Evil Characters

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Abstract: In this paper I examine the psychological traits that can play a constitutive role in having an evil character, using a recent affect-based account by Colin McGinn as my starting point. I distinguish several such traits and defend the importance of both affect and action-based approaches. I then argue that someone who possesses these characteristics to the greatest possible extent—the purely evil individual—can actually be less depraved than one whose character is not so thoroughly penetrated by such traits. To illustrate the contrast I have in mind, I use two fictional characters, each of whom exemplifies a different kind of moral extreme: Claggart, from Melville’s *Billy Budd*, and Wilde’s Dorian Gray.

1. Introduction

To gain entry into the pantheon of dubious characters whom we are quickest to cite as prototypes of evil, one needs to have committed crimes of the greatest magnitude and/or depravity. The closer one approximates in deed the Hitlers, Stalins, and Dahmers of the world, the better one’s odds of attaining—and, more to the point, deserving—a similar degree of notoriety. A natural proposal for what it is to be an evil person, then, might be that it consists in being guilty of the gravest offenses. Perhaps this sort of culpability-oriented account does correctly explicate one sense of ‘evil’, or ‘evil person’. It cannot, however, suffice as a complete account of what it takes to have an evil character, for we assess people’s characters primarily if not solely for how they are disposed to behave, think, desire, etc. Whether they actually succeed in perpetrating horrors of sufficiently shocking dimensions depends substantially on matters of moral luck, among other things. Had Hitler been rendered impotent to carry out his genocidal projects, he would still have been Hitler, and just as twisted a soul as we know him to have been. In short, his character would still have been evil.

I wish to largely set aside questions about who most deserves censure or punishment and focus instead on what it is to have an evil character—to be morally a person of the worst sort. In the first part of this paper, I will examine the psychological traits that can play a constitutive role in having an evil character, building on a recent account developed by Colin McGinn that gives a central role to the sympathies. I will then argue that someone who possesses these characteristics to the greatest extent can in fact be less evil than one whose character is not so completely penetrated by such traits. The extent to which one has an evil character, in other words, is not simply a function of the degree to which one possesses the evil-constitutive traits: how much one is responsible for having these traits matters as well. I establish the point by discussing two types of maximally evil character: the purely evil character, and the “merely” deeply corrupt one. In the former case—exemplified by Claggart, the master-at-arms in Melville’s *Billy Budd*—an individual possesses one or more of the evil-constitutive traits to the fullest possible extent, as one might expect, and is indeed a paradigm of evil. With the latter sort of extreme—vividly portrayed by Wilde’s Dorian Gray—one does not have those traits as thoroughly or profoundly as one might. Nonetheless, I shall argue, it is the most deplorable of the two.
2. The psychology of evil: evil-constitutive traits

2.1 Indirect theories

There are not many theories of evil character about, but one type of account with prominent recent adherents derives the notion from a prior theory of evil acts or events. Laurence Thomas, for example, claims that a person commits an evil act “if he delights in performing a harmful act that has a certain moral gravity to it…and if the person is not animated by understandable considerations” (1993, p. 77). One has an evil character if he is “often enough prone to do evil acts” (p. 82). Similarly, John Kekes takes evil to consist in undeserved harm to people, whereas a person is evil if she is a “regular source of evil” (1990, pp. 47-8; 1998, p. 217). We might crudely summarize this sort of view as follows: to have an evil character is to be disposed to do evil on a regular basis. Such accounts, notice, only identify the evil character via the consequences of her character traits. Hence I shall refer to them as indirect theories.

While it is plausible that some kind of indirect view might be correct as an account of certain varieties of evil person, some species of evil character escape its grasp. A thoroughly hateful and mean-spirited coward, for example, might rarely or never be disposed to act on his noxious sentiments, either through sheer timidity or perhaps fear of divine retribution. Yet his character is presumably no less evil for his cowardice. For that matter, perhaps an evil soul has simply grown too old for much action, having spent himself in a lengthy and rewarding career of tormenting his fellow beings! Senescence may have rendered him mostly harmless, but it certainly needn’t have made him a better person; maybe he has even gotten meaner. Second, this type of account is not especially illuminating as a theory of character: a disposition to perform evil acts might reflect a variety of character flaws. Consequently, it does not tell us why the evil person does what he does. Ceteris paribus, a theory that provides such an explanation is preferable to one that does not.

2.2 McGinn’s direct account

In Ethics, Evil, and Fiction (1997), McGinn takes a different tack and offers a direct theory of evil character: having an evil character consists in being disposed to feel pleasure at the pain of others (and vice-versa). This sort of character I shall call, for want of a more conventional or attractive term, antisympathetic. Before we look into the virtues and limitations of this account, notice that some other authors do appear to take a direct approach, including Benn (1985), Hampton (1989), and Milo (1984; 1998). None of them, however, depart from the indirect strategy to the extent that McGinn does, as they focus less on the underlying character flaw than on the role of the right and the good in an evil agent’s practical reasoning. So, for instance, one is evil insofar as one tends to perform immoral acts because they are wrong, or without sufficient regard to their moral status. More importantly, they resemble indirect theories in being action-based: the notion of an evil character ultimately concerns the extent to which an individual’s actions tend to be immoral.

Proponents of action-based accounts would doubtless object to McGinn’s affect-based theory on the grounds that it gets things backwards: even if hedonic dispositions are relevant to assessments of moral character, they are surely of secondary importance at best. What really matters is what a person does, or is disposed to do. Or perhaps, in a Kantian vein, it is having a good or bad will. Such feelings as sympathy and its reverse are beside the point: their relevance is primarily, if not entirely, a function of their role in encouraging or inhibiting the traits that do matter.
While action-based theories do capture an important aspect of evil that McGinn’s account leaves out, this objection misses the mark. To see why, consider an example of McGinn’s, taking the character of Claggart from Melville’s *Billy Budd* as our paradigm of evil. It is an essential point of Melville’s story that he harms Budd not for any reason, nor out of any normal human motive, but simply out of a “natural animosity”—a “rabies of the heart,” as it were. It is Claggart’s innate, fundamental antipathy towards others, or at least the goodness he sees in them, that motivates him. This enmity, moreover, stems from an “elemental evil” that runs so deeply within him that, while he is intellectually capable of “apprehending the good,” he is “powerless to be it” (Melville, 1924, Chapter 13, p. 42). Is Claggart antisympathetic, or rather, need he be? Yes, and this looks to play a key role in our assessments of his moral character. For starters, he evidently enjoys tormenting Budd, though his pleasure seems less of a giddy nature and more akin to the reptilian gratification of a predator who is onto his prey. And how could he fail to enjoy Budd’s suffering given the ferocity of his animus towards the man, and the absence of any reason to think him disinclined to enjoy such things? Moreover, he presumably must take some sort of pleasure in Budd’s misery if we are to recognize him for the beastly creature that he is. It certainly cannot be the case that he sympathizes with Budd—that would be far too redeeming—and a mere indifference to Budd’s suffering would fail to reveal the depth of depravity that Melville wants us to see in him. Indifference would also render his motivations even more opaque to the reader than they already are—too mysterious by far to serve Melville’s purposes. And not only must Claggart enjoy Budd’s suffering, it would undermine the story as well were any circumstance to arise in which he exhibited genuine sympathy for others. Indeed, it would represent a peculiar lapse in the story’s logic were his odious tendencies not to be thoroughgoing. We would, for instance, find thoroughly baffling the revelation that Claggart was sincerely kind and generous in his dealings with most people. A divided personality is simply not in the cards here.

There can be little doubt, then, but that Claggart’s character is profoundly, if not wholly, antisympathetic. Moreover, his being an evil person is at least partly constituted by this perverse “inversion of the usual laws of interpersonal feeling” (McGinn, 1997, p. 64). For we do not find people like Claggart to be so repulsive merely because they tend to do bad things. Indeed, Claggart could hardly merit his lofty rank among literary villains on that count alone. Rather, his hideous sentiments are what really disgust us. Whether or not he actually harmed or would have harmed Budd, the mere fact that he finds it pleasant to see great harm come to someone like Budd convinces us that he must be an evil-hearted—evil—man. Were he thwarted by cowardice, as in our earlier example, we should hardly think better of his character. Consider, alternatively, Gray’s loathsome Svengali, Lord Henry Wotton. As Wilde portrays him in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he certainly comes across as a dissolute and creepy individual, but he only dubiously qualifies as evil. We could, however, readily imagine a far darker and meaner counterpart, one whose greatest joy is another’s suffering. Like Wotton, this person is essentially passive and voyeuristic, but even more so: an incurable misanthrope, his heart’s desire is to see people suffer at each others’, and their own, hands, without any involvement on his part. His pleasures being essentially passive, he lacks any inclination to harm anyone. He seeks only to observe as much of his favorite kind of misery as he can. Though he may never bring about any evils, evil is surely the proper designation for such a moral grotesque.
2.3 Extending McGinn’s framework

2.3.1 Deficiencies of conscience

Such cases as those just described lend credence to the idea that antisocial tendencies—mere hedonic dispositions—can play a central constitutive role in having an evil character. At the same time, such a disposition alone may be neither necessary nor sufficient for being evil.\(^7\) Not sufficient, because it would seem that a truly evil individual must not only have an antisocial nature, but also lack a fully active conscience. The notion of an active conscience is somewhat obscure, but as I am using it has two components: it involves, on the one hand, a sincere commitment to goodness, such that one is disposed both to recognize what is right and good and to act on this recognition; and on the other, being disposed to have the appropriate reactive attitudes (Strawson, 1974) towards one’s own moral failings—guilt, shame, etc. Whether or not this crude sketch constitutes an adequate analysis of the notion, it is how I understand it here. Perhaps a complete account would do away with the concept altogether in favor of more precise notions, but it should suffice for our purposes.

Now an antisocial person who has an active moral conscience—especially if he often fails to act on his sadistic desires as a result—is clearly less depraved than a conscienceless counterpart who has no problem with, or even endorses, these urges. And surely it is possible (however unlikely) to be antisocial, yet also have the normal moral convictions—presumably with the consequence that one is plagued by a profound sense of self-loathing. For example, the serial murderer Jeffrey Dahmer, who supposedly enjoyed torturing and killing his victims, professed to be deeply appalled by his own feelings and behavior. (I do not know whether he felt any sympathy for his victims; we can certainly imagine that he did not.) This possibility alone indicates that the hedonic account is somewhat incomplete as a specification of the depths to which a malignant soul can sink. But does it mean that having an antisocial disposition is insufficient for having an evil character? Quite possibly: that depends on whether it is plausible to call an utterly antisocial but conscientious individual evil.\(^8\) I am unsure what to say here—though inclined to respond in the negative—and suspect that intuitions will diverge on this question.\(^9\) Surely there is at least an aspect of evil in such a person, but a genuine commitment to goodness would appear to be a substantially mitigating factor.

Interestingly, it is not the mere intellectual recognition of right and wrong that counts most in such cases.\(^10\) Rather, we look for the felt recognition that one’s perverse pleasures are wrong. Supposing that Dahmer was really as I have described him, it would make a substantial difference in our appraisals of his character whether he merely believed that what he felt and did was wrong, or whether he also felt it, and to what degree. Whether, that is, it bothered him, caused him great distress. Assuming his belief to be sincere, to the point that he also wished himself to be better (and perhaps also acted on this desire at times), it would probably not count for much unless it were, so to speak, taken to heart. The putative fact that he suffered deeply through his conscience is far more redeeming than a relatively unfelt awareness of his depravity would be. (Consider, by way of contrast, a more sanguine response: “Sure it was wrong—I would rather I hadn’t done it—but what the hey…”) Whether this is sufficiently redemptive to remove him from the class of evil persons is another question (even setting aside the likelihood that Dahmer was not in fact entirely antisocial).\(^11\) More likely, we would consider him to be pathetic. Consider also that it is often quite easy for a person who is largely virtuous to do all manner of bad things—e.g., through moral lapses brought about by weakness of the will, a quick temper, and so forth. It is much harder, by contrast, for a good person to do bad things, to bring
suffering to the innocent, and then feel happy about doing so. Good people often do bad things, but only the truly perverse are inclined to feel good about it. It is no accident that the notions of penitence and forgiveness figure centrally in at least one major religion; what ultimately counts is not just the sin but also the subsequent history of the spirit. This includes one’s emotional history.

On the other hand, suppose that Dahmer were prevented from acting on his beastly urges by an emotionally inert conscience. If indeed such a case is possible, this fact would certainly count heavily in his favor, though perhaps we should still consider him evil. So the capacity of conscience to redeem is, as proponents of more traditional theories would insist, importantly related to its action-guiding function, and not simply its emotional dimensions. Nonetheless we can see that, to the extent that McGinn’s account needs supplementation with matters of conscience, such an extension is itself liable to be substantially hedonic. We care not just about one’s belief in doing what is right, nor whether one is thus motivated to do what is right, but also about the pleasure or pain one is disposed to feel at doing wrong.12

2.3.2 Malice

So having an evil character apparently demands, in addition to an antisympathetic nature, a certain poverty of conscience. Might there be evil persons who aren’t antisympathetic at all? Probably not among those possessed of the normal human sympathies, as it is difficult at best to picture someone who sympathizes with the suffering of others to the usual extent yet nonetheless qualifies as evil. Though one might well commit the most horrendous of crimes whilst having such feelings, we regard the possession of these sentiments as strongly indicative of an inner goodness that presumably rules out one’s being truly evil. (As with Dahmer, perhaps we should describe such a person as partly evil.) But suppose we have an individual, X, who is not antisympathetic, but merely indifferent to the suffering of others (asym pathetic). Suppose further that X lacks any real conscience, which is just to say that X is indifferent to morality: amoral. Is X evil? Whilst one might think that this distinction requires an active disposition to badness that we do not find in X as described, in reality we would have little trouble counting such an individual as evil. After all, the person who exhibits no concern either for duty or the welfare of others is almost certainly bound to inflict all manner of unpleasantness on the world, especially if it is in his interest to do so. We would undoubtedly find him an appalling character.

However, suppose that X is not quite defective enough in conscience and sympathy to qualify as evil on those counts alone. There are other ways in which he might make the grade. Additionally suppose, for instance, that X is grossly malicious—i.e., that X is deeply hostile towards other people, wishing them great misfortune. We can hardly deny that he is evil, even if he is not antisympathetic. But is this even possible, viz., to be malicious yet fail to take pleasure in others’ suffering? Yes, to the extent that it is generally possible to wish for things whilst failing to enjoy their fruition: the reality may not live up to the anticipation, or maybe what is wanted is simply not the sort of thing one enjoys. The psychological hedonist notwithstanding, we often knowingly desire things that we do not enjoy. (Notice that neither possibility seems applicable to Claggart.) Moreover, the basically malicious and antisympathetic natures are not the same, even where the traits do co-occur: in the former case the pleasure derives from the satisfaction of a prior desire (I enjoy getting what I want), whereas in the latter case the desire results from the fact that one finds pleasure in certain things (I want to get the things I enjoy).
2.3.3 Malevolence

There is at least one further way for one’s character to be evil. For why need it be merely the pain or misfortune of others that the evil person seeks? Perhaps he has a broader disposition to seek badness, destruction...evil. That is, we must recognize the possibility that an evil person might be malevolent, rather than antisympathetic or malicious. The malevolent character seeks not so much the pain of others as evil ends quite generally. He is full of ill will and bad intentions. Claggart’s vile disposition, for instance, is probably best described as malevolent, and not merely antisympathetic. After all, it is no coincidence that he chooses Budd—the ship’s most innocent and virtuous inhabitant—to persecute. It looks to be precisely Budd’s goodness that so arouses Claggart’s enmity. If he only sought to realize another’s misery, why choose Budd—especially given Budd’s popularity, which only made his job more difficult? He seems not only to enjoy the suffering of others, but to despise whatever goodness he encounters in them. Moreover, there is little evidence of any redeeming qualities on Claggart’s part. To the extent that he conforms with the rules of morality at all, it is apparently only for egoistic or otherwise unworthy reasons. Consequently, we might well suppose that his basic nature is malevolent: he has a deep-seated enmity towards goodness.

Most obviously malevolent would be the sort of character whose vileness drives him to seek (inter alia) destructive, odious ends of the sort that cannot reasonably be viewed as essentially painful or even harmful to other people (or other pain-experiencing creatures). Hence we might imagine cases involving, say, a generalized hostility towards the world (including the rules of morality, or perhaps those of heaven); or, at the limit, someone who is driven to do—and loves doing—just the opposite of whatever morality dictates, whether or not doing so causes any harm. Unfortunately, good examples of such extreme individuals are not readily encountered; most of the fictional characters that come to mind are one-dimensional cartoons, little more than Snidely Whiplash caricatures—mustache-twirling, diabolical cackle and all. Perhaps it is simply too difficult for a normal person to fully comprehend the malevolent soul (though there may not be much to comprehend!). We may, however, find a notable exception in Milton’s Satan (not to mention Goethe’s Mephistopheles), whose malignancy consists in a total dedication to opposing the moral order—“Evil, be thou my good”—along with all else pertaining to God’s rule. Whether this opposition includes harm or suffering to others is purely a secondary matter. We plainly need to look beyond a simple reversal of sympathy, surfeit of malice, or deficit of conscience to account for such a beast.

As should be clear enough, the evil-constitutive traits described thus far are not mutually exclusive. (Nor, I should add, need they exhaust the possibilities.) In fact, we would naturally expect the truly malevolent disposition to be accompanied by the others, as we see in both Claggart and Satan. But as with the closely related antisympathetic and malicious natures, however, the causal priority may vary from one case to the next. In one individual, an innate perversion of sympathy might lead to a generalized rejection of morality (if you can’t be good, then reject goodness); whereas in another, a conscious decision to pursue evil may eventuate in a reversal of the sympathies. Interestingly, it would seem to be his galling inversion of the usual sympathies, where this occurs, that is most disturbing about the malevolent soul. So even here McGinn’s account may do a lot of the explaining.
3. Two extremes of evil character

3.1 The purely evil character: Claggart

3.1.1 The basic account

Thus far, I have characterized evil in terms of the extent to which a person possesses certain negative qualities, such as being antisypathetic (to which I have added a deficiency of conscience, as well as malice and malevolence). Consequently, we would expect the very worst sort of person, the most clearly evil soul, to be one who possesses such qualities to the maximum possible extent: the purely, or thoroughly, evil person. If one’s wickedness consists in being antisypathetic, then this person is antisypathetic to the core, lacking any disposition whatsoever to sympathize with others. Instead he has the opposite disposition. I mean this in a fairly strong sense, in that his antisypathetic tendencies are not contingent on any suppression of sympathy, or of other mental states that would lead to sympathy. Nor do they depend on his maintaining a particular set of beliefs or desires (other than those that might be logically necessary for antisypathy). His disposition, in other words, persists across substantial variation in his psychology, and not just external circumstance. So he would not cease to be antisypathetic, for instance, even if he very much wished to. In some sense, this individual has no capacity for sympathy (or perhaps even for asympathy). Whatever exactly this sense is, the point is that someone who lacks the capacity for sympathy (or asympathy) may thus be regarded as possessing this trait to a greater degree than someone who has this capacity but consistently fails to exercise it. Perhaps the latter is inured to a sick ideology and refuses to let evidence or entreaty sway his conviction; were he to exchange his beliefs for more ordinary ones, his natural capacity for sympathy would kick in. This appears to be the sort of case we often have in mind when we speak of someone’s having an “inner core” of goodness, a “better nature” to which we might try to appeal in efforts to sway him from his evil course. The purely evil person has no better nature; evil permeates his character right down to the marrow. Morality, or some key aspect of it, simply has no purchase on this individual. In some sense, then, he possesses the evil-constitutive traits such as antisypathy to a greater degree than our (merely) consistently antisypathetic ideologue.

Whence the purely evil character? I do not think we can rule out the possibility that one might be responsible for having become that way; perhaps a basically good person could deliberately set out to undermine his own virtues and be so successful that he wipes out all trace, all capacity, for goodness (e.g., for sympathy). However, this may presuppose an implausible degree of control over one’s character. Suppressing one’s sympathies is one thing, but voluntarily eliminating one’s capacity for sympathy is another matter. Consider, for instance, the case of Robert Alton Harris, a justly reviled murderer who looks to be purely evil if anyone is, and whose viciousness results from a shockingly brutal upbringing (Watson, 1993). Could an ordinary person truly make such a monster of herself? Perhaps, but it seems probable that the moral instincts are so deeply ingrained in most of us that we cannot simply opt out of them, certainly not without quite a lot work. More likely is that the purely evil person had no choice in being that way: perhaps the flaw is hereditary, or maybe it results from an extremely abusive (or permissive) childhood, among other possibilities. At any rate, for our purposes it will be convenient to assume that the purely evil person is not culpable for his condition.

Thus conceived, the purely evil person’s moral stature is hardly a lofty one. At the same time, however, there are important limits to his ability to morally offend: namely, he is not re-
sponsible for his depravity. We cannot unequivocally say that he “ought to know better.” Recall the discussion of Claggart above; though he may fully comprehend what goodness requires, he is “powerless to be it.” This is a truly basic, essential flaw in his character, one that he has “no power to annul.” What, then, could we expect of him, if not to viciously persecute Budd, or whoever else presents an attractive target? Claggart’s hopeless condition brings to mind the story of an old woman and a snake, a variation on Aesop’s fable of the scorpion and the frog: An kindly old woman, on finding a deadly but badly injured snake, takes the snake in and nurses it back to health. Once the snake is well, she takes him back to where she found him and returns him to the wild, whereupon her venomous patient turns and strikes her. Mortally wounded, the incredulous woman asks the snake why he attacked her. “What did you expect? You knew I was a snake.”

The wholly evil character is, like the snake—and like Claggart—incapable of disappointing anyone but the ignorant or gullible. And like the snake, the purely evil person can only accrue so much blame and moral disapproval: that’s just the way he is.20 Here it is worth quoting Melville at some length:

> With no power to annul the elemental evil in him, though readily enough he could hide it; appraising the good, but powerless to be it; a nature like Claggart’s surcharged with energy as such natures almost invariably are, what recourse is left to it but to recoil upon itself and like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted it? (p. 42; emphasis added)

We recognize that his actions are wrong, but we wish less to punish him than to simply be rid of him, to dispense with him the way we would an irritating bug. We do not withhold blame, to be sure, but this is usually attended less by sentiments of rage and righteous indignation than by a mood of sad resignation and awed, fearful amazement: “Can there really be people like that?”21 In some sense, the purely evil person is just mentally defective or abnormal. Deprived of what Melville calls a “normal nature,” this person lacks the moral instincts, as if a part of his brain is missing. It would be pointless, moreover, to attempt to reason with such an individual on moral grounds, for moral reasons can hold no currency with him.

3.1.2 The moral significance of the purely evil character

Such considerations might lead one to conclude that the purely evil person is, in fact, of no greater moral interest than a snake or scorpion—or, at best, a psychopath.22 Indeed, one might argue, we cannot call such a monster evil. To go this far would be a mistake, however, for unlike the snake or the psychopath (at least on one view of psychopathy), a Claggart’s deficiency is not one of understanding. He is not a “moral imbecile”, as they used to say. Morality and goodness make perfect sense to him; they just don’t move him, at least not in the right way. Similarly, Gary Watson observes of Robert Alton Harris that “unlike the small child, or in a different way the psychopath, he exhibits an inversion of moral concern, not a lack of understanding” (1993, p. 134).

A Claggart not only recognizes goodness; he also is perfectly capable, in an important sense, of doing good things. Indeed, he could hardly have risen to the post of master-at-arms in the British navy without a well-developed capacity for regulating his behavior. Nothing actually compels Claggart to torment Budd, just as nothing compels a saint to assist the needy. He could have chosen not to, if he wished (on a whim, say, or if the perceived risks were too great). Neither hypnotism, psychosis nor anything else deprives him of moral agency. It’s just that he lacks any motivation whatsoever for doing otherwise. To be sure, he could not be so motivated even if
he wanted to—hence Melville’s description of him as fated to do ill—but why should this completely excuse him from blame for his actions, much less exempt him from moral appraisal altogether? He is perfectly free to do as he chooses, and his unfreedom to be motivated in radically different ways needn’t be particularly greater than ours is. After all, a saint may be no more capable of sharing Claggart’s motives than he is of sharing the saint’s. So he is not volitionally impaired.

Moreover, it seems plausible that Hitler—who presumably met the conditions for moral agency—may have been incorrigibly hateful, and thus incapable of having the motives and sentiments of a morally decent person. To the extent that this was the case, then he was not quite as bad a person as he could have been were he not so incapacitated. But surely we do not want to seriously entertain the notion that he was not a morally bad person at all, or even that he cannot be morally blamed for the horrendous consequences of his viciousness. Notice that this judgment does not seem to be contingent on any assumption that he is responsible for his incapacity; perhaps he was born that way. That someone who is neither cognitively nor volitionally impaired does not care, and is unable to care, about moral concerns—or worse, is perversely motivated by them—does not excuse him from moral responsibility. Nor does it exempt him from moral assessment. Admittedly, it does somewhat diminish one’s responsibility, for a Claggart is capable of doing good things only in a qualified sense. Furthermore, we cannot reasonably expect much good to come of such a beast.

Even if one rejects my contention that such individuals as Claggart are capable of acting against their natures on a given occasion, we need not conclude that this makes them ineligible for moral opprobrium. Someone whose cowardice leads to disastrous consequences, or who takes great pleasure in a child’s suffering, would seem to rate moral disapproval at the very least, whether or not he could control his responses in those situations. Were we to assume that Claggart had no choice, not only in being evil, but also in inflicting evil on Budd, we might still think him a moral monster. And perhaps Dahmer was truly powerless to contain his disgusting urges. Though doubtless we should take this fact into account, and perhaps feel some compassion for his plight, we would be badly misguided to regard him merely as someone with an unfortunate illness. For insofar as he counts as a moral agent at all, his defect is not purely medical, but moral as well. Ought he to have been (morally) ashamed of his behavior? Of course: he is lacking in morally important respects—those same respects which would, were he responsible for them, enable us to say that he is morally and not otherwise blameworthy. Likewise, we ought to hold him in lower moral esteem than if he were more sympathetically inclined.

Perhaps Claggart really is a psychopath on some understanding of the term, and maybe any purely evil person would so qualify. Fine: again, so long as we do not conclude that this sort of individual holds no interest for the moral philosopher. He is not “merely” a psychopath, whatever that means; he is evil. Those wishing to maintain otherwise have the unenviable task of explaining how Claggart—well-known as a paradigm of villainy—could fail to qualify as a bad person at all. (Or could there be such a thing as a non-morally bad person?)

3.1.3 The suppression of goodness

Notice that my purpose in this paper is not to characterize evil in its most ordinary, “banal” guises, but rather to gain some understanding of its nature by looking at its extremes. (Hence in part the focus on literary rather than actual cases.) It thus matters little for our purposes how often, if ever, such creatures as the purely evil person actually arise. Indeed, Kekes is surely correct in pointing out that the vast majority of the evil we encounter is not the product of
such “moral monsters” (1990; 1998). For instance, the truly antisympathetic constitution is probably so rare that most ordinary cases of sadism plausibly involve a certain mental detachment, a deliberate or perhaps involuntary subversion of our normal capacity for empathy. For if the tormentor were truly to recognize the nature and extent of his victim’s pain, he might find it unbearable. That is, the usual sympathetic response would kick in, with highly unpleasant consequences. So instead, the pedestrian sadist views his victim as an object, refusing to “see,” to empathize with, her suffering. The true sadist, on the other hand, is perfectly capable of empathizing with her victim. Instead of sympathy, however, she feels joy, exulting at the very misery she inflicts. And it is this tendency that we find so repellent about the antisympathetic person. So, for instance, Melville’s purposes clearly demand that Claggart’s sick pleasures not be contingent on any suppression of his normal reactions. Those are his normal reactions.

The possibility of suppressing one’s sympathies—and presumably, by extension, one’s other moral instincts—indicates how someone who possesses them might nonetheless appear to be purely evil. For if a person manages to suppress or otherwise subvert her moral reactions to a sufficient extent, then she will be behaviorally indistinguishable from the purely evil individual, at least in a wide range of circumstances. At the limit, this person will exhibit morally estimable qualities only in the event that she ceases to undermine her moral reactions.

3.2 The corrupt character: Dorian Gray

3.2.1 The basic account

If we want a reliable source of truly infuriating characters, we might do better to look instead at those who are perfectly capable of being good, but who, either by choice or negligence, fail to be it. Such individuals have, or had, within them the seeds of goodness, but have allowed wickedness to predominate. They are thus depraved in a way that those who had no choice in the matter are not. Presumably, then, we ought to consider the (inculpably) purely evil character such as Claggart, whose wickedness is basic and beyond his “power to annul”—and who therefore cannot really be considered responsible for his depravity—to be cut off from one sort of moral extreme: culpable wickedness of character. Unlike our purely evil person, the culpably wicked person has the capacity for evil because she could have chosen to be otherwise (though this capacity might only exist in the past tense for some individuals).

Rather, she is deeply corrupt, by which I mean that she has sufficiently serious vices for which she bears responsibility. She has, or had, the basic equipment for morality, and is, or was, perfectly capable of goodness. However, she has made little or no use of this capacity; on the contrary. And she quite literally lacks moral integrity—soundness of moral structure, or coherence of moral character (though not all those who lack moral integrity are corrupt). As in the case of official venality, the problem with the corrupt soul is not merely badness or wrongness; more importantly, there is also a gross discrepancy between what we quite reasonably expect of an individual and how she really is. That is, the corrupt (in my sense) individual and the bribe-taking judge both disappoint profoundly, in a way that someone whose moral failures are fated does not. Corruption in both senses constitutes an affront to, or perversion of, morality, and not just a departure from it. So whilst the corrupt person’s problem is certainly due in part to her antisympathetic (etc.) dispositions, the truly ghastly element in her character is in their completely preventable juxtaposition with a fundamentally sympathetic nature that is perfectly capable of decency. It is her moral corruption, the self-made ugliness of her soul, that offends us more than her sadism (etc.). The reader may have noticed that this sort of depravity—that of the fallen
soul—has a familiar, biblical ring to it. And it is hardly coincidental that the devil—“self-tempted, self-depraved” (Milton 1975, III 130)—is said to be a fallen angel. The corrupt soul harbors an important element of betrayal that is missing in the purely evil one.

Consider, for example, the title character of another work discussed by McGinn, Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, who is perhaps the prototypically corrupt soul. His problem is not that he altogether lacks the capacity to be good; on the contrary, Wilde’s depictions of him at the beginning of the story closely parallel Melville’s characterization of Budd. Like Budd, he is an orphan who personifies youthful beauty, innocence and purity—all the greater height from which to fall. But quite unlike Budd, he deliberately subverts his better nature so that he can pursue the aesthetic life (which, as the portrait reveals, has rather unaesthetic consequences for his character). What results is such a profoundly mutilated personality that he may even be incapable of returning to goodness. When he tries, it comes out as mere hypocrisy.

Before continuing, a couple of clarifications would be useful. First, my account appears to entail that corruption is itself an evil-constitutive trait. In a sense this is correct, but we should regard it as a second-order trait supervening partly on the first-order traits I have been calling evil-constitutive. Let ‘evil-constitutive trait’, then, denote just the first-order traits. Second, it may seem that I am confusing matters of blameworthiness and character. But it is not simply the case that someone who deliberately chooses to be evil (or allows herself to become that way) incurs more blame than someone whose evil is imposed on him. She is morally a worse person, for she is the sort of person who takes the path of evil when she could just as well be good.

### 3.2.2 The character of corruption

As the preceding section was fairly abstract, I would like to briefly discuss just what corruption of character might amount to. Presumably, it consists in precisely the sorts of character defects discussed in section two of this paper. So, for instance, one route to corruption is through the cultivation or toleration of grossly antisympathetic sentiments in a basically sympathetic character. This may well be what characterizes those soldiers and policemen of corrupt regimes—Nazi Germany, Haiti, Rwanda, Bosnia, etc.—who seem to gleefully commit the most heinous of atrocities against innocent civilians. It is difficult to imagine that all such persons are purely, or otherwise inescapably, evil. For one thing, we often hear of sadistic torturers who otherwise seem to lead fairly respectable lives, and who probably aren’t deceptive in seeming so, as Claggart is. How basically normal individuals could be so vicious is a mystery that I shall not try to solve here. However, it is tempting to suppose that, once one has begun to inflict horrors of any sort on others—and perhaps these people start with small acts of cruelty to those who are less obviously innocent—it becomes psychologically necessary in certain cases to actually embrace the evil, for the mere thought of the wrongfulness of such behavior would cause so much anguish to the normal nature that one must get oneself as far as possible from the notion. That is, the torturer takes so much pleasure from her work precisely because the displeasure that would result from *not* enjoying it—that is, from allowing herself to see the depravity of her actions—would be intolerable. (Having said that, any psychological necessity here is unlikely to be of the sort that would excuse.)

Dorian Gray illustrates a form of corruption that concerns more than just the sympathies. His debasement consists not only in the perversion of his sympathetic tendencies but in a more general debasement. His portrait deteriorates—reflecting the condition of his soul—largely because of what he does, rather than what he feels. Indeed, it is not even essential to the story that he enjoy the pain he causes at all, if in fact he really does. Contrast this case with that of Clag-
gart. His actions also carry weight, but not to the same extent. The key element in his character deficiency is not a tendency to do despicable things, but rather a monstrous inversion of the normal human sentiments. And it is primarily in virtue of this inversion—and not his behavior, which is merely derivative—that we see him as a truly evil man. And while there is no doubt some degree of schadenfreude, malice, and malevolence in Gray’s depravity—and certainly a barbaric lack of concern for the welfare and suffering of others—his crimes are not primarily the consequence of any of these. Rather, the chief character flaw in his case is that of an absent conscience, which leaves him free to pursue his darkest whims unfettered by pesky ethical concerns.

What Dorian Gray’s case shows, then, is how one might descend into the foulest corruption largely through the conscience; one might morally disintegrate, that is, by torpedoing one’s conscience, or failing to pay it much heed. There are doubtless many ways of doing so: convincing oneself that certain heinous deeds are not really so bad, or even that they are good; heteronomy—delegating one’s moral choices to others; subscribing to a perverse ideology; suppressing or distracting oneself from the “inner voice” of conscience; choosing to disregard its counsels; and so forth. With Gray, the author’s ingenious conceit is to have him transfer his conscience to canvas, where it would—or so he thought—never trouble him. However—perhaps in confirmation of my earlier assertions about the difficulty of eliminating one’s moral instincts—Gray cannot forever maintain this psychic exile: the painting’s “mere memory had marred many moments of joy. It had been like conscience to him. Yes, it had been conscience. He would destroy it” (p. 233). But this could have only one outcome, and in the end it was not merely conscience that he snuffed.

4. Conclusion

We need not catalogue all the ways in which one might voluntarily plumb the depths of moral turpitude here. My brief discussion of corruption through the sympathies and the conscience ought to suffice for current purposes; the reader should have little difficulty producing examples involving other evil-constitutive traits such as malice and malevolence. (Consider, for instance, Satan as a paradigm of malevolent corruption.) As we have seen, the very worst sort of person may not be the one we would naturally expect, for two reasons. For one thing, the worst thing about a given person may not be what he does, or is disposed to do, but what he feels. Similarly, those deserving punishment may not always be the ones for whom we ought to have the least moral esteem. Second, the worst kind of person may not be one who possesses the evil-constitutive traits to the greatest extent. The purely evil individual is unquestionably vile, but he lacks an important fault: he does not give himself freely to evil, but is delivered to it. Claggart could not help but be a cruel man—that’s just the way he is. Dorian Gray’s cruelty, on the other hand, is entirely of his own making. Thus, while the latter’s character is probably not, unlike Claggart’s, thoroughly and inescapably vicious, he nonetheless deserves the greater condemnation. For he disappoints reasonable expectation in ways that a Claggart cannot.

5. Notes

1 This paper appeared in American Philosophical Quarterly, 36:2 (April 1999), pp. 131-148. For their insightful and extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I wish to thank Douglas Husak, Peter Kivy, Aaron Meskin, Frederic Schick, James Weigel, Jr., and especially Colin McGinn.

2 See also S. I. Benn’s example of a wicked person who, due to paralysis and aphasia, never does any wrong (1985, p. 796).
Something needs to be said about the inappropriateness of these feelings, since (to use McGinn’s example) we should not take pleasure in the torturer’s happiness. McGinn offers a solution (p. 67), but I shall set aside such niceties here. Also, I am following McGinn in using fairly broad-brush construals of such notions as pleasure, pain and sympathy. Further precision is unnecessary for current purposes.

‘Sadistic’ would be a more elegant expression, but I use it to denote the taking of pleasure in causing pain or harm in another. An antisymathetic disposition almost invariably gives rise to a sadistic one, but is not to be identified with it. Moreover, ‘antisymathetic’ makes clear the polar opposition of this nature to the sympathetic one. Another possibility, ‘antipathetic’, is also unsatisfactory given that antipathy is not simply the reverse of sympathy. (See my discussion of malice in 2.3.2.)

In the paper that inspired me to pursue this topic, Peter Kivy argues persuasively for the motiveless nature of Claggart’s malignity (1980).

An even better example arises in the form of Chad, the lead character in Neil LaBute’s recent film, In the Company of Men. Purposely conceived by LaBute as an evil soul who quite successfully navigates the corporate world, Chad takes considerable and unqualified delight in the extreme suffering of a lonely deaf woman whom he deliberately woos and then viciously drops for the pure joy of it. In the process, moreover, he happily drives his weak-willed friend to mental and professional ruin. What he does is not even illegal—nor should it be—yet his cold-blooded perversions of normal affect leave no doubt about his profoundly evil nature. And pace Eichmann—whose crimes obviously dwarf Chad’s—there is certainly nothing banal about his depravity.

This is not to say that I conceive the theoretical task to be the provision of necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather, the point is just that McGinn’s theory does not tell the whole story.

Dahmer was actually conscientious only in an attenuated or partial sense, for his conscience failed to motivate him sufficiently—hence his appalling diet. My point here is just that he is not completely deficient in conscience, and actually possesses important aspects of it.

It might be objected that McGinn’s account already handles such cases, since a truly conscientious individual would be greatly bothered by his sadistic pleasures. But this objection misses the point: it is not the others’ suffering that bothers him—rather, he quite enjoys that—but his own moral lapses. And McGinn’s account demands that it is specifically one’s reactions to the pain of others as such that makes one evil or otherwise.

Perhaps such a recognition—where this is of morality, not mere convention—is impossible, pace internalism about morality and motivation (affect, etc.). Though it seems even an internalist should grant the point that follows to some extent, I do assume externalism in this paper. For a defense of externalism in the context of evil, see Milo (1984; 1998).

Benn, for one, thinks it is (1985, p. 797).

Remember that in this paper I am decidedly not concerned simply with the question of who most deserves censure or punishment, but rather with whom we ought, with respect to their characters, to hold in lowest moral esteem. For all I have said thus far, emotions might be completely irrelevant to such matters. And surely it would be obtuse to acquit a Dahmer of his crimes simply because he felt bad about them.

In fact, this points to one limitation of the use of literary examples: thoroughly evil characters usually aren’t very interesting, dramatically speaking. Thus artistic necessities may restrict the range of examples available to us. Milo goes further than I do and expresses doubt that “mere mortals” can realize the sort of “satanic wickedness” under consideration (1998, pp. 212-13).

Peter Kivy has suggested to me that it may not be evil as such that Milton’s Satan seeks. Rather, he pursues evil only insofar as it thwartsthe will of God, whom Satan feels has wronged him. This idea seems to me to have merit, in which case Satan himself might not be an ideal example of extreme malevolence.

I am grateful to Aaron Meskin for pointing out some difficulties with an earlier version of this account.

For simplicity I will focus mostly on this trait.

This case is more complicated, since even the most profoundly antisymathetic individual might not reasonably be expected to take an interest in every single case of suffering that comes to his attention. The most plausible reading of this claim, then, is that when he does take an interest in a given case, the reaction is never one of sympathy or indifference.

By ‘moral instincts’, I very roughly mean those traits, such as a sympathetic disposition, that are the specific basis of, and essential to having, a morally decent character.

The Creature of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, also discussed by McGinn, provides a possible example in fiction of how someone who is “born” with the moral instincts might have them conditioned right out of him. The Creature, who is treated quite cruelly in his formative period, arguably has little choice but to form a deep hostility towards others. A de Sade, Nero or Caligula might be an example of evil through a permissive upbringing.
We just saw that this might even be Gray’s condition. Contrary to what one might expect, however, such an individual can actually become evil without realizing it. This appears to have happened to Conrad’s Mr. Kurtz (Heart of Darkness), who recognized his grotesque “error” only as he neared death. What makes his moral corruption culpable is that, but for his negligence, he could perfectly well have seen what was coming and put a stop to it. (Though see Kekes (1990) for a different interpretation.)

Since our interest here is in moral responsibility and not the thoroughness with which one possesses a given trait, the relevant capacity for goodness may need to be somewhat more robust than that which just suffices for not being purely evil. That is, a person could have the (call it “bare”) capacity for, e.g., sympathy, such that she is not purely evil. But other aspects of her psychology (for which, we can suppose, she is inculpable) might rob her of the (call it “robust”) capacity for engaging her sympathies, so that she never has the opportunity for corruption. Perhaps for some reason she lacks the ability to see others in the proper light—she cannot help but view other people as deserving to suffer the greatest misery—and thus cannot sympathize with them, despite having the (bare) capacity for sympathy.

Wilde (1891). Wilde himself characterizes what happens to Gray’s soul as a process of “hideous corruption” (e.g., pp. 132, 135). William Golding’s Lord of the Flies documents a similar process in a group of schoolboys stranded on an island who devolve into savagery before they are rescued. Though less obviously apt an illustration of spiritual corruption than the tale of Dorian Gray, this story offers a chillingly believable portrait of just how easy it can be for ordinary people to sink into the foulest depravity. Of course, non-fictional examples are not hard to come by—e.g., the Holocaust, American slavery.

More likely, however, is that he simply forgot how to be good. For one thing, he was not especially persistent in his efforts, nor was his environment particularly helpful. And he seems to be responsible not only for becoming evil, but also for staying that way. Even if we do not hold him blameworthy for the latter, it is doubtful that any incapacity he did exhibit was so extreme as to qualify him as purely evil; perhaps he could not bear the burden of the guilty conscience with which a return to goodness would leave him. As Gray’s case hints, corruption as I have defined it allows for the possibility that one might be so thoroughly corrupt that one has become (culpably) purely evil. We just saw that this might even be Gray’s condition. Contrary to what one might expect, however, such an individual can actually be less depraved than someone who is merely corrupt. Whereas the former’s culpability ends with his acquisition of the vices, the latter’s carries forward insofar as he is responsible for his continuing failure to change for the better. Again the purely evil character, though she can possess the evil-constitutive traits to a greater
degree, fails to reach the moral depths attainable by an individual who is “merely” corrupt. Even though she might be culpable for her dismal state, a purely evil soul’s responsibility can only go so far.

31 Though see my speculations in section 3.1.3 about the psychological mechanisms of pedestrian sadism. Thomas (1993) provides an illuminating discussion of this question. Also, notice that the mere fact that someone cares greatly for the welfare of family and “friends” need not conflict with his having an essentially evil nature. He might simply care about them in the same way that we all care about our property.

32 After writing this passage I encountered the following lines from Robert J. Lifton’s account of the Nazi doctors who worked in Auschwitz: “atrocity begets atrocity: continuing to kill becomes psychologically necessary in order to justify the killing and to view it as other than it is” (Lifton (1986), p. 211; cited in Cowart (1996), p. 12). And de Sade’s Juliette—though not exactly a normal person—may make a similar point: “When one becomes accustomed to scorn the laws of nature on one point, one cannot find any pleasure unless one transgresses all of them one after the other” (de Sade (1987); cited in Shattuck (1996), p. 280).

33 See Benn’s discussion of heteronomous wickedness (1985, pp. 802-5).

34 Gray probably follows these last two paths (which McGinn points out with respect to the second (p. 127)).

35 In fact, it may be a mistake to view the picture as merely, if at all, a record of the state of Gray’s character. For a conscience ought not only to reflect this but also serve as a mechanism of self-reproach more generally. It therefore must document one’s crimes; and this actually appears to be the sole purpose of the painting, for otherwise it would have deteriorated far more rapidly.

36 Contrast our malicious voyeur (2.2) with a one-time drunk driver who manages to accidentally wipe out an entire family. Though the latter may, save for a momentary lapse, be a paragon of virtue, justice presumably demands some measure of punishment beyond that which would be warranted had she brought harm to no one. It is doubtful that the evil voyeur merits significant punishment, if any at all (though nobody is likely to shed many tears if perchance he were to be beaten senseless).

6. References