

An Account of the Pervasiveness of Origin Theories of Evil

For ages, philosophers and theologians alike have argued over a question: what is it that drives us to evil? Immanuel Kant presented an argument in his work *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* with the notion of Radical Evil, in which our propensity to evil stems from prioritizing the self over the moral law. 170 years later, Hannah Arendt put forth the concept of the banality of evil as she covered the trial of Adolf Eichmann, claiming that it was thoughtlessness that caused Eichmann to commit crimes against humanity. While one might think that the argument between Arendt and Kant concerning the basis for a fundamental human propensity to evil has little to do with theological concerns, one can see that their arguments harken back to accounts of the origins of evil. These arguments can be used in order to create a fuller understanding of Evil, through the examination of both the content and the scope.

When examining the argument between Kant and Arendt, we look to a specific type of evil: moral evil. While most consider moral evil, that is evil with a distinct agent, to have some sort of malicious intent at the core, there are also situations in which thoughtlessness, or utter lack of motivations, lead to terrible evil. It seems extremely puzzling that both motivation and lack of motivation could play roles in a propensity to commit evil actions, but theories placing emphasis on each have shown remarkable amounts of compatibility.

Regarding intent, Immanuel Kant's theory of "radical evil" bases our propensity towards evil in egotism, and the decision to prioritize oneself over the moral law. As discussed before, our human tendencies to compete with others and look out for our own self-interests can lead us to commit evil deeds. One need only look back to the story of Cain and Abel to see the terrible

evil humans can wreak out of a desire for power and status. In this case, intent does not mean the intent to kill out of sheer bloodthirst, but rather out of desires rooted in our own self love. Kant explains that the self-love we have as animals breeds dangerous vices, some due to our competitive nature while others due to imperatives that we have no control over. The end result of Kant's argument shows that we act in ways that prioritize our own self interests over the moral law, which places intent at the core of evil actions.

On the other hand, Hannah Arendt proposes the theory of the "banality of evil" which has its base in thoughtlessness, or more specifically, a lack of motivation. Her case study in the banality of evil was Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi who stood trial in Israel in 1961. As Arendt covered the Eichmann trial, she became very perplexed at the way in which Eichmann defended himself, saying "the longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else" (Arendt 49). She argues that it was Eichmann's lack of empathetic thinking that allowed him to absolve himself of wrongdoing by playing the part of the good soldier following orders that caused him to commit such terrible actions against the Jewish people.

These contradictory theories are remarkably compatible when a closer examination of Adolf Eichmann is conducted. Arendt claimed that "Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all" (Arendt 287). While she succeeds in explaining that Eichmann was not motivated out of hatred or bloodlust like many of his contemporaries in the Nazi Party, she fails to show that there was no motivation behind Eichmann's actions. Moreover, it is precisely that Kantian self love that drove Eichmann to join the SS and to follow every order he was given to the best of his abilities, ignoring the morality of

his actions in favor of the feelings of satisfaction of having power and status. Eichmann represents a single person displaying the fact that both malign intent and thoughtlessness can drive a person to commit acts of unspeakable evil. This compatibility between arguments also serves to show remarkable similarities to a much older set of arguments, that is the argument over the origin of our propensity towards evil.

One could say that these arguments are distinctly philosophical in nature and do not concern themselves with theological concepts, but in fact the arguments discuss the content of evil, the concepts and actions that gel together to form our understanding when we go to define a person or action as evil. Arendt and Kant put forth arguments that cover a wide span of what the content of evil might be. While it is certainly no small undertaking to understand the content of evil, Understanding the content is only half the battle when it comes to understanding Evil itself, and the missing piece is the scope. The scope of evil, the extent to which it affects us as a species, can be understood through the examination of theories concerning the origins of Evil.

Evil is as old as the human race, and its origin has been speculated on since ancient times. The bible has served as a primary resource when explaining the origins of Evil, but Immanuel Kant puts forth his own explanation in the same text where he discusses the notion of Radical evil. Unfortunately, popular opinion is rather quick to dismiss the idea that a religious standpoint and a what appears to be a secular standpoint could have common ground in an argument, but Kant's theory regarding the origin of our propensity to evil has a remarkable level of cohesiveness with the biblical accounts.

The first account of the origin of Evil can be found in religion. The bible gives us our first theory in the literal beginning, in the book of Genesis. In the story of the Fall, we see Eve

tempted by the serpent to eat of the forbidden fruit, in defiance of the one rule that God had imposed on mankind, and the subsequent punishment of Adam and Eve by God. When God discovers what has transpired in the garden, he punishes Adam for defying him, exclaiming “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Gen 3:17-19). For his disobedience, mankind is punished with mortality and doomed to a life of hard labor. As the book of Romans states "Therefore, subsequent generations of mankind would share in the sin of Adam. Over the ages by the offense of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation." (Romans 5:18) all this, this concept begins to become known as Original Sin, and the Christian religious faith explains that Original Sin is the reason why mankind exists in a state of sin from birth. This existence in a permanent state of sin is the religious foundation for the human propensity towards evil, with large areas of the Christian faith centered around this notion, such as confession and baptism.

Immanuel Kant’s theories in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* seem on the surface to be a departure into secularist philosophy. In *Mere Reason*, Kant gives a different perspective on our fundamental disposition to evil stems from our very nature as a species. Kant provides several different degrees of “self love”, or egotism, that could be responsible for why we commit certain evil deeds. The first degree is what Kant calls “Mechanical Self Love” (*Mere Reason* 6:27), the biological imperatives of self-preservation and propagation of the species. These drives motivate us to act in ways that fulfill these drives, regardless of any reasoning, with

no regard to those who are harmed in the process. The second degree is determined by self love through comparison to others, which can be seen as breeding envy and behavior aimed “to acquire superiority for oneself over others” (Kant 6:28). The desire for superiority over others could explain why we as a species lie, cheat, and kill each other for power and status. Finally, the third degree concerns the weighting of the moral law against the power of choice, in which Kant discusses a certain fragilitas, or frailty of the human heart, in complying with the moral law. As he states, sometimes acting in compliance with the moral law is “not “sufficient incentive to the power of choice” (Kant 6:29).

While at first what we seem to have are two distinct arguments, one based in theology and the other based in secular logic, there is actually a lot of common ground between the two theories. If we examine Kant’s argument as a “scientific” basis for why we commit evil deeds, we can see that the Fall of man is almost a case study for Kant’s theory. Kant speaks of fragilitas as a reason for why we act against the moral law, and with the temptation of Eve by the serpent we see this acted out. Eve is tempted by the serpent to take of the forbidden fruit as it is pleasing to the eye and will make her more like God, and so Eve goes against the moral law (which is identical to divine law at this point) and commits the first sin which dooms all mankind for eternity to lives mired by sin. Further evidence for a link between the biblical and Kantian theories lie in the fact that Kant himself claimed his theories were based off his own interpretation of the bible.

When we examine the origin theories, we also find another striking similarity between the two, in that they both show the universal scope of Evil. Original sin does not vary among the population, it is a state into which all are born into. Kant’s explanation for our propensity to evil

also does not differentiate some people as “less evil” than others. Within the origin theories, there is agreement that we are all Evil. This agreement between the core theological text and the work of a secular philosopher would lend itself nicely to the claim that there is a consensus that we are all evil, which has caused many across history to call this notion into question.

The idea that Kant would agree with the bible on the notion of the scope of evil led a friend of his as well as a fellow philosopher, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, to call Kant’s objectivity into question. In his work *Fallen Freedom: Kant’s Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration*, Goethe says that Kant “had criminally smeared his philosopher’s cloak with the shameful stain of radical evil, after it has taken him a long human life to cleanse it from many a dirty prejudice, so that Christians too might yet be enticed to kiss its hem” (Goethe 17). In saying this, Goethe is questioning why Kant would “slide back” into the Christian notions of the scope of evil. Goethe might argue that it is ridiculous to claim that we are all evil, as it would ignore all the good in the world, in agreement with Pope who claimed “whatever is, is right.”

The problem with Goethe’s argument is that it fails to understand what is meant by the scope of evil. It is true that there is agreement between the Biblical accounts and Kant’s work that we are all evil, but what Goethe does not understand is that Kant’s argument concerns to what degree we are all evil, not that we are all exactly the same kind of evil. Kant argues that on a fundamental level, we are all susceptible to putting our own self interests above the moral law, but he does not go on to say that we will all commit the same evil actions as a result.

To use an example, both Kant and the Bible would claim that both a serial killer and a regular person with no criminal record are evil. They were both born into the world with original sin and are both susceptible to putting their own self interests over the moral law. So why is it

then that one man wakes up and goes to work while the other wakes up and proceeds to murder innocent people? The point is that there is agreement on the notion that we are all evil to a degree, but the severity of our sins, our transgressions against the moral law, will vary from person to person. One cannot use these origin theories to claim that some people are more or less evil than others, only that we are all evil to the same base degree.

To further relate the concepts of content and scope from these arguments, we look to a different example. Adolf Eichmann is often compared to Adolf Hitler when one is attempting to break the link between content and scope. One might ask if Hitler and Eichmann could possibly be considered to be the same kind of evil despite being so different in so many ways. Hitler was the top dog, the orchestrator of the Holocaust and the leader of one of the largest fascist regimes in history, and oversaw the deaths of millions. Eichmann, on the other hand, was just a cog in the greater machine. He was a soldier whose duty was to follow the orders of his superiors. How could it be that these two men are the same kind of evil?

This example, as with the serial killer example, fails to understand that a propensity to evil does not mean that we will all commit the same evil actions. When we act in ways that bring harm to others, so many factors come into play when someone determines how severe an action to take that it may be impossible to truly understand why some who have hatred for the Jews in Germany would decide not to shop in Jewish stores while others would instigate genocide. In this way Hitler and Eichmann are both evil, but have different underlying causes and different levels of severity of their actions. They both fall under the universal scope of evil, but they have a difference in the content and severity of their actions.

The question of what drives us to evil has puzzled theologian and philosopher alike throughout history, but in the attempt to answer the question it has become clear that to begin to formulate an understanding, we must understand the component parts that make up Evil as we know it. With the understanding of both the content and scope, we can begin to formulate a wider understanding of Evil and our propensity towards it. Arendt and Kant's argument initially seem like a modern philosophical debate, divorced from ancient theories about the origin of Evil itself, but through their explanations of the content of Evil, they provide insights into answering two of the most fundamental theological and philosophical questions regarding Evil: What is Evil and to what extent does it affect us? Two arguments, separated by enormous spans of time, yet still united in the attempt to give us a greater understanding of the phenomenon of Evil.

"I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment."