

To what extent is mankind the cause of its own misery?

Evil within in Western civilization

An attempt to save the world by Rosanne Jonkhout

Layout

To what extent can man oversee evil within?

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'Rosanne is an impatient and fidgety little girl. She's smart, makes logical deductions, hears everything that is being discussed, it's not like she forgets anything. She doesn't forget assignments, she simply refuses to do them. Her self-image consists of 'I cannot, so I will not' and 'I can do nothing, and I am nothing'.'

Dr. E. Terlier, E. van der Meulen. 'Bär-Anneke van der Drift practice for children with behavioural problems, research report on Rosanne Jonkhout', 1999 (7 years old).

Limitations of people seem somewhat an obsession of mine. My own work is often about vulnerability, inadequacy or failure, and my theoretical research always bears this as a theme. This paradoxical research into blind spots of man and mankind reflect my fear of my own limitations, and my unawareness of them.

Especially as a child I was anxious and afraid of failure. My grandmother on the other hand, was a happy, flamboyant and spirited woman, always. Her strength and imperviousness served as a role model.

Even though as a child I did not always fully understand the use of the ceremony, the whole family would gather in front of the television to watch the Second World War commemoration from beginning to end every year. My grandmother would make a strong impression on me when I would suddenly hear her sobbing violently in those two minutes of silence.

When she heard people shouting, or cars racing by it seemed, almost like a personal insult to her. She would mutter about her fears on how there will be war again, 'as soon as people forget, and more and more people forget every year'. The terror of what the war did to my grandmother, made sure I secretly vowed to never forget the horrible things she had lived, before I even remotely understood what that meant.

That fact that people are having an increasingly hard time to sacrifice two minutes out of the year, so that they may reflect upon the horrors of the Second World War, quite frankly still both baffles and terrifies me. Like many people, I too have the urge to have everything under control. Everything must be learned and every bit of information and experience has to be caught. To forget is the enemy, things forgotten means things escape and are unlearned. Even the concept of 'not understanding', must be understood, as is the aim of my research.

As a schoolgirl I was determined, and it felt like a responsibility to ensure that the world does not lapse back into the same pattern of hatred, pain and sorrow. So that people like my grandmother never had a reason to cry again. I am under the impression that this research arose from this. Is it education, culture, surroundings or intelligence? I'll just stay in this illusion for a moment: I am, as it seems, still trying to save the world.

A respectful, horrified silence is the only civilized response.

- Adorno, in regard to Auschwitz

It is obviously no mistake that two of the three philosophers I chose, Adorno and Arendt, were Jewish and refugees in the Second World War. I will be proceeding this thesis along the lines of three great post-war thinkers: Theodor W. Adorno, Hannah Arendt and Martha Nussbaum as I attempt to deconstruct evil in the Western civilization.

Do we spread evil by mimicking each others behaviour? Does the smallest of evil in everyday life have a 'snowball effect' and evolve into disasters? Or does great evil, like wars for example, simply exist in the world like an energy beyond human understanding? The word 'evil' has the tendency to sound rather heavy and fierce. Evil can mean a big thing to which we distance ourselves from. This makes it easier to pass it off as though it doesn't apply to you. However, I am most interested in where evil starts. The 'little' evil that gives the first push on the snowball-effect. Where and whether large scale confrontations, wars and social problems can be led back to. Everyday evil; evil that is a responsibility to be in the hands of individuals. Events that we see in the news, and which we don't feel addresses us. Why we all seem to know so well, and love to tell other people right and wrong, but live in the world where the phrase NIMBY¹ exist. But maybe we are not so far removed as we would like to think ourselves to be. This thesis is a search for why we people harm and stagnate others, and (too often) ourselves. To which extend it has to do with stress, emotions or lack of intelligence. Whether you and me are inherently benevolent or malevolent, and part of harm that is inflicted on a daily basis, and to what extend we are aware of it. What are the limits in our understanding of acting rightly?

In a honest attempt to find an answer to the problem of evil, I will try to approach it from all possible angles. In the first chapter, I will research whether the evil we portray might be a projection, consequences of other events. If evil is merely a ripple effect. This by the means of psychoanalysis. In this chapter, I also attempt to state a solid structure to keep this dissertation grounded. In the following chapter, I briefly shine light on the history of evil. philosophical progress of the history of evil will reveal the way we understand it today. The existence and origins of evil itself will be questioned and inquiries are made to uncover whether evil might be something that is inborn, within our nature. I will examine, in chapters three and four, if evil is something we might consciously do with pleasure or something we do without understanding. Lastly, I will argue that the greatest evil may lurk in the most seemingly innocent and smallest places. I will attempt to provide an answer to the problem of evil.

Definition of terms

Our concept of right and wrong is based on a social structure that, albeit relative to change, we all need as to get a grip on how to function within our civilization. If we are to live in each other's vicinity as peacefully as possible, a structure is needed to make sure we understand each other and construct a body in which people will be judged fairly. For example; imagine if you were raised in an environment where your parents would blame you for something your little brother did, and at the same time would reward him for something good that you did. Even though -and maybe especially if- your parents would be aware of this, it would change your entire concept of right and wrong, if it could even exist at all. How would you even function without this concept? Since it is not clear to you what action is good, and which is evil, as you are neither punished for evil nor rewarded for good, you could be completely oblivious to the damage or injure you cause to yourself and people around you.

Since we live in a world where efficiency is maximised, just for the sake of this thesis I will refer to decisions one makes to disadvantage or impair themselves or others in any way, shape or form as 'bad choices'.

The Oxford English Dictionary gives this as a definition of the word 'evil':

EVIL

[MASS NOUN]

1 *Profound immorality and wickedness, (especially when regarded as a supernatural force):*

his struggle against the forces of evil

1.1 *A manifestation of this, especially in people's actions:*
the evil that took place last Thursday

1.2 *Something which is harmful or undesirable:*
sexism, racism, and all other unpleasant social evils

Definitions are not invariable, and much like any truths, the content of the word evil is relative to time and place. An interesting similarity is that this definition by The Oxford English Dictionary follows the same development chronologically in definition as the historical philosophical discourse. Which is a treat that may seem highly logical but it could have just as easily not have fitted my agenda as well as it does. Because; before the period of Enlightenment, monotheism dominated Western civilization and evil was regarded as an immense supernatural, as the first line of the definition also states. Bad things that happened such as outbreaks of diseases and earthquakes, were considered to be at the hand of God as a punishment for our sins. The centre of gravity in the definition of evil shifted during the period of Enlightenment. As point 1.1 with regard to the definition above states; *especially in people's actions*; evil evolved into something at the hands of men, actions of which he himself was accountable for. Instead of being bystanders, from here on, the problem of evil was in the care of man, an enemy in need of defeat. Although evil was still something that was wild and uncontrollable, such as madness or physical assault. Point 1.2; Evil didn't become a *social* problem until World War II, which I will get into in a later chapter.

There are still many ways to go from here, but I've chosen to probe into human development to discover if there are any reasons as to why we do bad things, and if evil may be provoked. A good first tool to tackle this is to start with psychoanalysis, which I will deduct in the following paragraphs.

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Evil exists in all man

The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose.

- Oscar Wilde (1891:303)

Evil was first thought to be something supernatural. Before the period of the Enlightenment, we did not question God's intentions. Whenever a bad thing happened, it was at the hand of God, punishing us for our sins. Since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, human kind was doomed to a short, earthly life of pain and could not obtain eternal life without the mercy of God. Since then, human kind believed that every bad thing that happened to us, was to punish us for bad things we had done. As is the nature of autocracy, Providence ruled our thought. But it only takes so much, up to the point that we are shaken to the core. The 1755 earthquake in Lisbon made a deep imprint on man, and with a city completely wiped out, people started to first focus questions about divine Providence and original sin. Thus it is believed to be to (one of the) spark(s) that ignited into Enlightenment.^{XIV} With so many innocent casualties, the injustice was overwhelming. We could not comprehend why God would be responsible for such a travesty. If God did not spare the innocent, it would mean that either he does not exist or he is irrational and illogical. And, if that, what point would there be to anything?

In Emile, Rousseau therefore came to the conclusion that if God were responsible for the earthquake, he would be incompetent; therefore nature must be autonomous. This left with moral evil; it is when nature and metaphysics were first separated. Natural evil wasn't something you would just wait to happen to you anymore, as now it was supposedly something you let happen, and therefore deserved. Man could actively work on bettering himself; man took evil out of the hands of God, and made it into his own responsibility^{XV}.

This notion by Rousseau is not disrespectfully meant, in contrary, God made everything, the way it is, so beautifully that God need not to look over our shoulder and intervene. God had become obsolete. Prayers and churchly services were not going to absolute you from evil, instead man needed love. A will to be good as to decide that certain choices were bad.

*Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of nature;
everything degenerates in the hands of man.*

- Rousseau, Emile, first sentence

To understand the source of the problem of Evil, we can't go past Kant. Inspired by Rousseau (and Locke), Kant thought the responsibility in the problem of evil was in the hands of men as well. Although his idea of good and evil extended in a different direction.

Evil was something only found in the deepest nature of mankind, since nature itself is not essentially evil. Animalism is neutral, states Kant, the problem of evil is thus: humanity. Evil is something that a man can't prevent; it's something humanity inflicts on one another, by existing amongst each other. His idea of the tendency to do bad is not taught but inborn and is both still morally obligated to be good.

With this notion, Kant first split philosophy from theodicy.^{XVI} Bad behaviour was now something to be inspected autonomously. Man turned his gaze inward before turning to God.

So why did we turn to God in the first place?

Nietzsche wrote that we started finding meaning in evils because suffering and pain without meaning would implicate that life was senseless. We know how to be punished; therefore pain must have meaning. Thinking it must be something that we have done to deserve it, leads to be the instigation- and original source of religion. The problem of evil emerged from those who had projected fears of their own worthlessness onto the world; but giving ideas of an eternal divine after-life, meant to condemn this world. The problem of evil was thus not given but created. This is why God had to die.^{XVII} Nietzsche had wanted this, so we as humanity were to move on and completely reinstate new rules, laws and ways of thinking that weren't based on our current perceptions of good and evil. However, Nietzsche knew early on that the problem of evil is insolvable, for a longing to prove the world to be good taints us all. For even since we have killed Him, the vacancy left behind, left us wanting to fill this need with no less passion than before. This we do by means of trying to give one's own life a purpose, a meaning, which is exactly the problem of evil, we were trying so hard to deny in the first place.

Thus, the death of God is a requirement, however merely this is not enough as we still have a need to be subjected to a larger whole. An entire reset on the way we see the world, is required. Freud also declared the problem of evil to be unsolvable. He said to even try is contradictory, for *'the wildest revolutionaries [are] no less passionately than the most virtuous believers'*.^{XVIII} For even when we discarded God, we are still looking for a replacement, even if we might call it scientific development, to which we are now religiously addicted. Freud describes the need for a God, a lingering need for a father-figure to make us feel safe in the world after having grown into adults. Even more so; not only do we long for a form of paternalism, we fear a power greater than ours.^{XIX}

According to Freud, we have animalistic urges that need to be suppressed for the sake of being accepted in society. It is not ideal since we are simply brutes; we are aggressive and violent, yet society gives us a conscience. The suppression may cause a whole other set of problems but society may be (one of) the best redemption(s) for our violent nature, as it helps us to behave better towards one other.^{XX}

Now onto Adorno, as this is where Adorno really takes the stage. Contradictory to Freud, Adorno believed that it is society that is everything wrong in the world. Adorno thought, like Kant, that animalistic nature is essentially innocent, and that it is culture that cultivates evil. Society breaks one's connection to nature in every human being. For example: a child that keeps being subjected to regulations by his mother. Adorno states that these behavioural limitations (as for example, imposed by the mother figure) leave a wound on the individual separating his need to be accepted in a society, from his actual nature. We are all doomed, for there is no healing from this internal rip. No doubt inspired by Freud, Adorno thought the world filled with unpredictability and sheer mysteries through which we neurotically have to build structures to feel 'free' otherwise, when we lose the sense of control, the fear of the unknowing paralyzes us. We have to be calm and collected, if we want to function 'normally' amongst other people.

We have to seem normal and together to fit into society's standards. This act calls for an abundance of self-control, and we have to suppress a lot of emotions. Society is nothing but a bunch of rules, walls we put up in order to feel safe and in control of ourselves and nature. Everything has a structure, both outside (e.g. earth & space, life, physical- and formal science) and within (e.g. philosophy, social science). Herewith, humankind is obsessively inclined to systemize and categorize everything. Matters that we do not understand are shunned, for we cannot make sense of them. Hereby, we make a break from nature, and the more we try to categorize and dissect nature, the further we drift from the true reconciliation with it.

Though we can never be fully reunited. For however hard we try, the structures originated by society functions like a bicycle we can never learn to un-ride. We are forever

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'Thinking in its non-cognitive, non-specialized sense as a natural need of human life, the actualization of the difference in consciousness, is not a prerogative of the few but an ever-present faculty in everybody; by the same token, inability to think is not a failing of the many who lack brain power but an ever-present possibility for everybody – scientists, scholars and other specialists are not excluded. Everybody may come to shun that intercourse with oneself whose feasibility and importance Socrates first discovered. Thinking accompanies life and in itself the de-materialized quintessence of being alive; and since life is a process, its quintessence can only lie in the actual thinking process and not in any solid results or specific thoughts. A life without thinking is quite possible; it then fails to develop its own essence- it is not merely meaningless; it is not fully alive. Unthinking men are like sleepwalkers.'

- Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*.^{xxxviii}

As discussed in chapter one, Nussbaum and Kant share the opinion that animals have a first and foremost priority; to care for their continued survival. Humans are the only species that let emotions get in the way of its continued survival. Take a moment to contemplate the most extreme evil you know. What seems more intentional than the Second World War?

In her earlier works, Arendt thought totalitarianism to be radical evil, for it rages like a storm at the expense of its own species and the rest of the world. A big, well-oiled machine of evil with Hitler as the key to start the engine. Well, at the end of the Second World War, a searing hole of the reality of the situation left the world uneasy. Humanity sought revenge and needed someone to blame. As it turns out, Nazis did compose a very well structured machine indeed that, once sabotaged, proved very difficult to lay blame on anyone. An evil we have never witnessed before: Nazi's were intelligent, practising efficient forms of evil. After witnessing the trials of war-criminal Adolf Eichmann, Arendt never spoke of 'radical evil' again.

Adolf Eichmann was a German SS-lieutenant-colonel and head of the department of Jewish Affairs in the Gestapo. Eichmann was in charge and responsible for the deaths of unimaginable numbers of people in death camps. When he was caught in Argentina, the world turned its head to listen: more than Eichmann's fate was being decided, Arendt has said that the entire war was on trial.^{xxxix} What Arendt witnessed, was not a man that seemed to be filled with hatred and anger at all. He was actually painfully boring. A man who never stopped to think whether his actions were moral, who just wilfully followed orders and cared about his own career above the lives of other people.

Arendt was frequently criticized as defending Eichmann, but this was misread. With astonishing little to go on regarding blame, it became apparent that by dividing tasks, the origin of evil was difficult to derive to one acute source. Arendt stated that an entire re-evaluation was needed, for a whole other level of evil became apparent: Radical evil targets the very moral distinctions itself. Working in an industry that is designed to exterminate people, hands were kept clean by assigning workers in death camps the task of executing the dirty work. It was unheard of: forcing Jews to collaborators of Nazi crimes. The Nazi's denigrated the prisoners in Auschwitz to the point where they were dehumanized to worthless objects.

Arendt is loosely stating that in some way or other, we are all guilty for what happened at Auschwitz, we could have all stepped in, and not remained innocent bystanders^{xl}. We all have a duty to uphold human dignity.

Conclusion

What are the limits of human understanding?

Of course Plato thought the senses were the limit of human knowledge and should be discarded. But as it turns out, mistrusting the senses, moved way down the priority list. Adorno states that the deeper you search, the easier you get lost; which is the least bit comforting. Once sight of the overview is lost, is it possible to be conclusive? Is there point in taking the next step? Won't the original motive be lost? Does this mean that reading a dissertation may function better as a breath of fresh air in the problem of evil than reading whole books? Or am I kidding myself into this illusion while not even a few pages ago, I explained how Nietzsche warned so clearly about the idle hope for a purpose.

As it turns out, we might not be as almighty as we think ourselves to be. Evil can come from any direction. So now what? We have been unjustly treated, and are upset because of it. At the same time, we cannot treat other people with the same fate without infecting the world with more evil, or even bottle up these frustrations without committing evil to our own personal progress. We can't just stay dormant as so to avoid making any bad decisions either, and Kant taught us that we can't even trust our reliable shopkeeper anymore! Even trying to make sense of events, like Auschwitz is fruitless for we would have to use the same structures of thought, that was used to give birth to Auschwitz. After Auschwitz even the notion of fighting ignorance is no longer the comforting answer to the problem of evil anymore.^{xii} How do we move forward?

The issue with the problem of evil is that there is not just one source. Evil is not to be exterminated, it only shatters. As when you finally corner the monster in your bedroom closet; it splinters into thousands of cockroaches, hiding in every crevice, in plain sight - Which is the moment you realize you should not have intervened at all. We ascertained that evil is like a fungus in our society^{xiii}, there is no uprooting it and if we can't finish it permanently, we are going to have to stay vigilant. Hiding from our limitations and stupidity will only make the problem of evil grow. If we want to avoid another Auschwitz, we cannot afford the luxury to hide from our moral duty as human beings. We can't blame the devil, or brush off our behavioural patterns at the hand of psychoanalysis. Using the past as an excuse for present choices, or as not to behave to the norm of a society, creates a rift through which evil seeps in. Which brings me back as to why the Second World War commemoration (and other awareness events) are so important.

Nature revolves around survival, evolving to adapt to ever changing factors to ensure the continued existence of the species in question. Mankind is the only deviation in that it continues to destruct itself and its kind. Self-destructiveness, in both as an individual or humanity as a whole, is our individual mission. The best solution is really to stay alert and open to problems that arise and exist, for the most dangerous evil is banality. We wish to be all-knowing; we wish to be god.^{xiii} But if we weren't evil, or stupid, there would be no human freedom. It is better not to know; otherwise we wouldn't be able to question it. We need the answer to the problem of evil to stay a mystery, as it keeps us striving for the solution. We need it, to not be bad.^{xiv}

Our faith is not scientific knowledge and thank Heaven it is not!
- Immanuel Kant (1978: 2.2)

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Auschwitz offered a moral lesson about vigilance for anyone willing to hear.
- **Susan Neiman (2004: 286)**

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Notes

^I Not In My Backyard

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^{III} Wijsman, Ella (2013). Psychologie en sociologie. Nederland: Noorhoff Uitgevers B.V.

^{IV} At the hands of Anna Freud

^V Gemes, Ken (2009). Freud and Nietzsche on Sublimation. Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, p.42 <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/philosophy/our-staff/academics/ProjectMuseJNS38FreudandNietzscheonSublimaton.pdf>

^{VI} Wijsman, Ella (2013). Psychologie en sociologie. Nederland: Noorhoff Uitgevers B.V.. p. 44.

^{VII} Wijsman, Ella (2013). Psychologie en sociologie. Nederland: Noorhoff Uitgevers B.V.

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^X Nussbaum, Martha (2000). Women and Human Development; The Capabilities Approach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 6.

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^{XII} Loutfi, Martha Fetherolf (2001). Woman on gender and work; What is equality and how do we get there?. Geneva: International Labour Office, p. 62. http://www.iiav.nl/epublications/2001/women_gender_and_work.pdf#page=62.

^{XIII} Aswell as the, in this instant less relevant, point 10, 'control over one's environment'

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- ^{xxxiii} Neiman, Susan (2004). *Evil in Modern Thought; an alternative history of philosophy*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 81.
- ^{xxxiv} Dutch: stom, dom, dwaas. English: dumb, stupid. German: dumm, stumm, dumb etc; ranging origins meaning deaf, mute, senseless, stunned, dizziness
- ^{xxxv} <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dumb>.
- ^{xxxvi} <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stupid>.
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