does appear to be central to having an evil character. But it is not the whole story, as I have argued elsewhere (1999). For perhaps such an individual is, like Kant’s dutiful but unloving man, conscientious or otherwise virtuous in important respects. Such a person will not, I think, be credibly viewed as evil. (Kant wouldn’t think so. Quite the contrary.) If the reader finds this implausible, this is likely to be for either of two reasons. Maybe such an individual is thought to be a psychological impossibility: sympathy is the foundation of morality, and someone lacking it will not, as a fact of human nature, be capable of any kind of moral virtue. Alternatively, someone might contend that such an individual is *not* virtuous in any respect: a commitment to duty, say, is no virtue if a hateful spirit lies behind it. Or maybe the very idea of such a commitment in a hateful person is incoherent. Either of these views amounts to denying that an evil person can have significant virtues. But this is exactly what the consistency approach maintains. It’s just that we can account for the required consistency in terms of a single root vice. Still, we must remember that this vice isn’t doing all the work: the absence of significant virtues such as conscientiousness is crucial. Maybe some other sort of extremity view can get around the difficulties raised thus far. A second example should make this possibility seem remote.

Consider now the case of Chad, the “protagonist,” as it were, of Neil LaBute’s recent film, *In the Company of Men*. Chad is a successful corporate operator who knows how to play the game. He appears to be the sort of middle manager who normally does no harm, plays by the rules, obeys the laws, and otherwise exhibits the hallmarks of a productive member of society. Society has rewarded him accordingly. But he is also evil, as LaBute himself has claimed in interviews (Sterngold, 1997). He is manifestly a worse person than Soprano, who does far worse things. Over the course of the film Chad does seriously harm two individuals and humiliate another; but the harm matters far less than what his behavior reveals about his inner workings. For one thing, we need not suppose that he normally does such things.

Chad tells his spineless boss Howard that women have treated them badly and deserve some payback. So he proposes that it would make for a good laugh if they were to make a game of seducing a gentle and lonely deaf woman who works in their office (actually, any “disfigured” woman would
have done, as Chad charmingly puts it). The two overwhelm her with attention, and over some weeks she falls deeply in love with Chad. At one point they arrange for her to be caught “cheating” on Howard with Chad, thus making her feel terrible guilt at “wronging” them both. All in the name of fun. Six weeks into the game, Chad gleefully informs her that it was all a put-on. He implores her to tell him how she feels, scrutinizing her face as one would an insect. Disappointed at not receiving a more demonstrative response, he departs, and she collapses in grief. Chad’s friend, afflicted with a conscience and enamored with the woman, suffers an emotional breakdown. With Chad’s encouragement Howard’s condition deteriorates until, aided by acts of sabotage on Chad’s part, he loses his job—which Chad happily takes over. We last see Chad at home with an attentive and unsuspecting girlfriend, who proceeds to service him.

Not once does Chad exhibit the slightest glimmer of doubt, compassion, or remorse over his actions. Indeed, he is quite pleased with himself. He usually goes through the motions of a respectable person, but nowhere does he exhibit any genuine moral virtues, nor any sentiments or thoughts of an even minimally redemptive nature. This is not to say that he is consumed with wicked impulses. He does not appear to be driven incessantly to harm or torment others. Chad’s loathsome behavior seems rather to be a departure from an unremarkable routine. He is not diabolical so much as amoral, utterly lacking in motives or sentiments of moral worth. He is plausibly capable of being moved sympathetically or morally, but this is a capacity he appears not to exercise. He is not an emotional or cognitive cripple: other people’s feelings are not a mystery to him. (How else could he pull off and take pleasure in his “game”?) They just don’t matter.

Perhaps Chad has some negative trait to a sufficiently extreme degree to qualify as evil on some sort of extremity view. But it is not obvious that he does. He is cruel, but not Satanically so. He has a disturbing propensity to harm others, but whether he frequently does serious harm is questionable. Such behavior would not be prudent: sooner or later he would likely be found out and ruined. And other people’s suffering may not interest him that much. At any rate, we can imagine that he causes serious harm only rarely. Chad sometimes takes delight in the suffering of others, but not, it seems, as a matter of course. He does not represent the kind of danger that a Tony Soprano represents. Indeed, he may never have done anything that warrants legal sanctions at all. He knows how society works, and he appears mostly to follow its rules and fit in nicely. This is a substantial part of what makes him so disconcerting. How many Chads are out there? Might there be Chads in our own workplaces? (I suspect my wife went to business school with a few. Consider the troubling phenomenon of “industrial psychopaths”—individuals who flourish in large organizations despite meeting standard criteria for psychopathy; see Sherman, 2000.) Might some of the most esteemed members of our society be like him?
The idea that evil persons could walk so quietly among us, and even get rewarded, is not a pleasant one. No wonder the film aroused such heated reactions when it was released: the film’s publicist was punched at the premiere, and Aaron Eckhart, who played Chad, has been verbally assailed numerous times by angry viewers who evidently failed to distinguish him from Chad. And many filmgoers—even some reviewers—were outraged at what they bizarrely took to be the film’s advocacy of cruelty to women. Chad as I have described him might seem unbelievable as a real human being to some readers. But why, if he is merely a caricature, did he arouse such fury? Many viewers evidently saw him as all too real.

Chad is evil not simply for having a particular trait, or set of traits, to an extreme degree. His evil consists rather in a kind of monstrous consistency of character: in his having extreme vices unleavened by significant virtues—indeed, by much of anything morally decent. He has no good side, but is vile through and through.

3. The Account

What, specifically, does the consistency of the evil person’s vices amount to? A weak version of the consistency view requires only the absence of significant moral virtues—the absence of a significant good side. This account is probably too weak: mere ne’er-do-wells might genuinely care about matters of duty and the good of others, but never be adequately moved or motivated by such concerns. Perhaps their selfish desires always override, or inordinately pull against, their better motives. (Imagine a thief and con artist who acts altruistically only rarely, and even then with unseemly reluctance.) Such persons are consistently vicious, lacking any real good side, yet their concern for duty and other people, however attenuated, makes it implausible to regard them as evil. Chad lacks even these weakened moral sensibilities, and I think that is why we are inclined to call him evil. He is consistently vicious in a stronger sense: he is neither moved nor motivated (positively) by what is morally good or right. Perhaps some trace of the decent impulses has found its way into his psychology, but not enough to make a significant difference to the moral quality of his character. While mere ne’er-do-wells have some modestly redeeming qualities—they do care, just not enough—Chad has none that we can see.

We can generalize the view as follows: to be evil is to be disposed to be neither moved nor motivated (positively) by the good to a morally significant extent. By “moved” I mean affect: crudely, a person’s feelings. The qualifier “positively” allows us to include those who are moved and motivated perversely by the good: they hate it. “Morally significant” here refers to the evaluation of a person’s character: the evil person, if moved and motivated positively by the good at all, is moved so little that it does not make a significant difference to the moral quality of the agent’s character. (We do not want
the ascription of evil to hang on the faintest of passions.) Finally, I understand “the good” in a broad manner that can include the right. For brevity I have omitted reference to the agent’s relation to the bad, but we should take as implicit throughout this discussion that being related in a certain way to the good includes being related to the bad in a similarly appropriate or inappropriate way. When I say, for instance, that evil people fail to be attracted by the good, I mean that they also fail to be repelled by the bad. We can ignore cases in which someone is, say, appropriately moved by the good, but inappropriately moved by the bad.

This is not an Augustinian view of evil: evil may, but need not, be nothing more than a deprivation. Evil persons could, like Satan, be actively opposed to the good.

We can simplify our characterization of this view by thinking of virtue and vice as a matter of a person’s orientation to the good: insofar as we are disposed to be appropriately moved and motivated by the good, we are aligned with the good. (I say “appropriately” rather than positively because someone might be moved too much by some goods. For instance, being too sympathetic can make us squeamish about performing certain duties, like disciplining our children. Also, someone might be positively moved by the good for the wrong reasons. See my discussion of Hitler in the next section.) We are virtuous insofar as we are at least adequately aligned with the good. Vice consists in failing to be adequately aligned with the good. Evil persons are those who are not aligned with the good to a morally significant extent. They are, morally speaking, wholly or almost wholly unaligned with the good, if not actively opposed to it.

In what follows, I will generally omit the qualifier “morally”: the evil person is not significantly aligned with the good. But note that some putative ways of being aligned with the good are not morally significant: consider the wicked aesthete, the bold and resourceful scoundrel, or the prudent miser. Or consider, for that matter, Milton’s Satan (as Loren Lomasky helpfully pointed out to me). Such individuals may be effective pursuers of some sort of good: aesthetic, prudential, etc. But their virtues are not moral, and make no difference to the moral quality of their characters. They are not better people for it. Interestingly, the qualifier “morally” does not seem crucial: we find it perfectly natural to characterize Satan as wholly opposed to the good, whatever his virtues.

(The present account is influenced by Thomas Hurka’s recent work on the virtues (1992; 2001). He calls being positively moved and motivated by the good “loving” the good. I have no quarrel with this term, since it serves well enough in some contexts, and no expression is ideal. But the word has undesirable connotations in the present context: evil persons like Chad don’t just fail to love the good; they don’t care for it at all. A more substantive difference between my view and Hurka’s is that his account identifies virtues and
pires with occurrent mental episodes, whereas mine construes them disposi-
tionally. Hurka arguably conflates the virtues with virtuous feelings and de-
sires—the expression of the virtues—perhaps because the latter play a greater
role in his consequentialist ethics.

Some readers may be put off by talk of being “aligned” with “the good”: it may suggest an anachronistic Manichean or Platonistic conception of value. I think such connotations are entirely appropriate to the subject matter: we are, after all, talking about evil. (In their contributions to this volume, S. R. Charles and Stephen Morris employ the language of alignment in their discussions of Platonic and Christian views of evil, respectively.) But the present theory of evil is compatible with many conceptions of value, including some forms of relativism. (Whether a given value theory can plausibly accommodate the phenomenon of evil is another question.) This view also allows a plurality of ways of being virtuous or vicious: a person may be aligned or otherwise with the good in many different ways.

Talk of virtue in terms of being aligned with the good may seem to sug-
gest that acting from erroneous moral conviction is never better than doing
what the agent knows to be wrong: either way, the agent fails to be appropri-
ately moved and motivated by what is in fact good. Conscientiousness counts
for nothing if it serves a bad morality. This is partly right: doing what we take
to be good or right can indeed be morally worthless (see the discussion of Hit-
ler in the next section). But we must distinguish between acting from bad prin-
ciples in a way that does, and does not, reflect some degree of morally worthy
concern. Someone who “conscientiously” follows a so-called morality of self-
ishness is no better than the rankly amoral. Nor is such a person truly consci-
entious in any meaningful sense. Compare this individual with someone who
kills innocent people out of the mistaken belief that such casualties are a re-
grettable but permissible means of achieving a desirable goal—say, protecting
an endangered species of fish. The latter mistake reflects a significant degree
of alignment with the good, even if the false belief shows this to be imperfect.

4. Implications

Unlike Chad, Tony Soprano is significantly aligned with the good: he is often
moved and motivated in morally appropriate ways. The noteworthy thing
about him is how much he resembles the rest of us—that someone so like us
could do such loathsome things. He is, for the most part, moved and motivated
in pretty much the same ways as anyone else. Moreover, Soprano does not
appear to have a particularly divided character. He’s just complicated, with
admittedly grave defects. (Indeed, the viewer wonders how much his behavior
reflects unusual defects of character and how much is just a matter of an ordi-
nary character reacting to extraordinary circumstances. Chad would likely be a
monster wherever you put him.) Soprano’s kinship with us raises difficult
questions about the propriety of learning too much about the good side of people like him: the resulting empathy may undermine our ability to properly judge the evil they, and others like them, do. Those who find the show morally suspect have real grounds for concern.

Chad, by contrast, is noteworthy for how little he resembles the rest of us. His operating principles are extraordinary, particularly given how normal he appears on the surface. He is a kind of moral freak. In calling people evil, we are not merely saying they are really bad. We are saying they are beyond the pale in every respect, or close to it. They have gotten off the moral boat in an important sense, and are not to be regarded as normal wrongdoers. Indeed, they are not to be taken completely seriously as moral individuals, for attempting to reason with them is likely to prove futile. Nor ought we to be disappointed when they behave immorally. They are always that way; what else could we expect? (LaBute has remarked that Howard is the one who really disgusts him, precisely because we can reasonably expect decent behavior from him. He is much more like the rest of us than Chad.)

Being so thoroughly unlike ourselves, evil individuals pose no worrisome questions about our kinship with them: we have none. Labeling persons as evil thus serves to distance them from ourselves, to impose a kind of moral exile. (See Bavidge, this volume, for a similar claim.) This is comforting and simplifies the question of how to deal with them: since they are moral outcasts with no real propensity for good, we need have no dealings with them save hostile ones. For under no circumstances can we trust them to have the right motives or sentiments. We ostracize evil people not just to censure them for their misdeeds or ill will, but also because they have already placed themselves completely outside the boundaries of moral society—because it doesn’t make sense to regard them as in any important way one of us. (Gilbert Harman has made a similar point; see 1977, chapter 9.) Were Soprano’s wife to conclude he is evil, she would not merely have to confront the fact that her husband likes doing terrible things. She would have to conclude that their relationship is a sham: how could a truly evil individual have any genuine, human concern for anyone? Evil precludes the depth and complexity of other-concern that genuine love and friendship demand.

The distancing effect of “evil” carries with it the temptation to attribute evil where it does not exist. Thus almost any sufficiently heinous act is liable to elicit claims that the perpetrator is evil, a monster who ought to be treated accordingly. Consider, for instance, American reactions to the Oklahoma City bombing. Concluding that the bomber must be evil, many refused at first to acknowledge that a fellow (white) American could possibly be responsible, and immediately began persecuting individuals who looked vaguely Arabic. (This despite the patently obvious fact that the target and timing could only have been attractive to anti-government Americans.) The culprit, Timothy McVeigh, confounded these expectations by proving to be not only a Cauca-
sian American, but by all appearances a basically good person who had picked up some nutty political ideas. His case prompted much public debate about the nature and meaning of evil.

Returning to our earlier example: the ex-husband of Soprano’s psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi, refers to Soprano as evil, and considers this grounds for dropping him as a patient. As I noted earlier, this accusation strikes the viewer as naïve. It is also a cheap shot—a way of not taking Soprano seriously as a human being. And it furnishes the accuser with an excuse for not dealing with the hard questions raised by a relatively normal wrongdoer like Soprano. By contrast, we like Dr. Melfi because she does not take the easy path (even if we disagree with her decision to treat Soprano). Part of the show’s genius is its use of the therapeutic setting: for who would care what troubles an evil person? The fact that we find Soprano’s sessions with Dr. Melfi interesting and worth taking seriously speaks to a sense of shared humanity that would be difficult to imagine with a Chad. Melfi’s ex-husband denies this common bond in calling her patient evil, so he naturally finds it incomprehensible that she should want to continue treating Soprano.

This sort of mistake comes naturally to us: we need to make judgments about each other’s characters, and observed behavior is all we have to go on. Unfortunately, we are often too quick to project from just one or a few facts about a person’s behavior to sweeping generalizations about his or her character. (This is a well-documented phenomenon known in the social psychology literature as the fundamental attribution error; see Ross and Nisbett, 1991.) Those who know criminals like Soprano only through news reports of their worst acts are liable to take these actions as representative of their whole characters: they are nothing more, and nothing less, than evildoers. The Sopranos is jarring to our sensibilities because it so thoroughly undermines this expectation. It makes us wonder how badly we may have misjudged Soprano’s real-life counterparts—the evildoers of the real world. Might we have similarly misjudged even the most obvious candidates for evil? Hitler?

The idea that even Hitler might escape classification as evil is distressing, and requires a fuller examination of his character than I can provide. But off-hand the idea that Hitler possessed the complexity of a Soprano seems implausible: he appears to have been an unremittingly hateful man whose alleged affections for dogs, (Aryan) children, Eva Braun, etc., show only that he was not entirely without things that suited his tastes. He also had a fondness for Panzers. Any putative commitment to duty on Hitler’s part is similarly suspect: suppose he truly did care—within limits—about being truthful, fulfilling his promises, and so forth. This would not reflect significantly on his moral character unless it was grounded in genuine respect or concern for others. We may reasonably doubt that it was. As I noted in the previous section, genuine conscientiousness cannot be rooted solely in morally worthless bases such as selfishness, aristocratic ideals of nobility (it would be “beneath” him not to
carry out his duties), a desire to be well-regarded, or empty reflexes instilled by social conditioning. (This indicates that merely desiring and taking pleasure in the good is not sufficient for being aligned with the good: the good must positively move and motivate us for the right reasons; our concern for the good must be properly grounded.)

We can avoid taking evildoers seriously as fellow humans by labeling them as evil. But we would be wrong to do so in the absence of any good reason for thinking that they possess the sort of grotesque consistency of character that evil requires. Perhaps a tendency to overattribute evil has value in firming up our resolve to deal appropriately with wrongdoers. Better, I think, to face the truth and come to grips with the fact that many evildoers are not so unlike us after all. Worse, many evil persons may travel among us undetected. Perhaps the reader works with, or for, one.

5. Objections and Replies

My arguments have relied mostly on intuitions about who is, and is not, evil. The reader may wonder why we ought to care about such intuitions. More generally, who cares what the right theory of evil persons is? What’s at stake here? We would like to have some idea of what our interests in evil are, and what we want from a theory of evil persons. We would like, in short, to know that we aren’t quarrelling over a merely verbal issue: to whom the word “evil” applies. An evil person is the worst kind of person there is, but even within the class of evil persons we can plausibly distinguish better and worse. (However, see Zaibert, this volume.) How do we decide where to draw the line between the classes of evil and merely (very) bad persons? Why does it matter? These are good questions, but we need not answer them here. (Note that, whereas we saw that frequent evildoing theories do seem to furnish a credible explanation of our interest in the category of evil persons, they do not obviously supply grounds for distinguishing evil persons from the merely bad.) The theory of evil character is still in its early stages, and we need a grasp of the ordinary concept of evil before we can get clear on the role it plays and why it matters whom we call evil. Then, having identified our practical and theoretical interests in the phenomenon, we can return to our original account and see whether it enables us to satisfy those interests reasonably well. If not, then some revision may be in order. If the contentions of this essay are correct, then the concept of an evil person appears to serve a distancing function, denoting those individuals whose affective and motivational economies are wholly unhinged from, or at odds with, the good. But more needs to be said to explicate the significance of the notion.

Defenders of extremity views may object that the consistency approach obscures the importance of specific vices for evil. But the foregoing only sketches the outlines of an account of the evil person. Some vices surely go
further toward making someone evil than others, and improvements in some aspects of character are more likely to remove a person from the ranks of the evil than improvements in others. Cruelty counts for more than dishonesty. But such questions are beyond the scope of this chapter. (I have argued in an earlier paper for a pluralistic account of the evil person’s central vices; see Haybron, 1999. There I gestured in the direction of a consistency requirement, but did not endorse one.)

A third objection contends that my view is too weak: a mere indifference to matters of duty and the well-being of others cannot suffice for having an evil character. Evil requires a kind of active maliciousness or malevolence. Such worries reflect a failure to recognize the moral gravity of being completely unaligned with the good. Suppose, for example, that a child were to imbibe a poison that leads to an agonizing death. How would we feel about a father who could cheerfully go about his business while watching this happen right before him, a process he could easily stop were he willing to put up with a slight inconvenience? We should have no problem regarding such a man as evil if this behavior were representative of his character. Imagine such an individual running a country: though he lacks a malicious nature, he would gladly slaughter millions if it suited his purposes. True indifference to the good is vastly worse than a mere failure to be good: it is, plausibly, evil.

The consistency view raises worries about moral agency: is evil even possible? Is what I am calling the evil person a moral agent, or even a person, at all? (For an interesting discussion of personhood and evil, see Thomas, 1995.) Talk of being “off the moral boat” and of the futility of morally reasoning with the evil person might make us wonder whether such individuals are subject to moral appraisal in the first place. These concerns parallel those about the status of psychopaths. Indeed, an interesting question concerns what, if anything, distinguishes the evil person from a psychopath on this account. Perhaps nothing, on some views of psychopathy (Hare, 1998; Millon, Simonson, et al., 1998).

These are deep questions that we cannot hope to resolve fully here, but I do not think the consistency view makes evil incompatible with moral agency. For someone might be perfectly capable of moral decency despite lacking any significant propensity to be morally decent. Perhaps some individuals are in the grip of monstrous ideologies that so warp their psychologies that their better nature is wholly suppressed. Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray is like this (1891). These individuals might be perfectly capable of rejecting such ideologies while lacking any inclination to do so. Perhaps a radical change of circumstances would prompt a sort of conversion. Maybe a serious accident would jar Chad into a completely different outlook, making a decent person out of him (à la Ebenezer Scrooge). Would this show him not to be evil on the present account? No: he is still highly and thoroughly vicious. The fact that he could acquire virtues does not show that he now has any significant virtues. He is a
moral monster, and it would take a radical change of character to make a toler-
able person out of him. (In an earlier paper, I distinguished “purely evil” char-
acters, persons whose vices are so profound and deeply entrenched that they
lack the capacity to be virtuously moved and motivated (1999). Worries about
agency are more pressing for such individuals, though I argued that even
purely evil individuals qualify as moral agents: they could behave well if they
wanted to; they just don’t want to, and are incorrigible in this. As the forego-
ing remarks indicate, evil persons need not be purely evil in this sense.)

The fifth objection concerns my claim about the distancing effect of as-
cribing evil. What about all the classic examples of ordinary people gone
wicked: Lord of the Flies, Heart of Darkness, etc.? Isn’t our kinship with the
evil person precisely the point of such stories? Yes, but our real kinship is with
the people these individuals once were, not with the ones they became. Such
tales remind us that many of us are capable of losing our humanity and becom-
ing monsters. Notice that such a progression always involves becoming, in an
important sense, a different person. This is not to deny that it could involve the
surfacing or flowering of tendencies that were always there in some sense. But
the individual becomes a different person in allowing them to take over. So we
can have a kinship of sorts even with the evil person. But the relationship con-
cerns our resemblance, not as we are, but as we could be.

Some might object to the epistemol-
ogical hurdles my account raises: they
may think it too hard to know who the evil people are. But who said character
was easy to discern? Our business here is to judge not actions but character—a
person’s most intimate possession. We may find it less gratifying to admit that
we do not know someone’s moral character well enough to judge than to blast
the person with the blunderbuss of “evil.” But doing so may be more honest.

For all I have said, we might discover that no evil people exist outside of
fiction (though this is most improbable). Does this account let too many peo-
ple off the hook? We might have hoped to vindicate our sense that a butcher
like Serbia’s General Mladic is evil. Perhaps this individual is evil; I do not
know much about him. He is certainly creepy, frightening, and infuriating. But
we would need to know a lot more than the typical news report conveys to say
with any confidence whether he is evil. I suspect he is not. But this, if true,
does not let him off the hook. Evil or not, he might still deserve to be shot,
forever imprisoned, or whatever. Likewise for Soprano. Matters of character
are, after all, distinct from matters of crime and punishment.

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WORKS CITED


