

MEDITATIONS ON EVIL

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OFFICE OF FORGIVENESS

I have long struggled to understand evil and the concept of forgiveness in a pragmatic way. Both concepts seem to be too esoteric to achieve full understanding. I sought to further my understanding by researching my own personal moral code and understanding of evil. When I began this art project, I developed an interest in ways people seek forgiveness for “sinful” actions. To me, many methods—a confessional or a prayer—seem arbitrary, for none resolve interpersonal issues in a realistic way.

Here, I am manifesting the abstract the idea of forgiveness into a simulated “real-world setting,” the “Office of Forgiveness.” This rather mundane professional office forgives people for their sins through a complicated bureaucratic process. Each client comes into the office to tell the clerk their sins, which are written down by the clerk. The clerk then composes instructions on how to seek forgiveness for each sin. These instructions are mailed to another participant in the game who is asked to execute them as a method to transfer forgiveness to the first client. This is done for each client and all clients remain anonymous to one another.

Through the use of performance art, drawings, and diagrams, this interactive installation provides absurdist commentary on religious institutions. The work brings into question our notions of forgiveness and evil and presents them in a light-hearted, satirical way.

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Meditations on Evil

These meditations are meant to be read in the order that they were written and presented as such. Each of following is a distilled from deeply personal meditations I preformed about evil. Please enjoy.

Introduction

The following pages include several meditations that I have completed in order to better understand evil¹. The idea of evil is a topic that I found hard to write about as a simple technical paper. I wanted to dive deeper into my psyche², so that is what I did. Each of these meditations were created by sitting down with an essential question and writing down whatever thoughts came about the topic for a period of two hours. I then did my best to distill the massive amount of content generated into more concise works.

Before diving into this topic I read many authors in preparation including Nietzsche, Augustine, Marquis De Sade, Russell and Singer. I did this in order to give me a better idea of others concepts of evil before I delved into my own explorations of the concept. All of the work presents my personal views on evil which are of course influenced by others but are ultimately my own beliefs about evil and its role in my both my own life and in society in general.

What I have tried to represent below is an understanding of evil. Not societies understanding of evil or even a philosophical view but my own personal understanding of evil.

¹ Throughout this text, the kind of evil I am speaking of is moral evil. Moral evil is evil that results from the intention or negligence of moral agents (Todd). Marcus Singer also offers a very clear definition of evil that serves the purpose of this paper very well, it reads as follows "evil' [in this sense] ... is the worst possible term of opprobrium imaginable" (185). Natural is evil for which "no non-divine agent can be held morally responsible for its occurrence." (Trakakis).

² The reason I choose to use a personal approach to dealing with the concept of evil is because I see evil and understanding it a deeply personal thing.

Am I Bad? A meditation

Raskolnikov felt sick but he couldn't say why

When he saw his face reflected in his victim's twinkling eye

-Mountain Goats

One of the most distinct memories I have of feeling bad (or evil) was in Spain. I spent several hours in a doorway near the local bar. I was just drunk enough to feel the sangria in my chest, but I could still think well. I don't know why this girl told me she loved me and ran her hands over my body. At about 2:00 am, I remember she asked me to walk her home. She did, and we kissed in front of the doorway to her apartment. That night when I back to the bar got incredibly drunk went home cried then vomited. Several weeks later I saw the boyfriend of that girl at the same bar. He said he wanted to kill me and I pulled a knife on him. I hated myself for it then as I do now. Although I feel remorse about this I do not think that remorse would stop me from acting differently in the same situation.

I don't think this makes me a bad person³. I would agree that this is morally reprehensible action, but I don't believe I am evil. I think the easiest metaphor for me to

³ This paper often takes a more linear perspective on evil. This is used to make the paper more readable and simplistic. I do not believe that we can place the same linear moral definition of evil on all humans. We tend to "designate a series of moralities in an order of rank that ascends from the plebeian to the noble: some moralities are more suitable for subordinate roles; some are more appropriate for dominating and leading social roles. What counts as a preferable and legitimate action depends upon the kind of person one is. The deciding factor is whether one is weaker,

latch onto with this subject has been a belief my grandmother, a strong catholic always believed: that we are born full of sin and that it is our job to try cleanse this sin from ourselves as to be pure before the eyes of god⁴. I do not believe in god, but I find it easy to believe we are born full of sin.

Not to say that everyone is born bad necessarily but that everyone is born capable of sinful acts. All of us are capable of bad. I am a product of circumstance⁵ as we all are. The example that is most striking of this to me is the Spanish Civil War. During the Spanish civil war families were split and atrocities were committed on both sides in the name of the republic and the fascists. In the town I lived in, the republicans came around one day loaded all of the town's known fascists supporters onto a truck, took them into the middle of the town and shot them all. I was told the town square ran red with their blood by one of the few survivors.⁶

This act would normally be considered morally reprehensible yet those who perpetuated this act are considered heroes these days, a last line of defense against the fascist overtaking of Spain.

sicker and on the decline, or whether one is healthier, more powerful and overflowing with life (Wicks)."

⁴ "Original sin may be taken to mean: (1) the sin that Adam committed; (2) a consequence of this first sin, the hereditary stain with which we are born on account of our origin or descent from Adam (Harent).

⁵ Circumstance in this context is defined as one's material or mental welfare as well as a concomitant that makes in impact on how one acts.

⁶ A memorial to this event can be seen in Villarrobledo, Spain in the *Parque Joaquín Acacio de la Peña* in the form of a battered, vaguely phallic statue.
(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Villarrobledo_-_Parque_Joaquín_Acacio_de_la_Peña_-_Monumento_a_los_Caidos_3.JPG)

These men did a bad thing. They committed acts of evil by murdering these fascists. Yet I cannot say I would not in the same circumstance commit the same atrocity. Making myself complicit in these actions. By all accounts, I feel I am a guilty man for knowing that deep down could have the same intentions as these republicans. I find it hard to be able to truly condemn someone when I believe I am capable of killing these fascists if they threatened my community. I know that I am fully capable of Can I really ask anyone to repent if I would readily commit the same sin?

If I must ask myself if I am bad; the answer would be yes. I am bad but no worse than the rest of us. I believe that none of us are born good or bad. Humans act according to our circumstance, performing what is asked of them. I don't think that anyone can ever be purely good or evil. If we focus solely on the pursuit of eradicating evil, we can get caught up in the pursuit. In an attempt to define and seek out (and eradicate) evil, we can just as easily create evil. By defining bad in black and white terms we risk becoming evil ourselves in order to destroy what we perceive as more "evil" than ourselves. I am ready to forgive those who have perpetrated evil.. I could forgive crimes from theft to murder. Forgiveness is not difficult for me. Forgiveness is an inherent part of our nature. I find it difficult to condemn complete any action that I would just as readily indulge in. If I would commit an action how can I completely condemn it. I feel as though I must hold myself somewhat accountable.

How can I truly condemn a singular death when I wonder if it truly matters. it the death of any of us matter? "if we are to but to live one life. An actor performing a play with no rehearsal" (Kundera) How can truly live or have enough life experience to

truly understand evil? I don't think this is a feasible thing so we must be resolved to the fact that I do not understand evil. I am a man. I am not good or bad. I am merely a result of my circumstances as are we all.

If each action is constantly repeating we are simply cogs in an eternal machine⁷. As stated by Sir Thomas Browne in *The Garden of Cyrus* "All things began in order, so shall they end, and so shall they begin again." (210). If we accept this to be true. It becomes hard to condemn crimes. If each sin is eternal and reoccurring how can we condemn anyone more than the others. Each action becomes equally significant and insignificant. The absurdity of life becoming illuminated in an endless cycle.

⁷Eternal Return is a concept that states that all existence is constantly occurring and recurring in a similar form throughout and across time and space or to quote Milan Kundera "The myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing" (Kundera).

Why Does Evil Exist? Second Meditation

Don't you know there's no devil, it's only god when he's drunk

-Tom Waits

“Evil” exists everywhere, dolphins rape, torture and murder porpoises and cats tease mice for what is believed to be pure enjoyment⁸. Sadistic behavior is present in almost all of nature. One could easily argue that nature and evil must both exist or just as easily argue that it does not exist thereby making nature merely a random alignment of events. I believe that evil is to some extent an intrinsic part of the human experience, a naturally occurring phenomena. All of us have some inkling of what would commonly be considered evil. As I have stated before I believe everyone is capable of evil. Evil is only a result of our circumstance.

I don't need to accept or approve of evil but I do need understand its place in our world. It's helpful to realize that evil is not a quantifiable concept but is a very real concept. Evil matters to me. It's wrong to say that we do not care about evil. Sadistic and grossly bad actions hurt me. They are a detriment to society. I know this, as we all do.

Evil does not exist, at least not as it's classically defined. It is created within the construct our day and age. The Spanish Inquisition and the horrors of the *damnatio ad*

⁸ It is important to acknowledge that, the moral status of animals is very different than that of humans. The fact that animals can appear to make moral claims does not mean mean that they have the same moral code as us. Yet from our perspective, “Moral considerability is not an intrinsic property of any creature, nor is it supervenient on only its intrinsic properties, such as its capacities. It depends, deeply, on the kind of relations they can have with us” (Anderson).

bestias shows of the roman colosseum all seemed ethical and completely justified in their time and circumstance. It is important that we acknowledge that things are bad, but how can we truly recognize that things are evil when we actively participate in them. Even if we commit horrible sins and have remorse for them. That does nothing to correct the fact that we preperated these acts.

It is necessary to explore to our own understanding evil. The reason one needs to understand is so that, they can define a moral code for themselves. Having a moral code I believe is very important, although each of our moral codes will of course be intensely personal.

I believe that everyone is capable of evil acts. It's important to acknowledge this as part of the human experience.

The best that I can do is to define my own understanding of evil. Yet this is hard because I do not believe that true moral evil exists⁹. Defining true evil is not something I can do. I cannot differentiate between the significance of individual actions. Each of them to me is as absurd and as meaningful as the next. Yet I know I need to establish a clear set of morals for myself, if only to keep my own consciousness clean.

So what is evil? I would define evil as an unbalance in ethics or behavior. The antagonistic opposite of good. The simplest way I can quantify this is by saying that good is that which is useful to us. Evil can be defined as something that hinders that which is useful to us (Spinoza). So things that hinder us from achieving that which is good are evil.

⁹ I do on the other hand believe that natural evil exists.

The real, individual, measure of evil is the emotional resonance of actions. The most basic measure of evil is how it how it affects personal happiness and overall social happiness. This is a simplified definition of evil but to me this is easiest way to keep a clear definition of evil, that can keep my consciousness clear.

What is Evil? Third Meditation

Everyone analyzes and desires to understand evil from laymen and theologians to philosophers. In the face of such recent tragedies such as the holocaust and the genocides in Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, we are forced to examine our own understanding of evil in the face of it. There are, at least in my mind, two kinds of evil. A personal kind of evil (ex: Jeffrey Dahmer) and a broader societal evil (ex: genocide). Personal evil is that of the outliers of society who commit acts that we believe to be grossly perverse. While this personal, narrow description of evil brings brings shame and punishment within the system. Contrastingly, societal evil often goes unpunished it becomes outdated at some point.

I argue that societal evil is worse than personal evil. It is necessary to abandon our traditional concepts of right and wrong as these can be dangerous, easily creating biases. Believing in the concept of evil maybe even more damaging as it allows for ideological abuse. It may be impossible to develop a clear and deterministic understanding of morality, in rectify acts of gross evil. If we could develop a clear understanding of evil we could work to prevent it. Although, I don't believe this is truly possible. I am reluctant to attempt to define evil, as this is a dangerous pursuit. The most I am willing to say on this is that I can attempt to define evil for myself and no one else.

Evil is a tricky concept to grasp. I'm not sure that I truly understand it but I hope that one day I will be able to at least have a personal understanding of evil. That is all I can hope

for in my lifetime, maybe by having a clear personal understanding of evil I will be able to contribute slightly to the greater human understand of it¹⁰.

Evil as I have stated earlier is an unbalance that prevents the attainment of good¹¹. When looking at evil as it pertains to myself this is what I find to be the most fitting definition. I think the next logical question, is of course, what is good? Evil is the antagonistic opposite of good. Good is on a base emotional level anything that increases emotional or social well being. Evil, under this definition, is anything that worsens general social or emotional well being.

This simple definition is what helps me the most to rationalize evil and my personal understanding of it. I cannot create some elaborate definition that deals greatly with the true nature of gross evil. All I can do is create a definition which applies to myself. I am content with the definition that I have created.

¹⁰ Not to be pretentious

¹¹ This is not a perfect philosophical definition but (for myself at least) it is the most pragmatic way I can define evil. I am using this definition within this text as to keep a practical definition of evil. I just don't want to go crazy because if I think about evil too much I will go crazy. I DON'T WANT TO TURN INTO NIETZSCHE or a philosophy student both are awful. So as to avoid this I will stick with my somewhat understandable definition.

What Kind of Evil Am I capable of? Fourth Meditation

It is a challenging thing to think about my own capacity for evil. I don't want to think that I am capable of evil. Yet I know that am I. What is lost to me is the extent to which I am willing to commit "bad" acts. Yet I have done bad things (lying, threatening people, etc.). I am sure that I could complete much grosser acts of evil if given the correct circumstance. What is the correct circumstance? Will I ever be able to recognize these circumstances, to what extent of evil could these circumstances drive me.

I think that there are crimes that if I committed they would very heavily weigh on my consciousness (rape, genocide, massacre). To me these crimes seem completely reprehensible and like crime I could never commit. Although, I wonder if these were broadly accepted societal themes. Would I be willing participant? The idea that I could be willing to participate in acts that I deem as so grossly evil is repulsive to me. Yet, it is not unbelievable that if these acts were socially acceptable that I would participate in them.

I think that in the right circumstances there are many crimes that I would be willing to participate in. From robbery to murder, there's a good chance in the right condition I could be drawn into these crimes. Murder I could only see as justifiable when my own life or the life of people I care about¹² is in peril. As I am, as most of us are, a selfish person. I think most crimes I would be willing to commit would be for self preservation and nothing else.

¹² I would define someone I care about as anyone that I've had an intense personal interaction with.

I think a lot of crime can be quantified as such. I don't think that evil is committed for intrinsically altruistic motives. Well at least if I committed a grossly evil crime it wouldn't be.

Another question that comes of for me in this train of thought is what amount of remorse I would feel. I have no frame of reference for knowing what amount of remorse I would feel. So, I cannot speak to this topic much.

Overall, it's truly hard for me to understand what level of evil I am able to achieve without being placed into situations that would allow me to commit evil acts. I think am I like the majority of us, bound to moral guides due to the guidance of society and some sort of deeper internal moral guide that is lost to me¹³. I'm not entirely sure what keep me bound to some sort of moral code but I know that it does exist.

¹³ It is difficult for me to define what my intrinsic moral code and whether or not it even exists is a very debatable subject. I feel as though on some deep level I do have some intrinsic moral code although this may just be, again, a mere product of my circumstance.

Conclusion

I feel as though through these meditations I have sought to explore my own understanding of both personal and societal evil. Whether or not I have accomplished this remain to be seen. This entire writing process dug deeply at me. I explored parts of myself that I never wanted to delve into. I do not believe this was all in vain. I now have a clearer understanding of my personal beliefs about evil as well as what I see to be the way that society views evil. Evil is a multifaceted and complex thing and to explore it from a technical perspective would have been far too limiting. I feel after completing these meditations I understand myself and my psyche in much clearer terms.

I have accomplished a lot from this writing. It has challenged me in many ways from an emotional level to a philosophical level. I hope to continue this exploration of evil throughout the rest of my life.

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