

EXTREMITY OF VICE AND THE CHARACTER OF EVIL

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ABSTRACT: It is plausible that being an evil person is a matter of having a particularly morally depraved character. I argue that suffering from extreme moral vices—and not consistently lacking moral vices, for example—suffices for being evil. Alternatively, I defend an extremity account concerning evil personhood against consistency accounts of evil personhood. After clarifying what it is for vices to be extreme, I note that the extremity thesis I defend allows that a person could suffer from both extremely vicious character traits while possessing some modest virtue as well. By contrast, consistency theses rule out this possibility by definition. This result does not suggest that extremity accounts are flawed, however, since, as I argue, the thesis that evil people must lack moral virtue altogether effectively defines evil people out of existence and prematurely privileges skepticism about evil personhood. Ultimately, I contend that an extremity account is most consistent with common intuitions about putative evil persons as well as plausible assumptions about aretaic evaluations of character quite generally.

the main fallacy which prevents people from recognizing potential Hitlers before they have shown their true faces . . . lies in the belief that a thoroughly destructive and evil man must be a devil—and look his part; that he must be devoid of any positive quality; that he must bear the sign of Cain. . . . There is hardly a man who is utterly devoid of any kindness, of any good intentions. . . . Hence, as long as one believes that the evil man wears horns, one will not discover an evil man.

—Erich Fromm (1973, 432)

I. INTRODUCTION

Any plausible account of evil personhood must take seriously the above observation that many evildoers, even the perpetrators of great atrocities, are in some

respects rather similar to morally decent folk (Morton 2004).¹ In what follows, I articulate and defend an account of evil personhood that is consistent with Fromm's observation. In particular, I argue for an "extremity account" of evil personhood and against "consistency accounts" of evil personhood.²

II. A MODEST PROPOSAL AND TWO THESES ABOUT EVIL

Since Hannah Arendt (1963) introduced the locution, it is common enough to take the "banality of evil" for granted.³ It is certainly a mistake to suppose that banality is necessary for being evil: Idi Amin and Charles Manson are hardly boring or ordinary, but they are certainly not exonerated from the charge of being evil on those grounds. More plausibly, Arendt's ruminations on the banality of evil are part of an attempt to reconcile the assumption that Eichmann is both evil and disturbingly similar to many of we morally decent folk.

Arendt's discussion of Eichmann is not uncontroversial, and her assumption that Eichmann is evil can be challenged. One problem with supposing that Eichmann is evil is that while he is surely a morally bad person, he surely could have been much, much worse; the animus Eichmann lacks, Hitler has in spades. But if Hitler is worse than Eichmann, it is because he is a morally worse *sort* of person than Eichmann—that is, because Hitler has a qualitatively different (and qualitatively worse) sort of character. A number of philosophers have suggested that describing someone as "evil" is qualitatively different from describing them as "bad" or even "very, very bad" (de Wijze 2002; Garcia 2002; Garrard 2002; Haybron 2002b; Steiner 2002). And a number of philosophers agree that being evil amounts to having a certain kind of character (Garrard 1998; Haybron 2002b; McGinn 1997; Perrett 2002). This reasoning is captured in the following thesis I dub 'the modest proposal':

(MP) The evil person is the morally worst sort of person; for all persons, if x is a morally worse sort of person than y , then y is not evil, and y is evil only if x is not a morally worse sort of person than y .

(MP) does not imply that there could be only one evil person since it asserts that a person is not evil unless he or she is the morally worst *sort* of person. The point is simply that a necessary condition for being evil is that one could not morally worse than one is.⁴ Thus, those who suppose—with Arendt—that Eichmann is evil must also suppose that Eichmann is at least as bad a sort of person as Hitler if Hitler is evil.

Suppose, plausibly enough, that 'evil' is a superlative such that it is rightly used to describe only the morally worst sort of person. It would seem that only the cruelest and meanest and most hateful of us could be evil, since someone who was less so could be a worse sort of person, and hence is not evil by (MP). Such reflection supports *the extremity thesis*:

(ET) A person is evil in virtue of possessing extremely morally vicious states of character.

Similarly, if evil persons are the morally worst sort of person, then they surely must lack morally redeeming qualities. After all, someone possessed of morally redeeming qualities has a morally worse counterpart who lacks those qualities. Such reflection supports *the consistency thesis*:

(CT) A person is evil in virtue of consistently lacking morally virtuous states of character.

Ultimately, I argue that (ET) is correct and that (CT) is not—that is, that extreme viciousness suffices for being evil and the consistent absence of moral virtue is neither necessary nor sufficient for being evil.⁵

(CT) and (ET) both may appear obviously false. Some putative evil persons seem to possess morally redeeming features. Arendt herself acknowledges that Eichmann was not completely without compassion and kindness, noting that he took steps to help some Jewish relatives to emigrate and that he deeply and publicly regretted shaming “one of his favorite Jews” (Arendt 1963, 46–47). But if evil persons can possess such virtue, (CT) is false. Arendt also notes that Eichmann fell wildly short of the expectations of the Nuremberg Court, arguing that despite the efforts of the prosecution, it was clear he was no “monster” (Arendt 1963, 54). Indeed, Eichmann’s banality surely rested partly in his lack of animus, precisely the sort of thing that might be expected of an extremely vicious person. But if evil persons can lack such vice, (ET) is false.

Much depends on what alleged counter-example to (CT) and (ET) is considered; if there is good reason to doubt that Eichmann is evil, then he is no counter-example. Further, reflection on other putative evil persons supports both (CT) and (ET). Consider a particularly extraordinary example of a sociopath: Robert Alton Harris. One of Harris’s companions on death row suggests that Harris “doesn’t care about life, he doesn’t care about others, he doesn’t care about himself” (Watson 1993, 130). Harris’s sister, Barbara, claimed that “every grain of sweetness, pity, and goodness in him [was] destroyed” (Watson 1993, 134). If these descriptions of Harris can be taken at face value—if Harris *entirely* lacked care for himself and others, if *every* grain of goodness in him was destroyed—then he would *consistently* lack virtue as (CT) suggests. Harris’s lack of care and concern also suggests that he is extremely callous and cruel and thus suffers from extreme vices as (ET) suggests.

Any account of evil personhood that implies (CT) is a consistency account and any account of evil personhood that implies (ET) is an extremity account. Both accounts merit further consideration.

III. CONSISTENCY ACCOUNTS OF EVIL PERSONHOOD

Consistency accounts allow that evil persons may have significant non-moral virtues: just as a cat-burglar might be clever and a philanderer might be conscientious, an evil person might be resolved or charming or witty (Haybron 2002a). (CT) is nicely captured in Dan Haybron’s suggestion that evil persons “lack any significant moral virtues, having no ‘good side’” as it were (Haybron 2002a, 63). Haybron

sometimes characterizes evil persons as those persons lacking morally appropriate motivation. Using an apt phrase, Haybron claims that being appropriately motivated by the good is to be “aligned with the good” and that evil persons are “unaligned” with the good and therefore consistently inappropriately motivated by the good (Haybron 2002a, 71). It is fairly widely agreed among virtue ethicists that the virtues are multi-track dispositions, that virtues dispose their agents to perform certain actions in certain circumstances for certain reasons with certain feelings, and so forth (Hursthouse 1999). So understood, someone who consistently has no desire to act rightly when the opportunity arises consistently lacks virtue, since she consistently lacks dispositions partly constitutive of virtue.

Eve Garrard is also committed to (CT). Garrard suggests that evil persons suffer from “a profound cognitive defect” (Garrard 2002, 331). In particular, evil persons suffer from “a total failure to see that certain considerations are [moral] reasons at all” such that an evil agent “*can’t even see* that there is a reason of the most important kind against his action” (Garrard 2002, 330–331). Further, the pain and suffering of an evil person’s victim “make[s] no claim on him at all that he can hear” suggesting an “inability to hear the victims’ screams as significant” (Garrard 1998, 53–54). Quite literally, Garrard’s evil person is unable to perceive moral reasons.

Garrard’s characterization of evil persons is problematic, however. Garrard’s claim that evil persons cannot perceive moral reasons suggests that evil people fail to be *receptive* to moral reasons. A failure of *receptivity* involves failed connections between moral reasons and an agent’s belief about those reasons, as opposed to a failure of *reactivity* that involves a failure to translate moral beliefs into morally appropriate action (Fischer and Ravizza 1998). If, on Garrard’s view, evil people are not even receptive to moral reasons, then Garrard’s view yields the implausible result that knowingly engaging in wrongdoing exculpates one from being evil; after all, for an agent to know that her act is wrong she must, roughly, be aware that there is some moral reason for her not to act as such. But then she is receptive to moral reasons and not evil on Garrard’s view.⁶

Fortunately, a more charitable interpretation of Garrard is available. Garrard also claims that an evil person is “completely insensitive” to the reason-giving force of another’s pain (Garrard 2002, 330). One way to be insensitive to another’s suffering is to be oblivious to it, but an insensitive person might instead be aware of another’s suffering and disregard its moral significance. That latter sort of insensitivity suggests a failure of reactivity—that is, a failure to appropriately translate moral beliefs into action. And if virtues are understood as multi-track dispositions, a consistent failure to be reactive to moral reasons implies a consistent failure to act rightly for the right reasons, a disposition partly constitutive of virtue. So, on the most plausible interpretation of her view, Garrard’s evil person consistently lacks virtue and she is committed to (CT).

Haybron suggests that (CT) can be further refined insofar as he distinguishes weak and strong varieties of consistency accounts: weak consistency accounts allow

that an evil person might have some “morally insignificant” virtue—that is, virtue that does not make a difference to the overall moral quality of her character—while strong consistency accounts preclude even morally insignificant virtue (Haybron 2002a, 70). So, two different versions of (CT), one weak and one strong, should be distinguished:

(WCT) A person is evil in virtue of consistently lacking *morally significant* virtue.

(SCT) A person is evil in virtue of consistently lacking moral virtue *entirely*.

(WCT) allows that an evil person may be a bit kind or generous, but not so kind or generous that the overall moral quality of his character improves. Suppose that on some few occasions, Hitler exhibited some slight kindness in his relationship with Eva Braun, acting kindly and for the right reasons with the right feelings, and so forth, suggesting he possessed some limited virtue. (WCT) does not rule out the possibility that this Hitler is still evil, perhaps because his slight virtue makes no difference to the overall moral quality of his character, though he is clearly not evil on (SCT).

Interestingly, Haybron himself rejects (WCT) noting that mere ne'er-do-wells—persons who genuinely care about the good of others but who are never adequately motivated to act accordingly—lack significant virtue but are wrongly regarded as evil (Haybron 2002a). And that seems right, suggesting that (SCT) is the most plausible thesis available to proponents of consistency accounts. Thus, in what follows, I suppose that (SCT) is the definitive consistency thesis and that consistency accounts fail or succeed on its merits.

IV. EXTREMITY ACCOUNTS OF EVIL PERSONHOOD

Recall (ET): a person is evil in virtue of suffering from extremely vicious states of character. No philosopher that I am aware of has explicitly defended (ET); hence, it is somewhat unclear just what extreme viciousness amounts to. Fortunately, proponents of (ET) can take advantage of recent work on the virtues. Thomas Hurka suggests that there are “degrees” of virtue and vice and that their degree is a function of both their *intensity* and the *value of their object* (Hurka 2001, 58). Proponents of (ET) can thus plausibly explicate the extreme degree of some vice either in terms of its intensity or in terms of the value of its object.

First, consider the suggestion that vices are extreme if they are sufficiently “intense”: the more intense, the more extreme. The intensity of an attitude is most plausibly understood in terms of its capacity to motivate its agent (Hurka 2001). Other things being equal, the more a character trait disposes its agent to perform some requisite action, the more intense that character trait. Extreme vices would thus be those vices that greatly dispose their agent to perform some requisite wrong action. It is this first sense of ‘extreme’ that Haybron seems to have in mind when he claims that an evil person who is cruel will tend to have “cruel propensities to the highest degree” since cruel propensities will most obviously

manifest themselves in cruel actions (Haybron 2002a, 63). So, other things being equal, if Rosencrantz greatly and regularly wants to inflict suffering on Hamlet while Guildenstern weakly wants to do so, then Rosencrantz's cruelty is more extreme in this first sense.

Following Hurka, however, vices can be extreme if their object is sufficiently disvaluable: the more morally disvaluable the object, the more extreme the vice. Other things being equal, if Rosencrantz is unjust while Guildenstern is merely apathetic, Rosencrantz suffers from a more extreme vice in this second sense since his vice has a morally worse object. The worst moral vices—those that are *extremely* bad—would be those that have the most morally disvaluable objects.⁷ Vices are extreme in this second sense insofar as they are correlated with especially disvaluable objects. The objects of both malevolence and rudeness are both morally disvaluable: the object of malevolence is some state of affairs in which undeserving persons are harmed and the object of rudeness is some state of affairs in which persons are offended. But surely the object of malevolence is of great moral disvalue and greater moral disvalue than the object of rudeness. Thus, malevolence, but not rudeness, is an *extreme* sort of vice.

It is of course possible that vices might be extreme in one sense but not the other; someone might be malicious but never motivated to act accordingly and someone might be merely rude though greatly motivated to act accordingly. Probably, a person who suffers from vices that are extreme in only one of the above two senses is not evil. (ET) is most plausible when the vices of the evil person are extreme in both senses—that is, when she suffers from the morally worst sort of vices to significant degrees.

A plausible consequence of (ET) should be noted. It would be a mistake to identify the evil person with someone disposed to act wrongly, since someone might act wrongfully while feeling shame or regret or remorse for her actions, emotions that are inconsistent with having an evil character. But if virtues and vices are understood as multi-track dispositions, evil persons with extreme vices will not just be disposed to act wrongly but also to act for wrong reasons, to have the wrong feelings and so forth. Further, it is probably the case that virtues and vices are grouped together in important ways. I discuss this point further below, but it is rather plausible to suppose that someone who is unjust will also be miserly, that someone who is malicious will also be callous, and so forth. Thus, the possession of some extreme vice will tend to bring with it other moral vices with similar constitutive dispositions. Insofar as evil persons suffer from extreme vices, their characters will likely be well-rounded with other morally dubious character traits as well, which is probably just what we expect of evil persons.

(ET) also helps to make sense of the above suggestion that Eichmann is not clearly evil because Hitler seems to be a morally worse sort of person than Eichmann. If Hitler is malicious and hateful while Eichmann is “merely” callous and selfish, then Hitler's vices are extreme in a way that Eichmann's were not because Eichmann's vices are not among the morally worst. If Hitler has a qualitatively

worse moral character than Eichmann, then, by (MP), Eichmann is not evil whatever else is wrong with him.

(ET) seems well supported by examining concrete examples of putative evil persons. Focus again on Robert Alton Harris. Harris, accompanied by his brother Daniel, killed two sixteen year-old youths after stealing their car, shooting one in the back and chasing the other down a hill, shooting him four times. While Daniel reacted with the expected shock and horror, Robert contented himself with eating the slain youths' hamburgers and apple turnovers, laughing as Daniel became nauseated. Harris then proposed that he and Daniel pose as police officers and inform the parents of their victims that their sons had been killed, laughing while recounting how he "really blew that guy's brains out" (Watson 1993, 131–133). Harris's indifference and callousness was not slight, but *grave*. Insofar as Harris seems to have relished hunting his youthful victim, he is not just a bit malevolent and sadistic, but *very much so*. Insofar as Harris suffers from some of the morally worst sort of vices and suffers from them to significant degrees, Harris suffers from extreme moral vices.

(ET) seems to get other cases right; in particular, while the proponent of (ET) can agree that paradigmatic examples of evil people—like Hitler and Harris—really are evil, she can be genuinely ambivalent about difficult and controversial cases. For example, some accounts of Eichmann suggest a rather different sort of person, still callous but not to the mythical degree suggested by Arendt (Cesarani 2004). (ET) allows for ambivalence about whether or not Eichmann really is evil precisely because it is unclear just how intense his vices are. Since I take it that it is generally a virtue of an analysis that it does not artificially do away with controversial cases, I suppose that it is a virtue of (ET) that it permits sincere ambivalence with respect to controversial cases of putatively evil people.

V. TWO CHARACTER STUDIES

While I argue that (ET) gets cases right, Haybron argues that (ET) actually gets cases wrong and that (CT) fares rather better. Haybron's arguments depend upon two character studies, both of which I consider below.

Haybron first considers Tony Soprano, fictional New Jersey *Mafioso*. Soprano plausibly suffers from extreme vices as suggested by his morally wrong acts: Soprano cheats on his wife Carmela repeatedly; he goes to the hospital with the intent of smothering his mother to death; on several occasions, he takes advantage of his friends in his usury business; he assaults and batters and kills for the sake of *la Cosa Nostra*, twice killing individuals he previously claimed were his best friend. Still, Soprano often enough displays a good side: on a tour of college campuses, Soprano shows genuine warmth and love for his daughter (and later kills a mob informant he stumbles upon); he seems to genuinely regret some of his behavior, at least for a while; he is genuinely repulsed by some actions of others. If Soprano's immoral actions imply he has extreme vices, his right actions suggest that he is not entirely without virtue.

Haybron next considers Chad, protagonist of Neil LaBute's film *In the Company of Men*. While Soprano's actions suggest that he is not without virtue, Chad does nothing to suggest that he has any virtue whatsoever. Chad and his spineless co-worker, Howard, charm a naive young deaf woman with the express purpose of making her think that she has betrayed them both. Chad and Howard intend to leave her as revenge for the abuse each has suffered from their respective girlfriends. Chad prematurely informs her of their plan and takes relish in her suffering. Howard ultimately loses his job to Chad, partly through Chad's sabotage. In the final scenes of the movie, it is revealed that Chad and his girlfriend never separated and that he merely wanted to "really hurt someone." Along the way, he humiliates and abuses fellow co-workers and takes every opportunity to engage in whatever misogyny he can. Chad appears morally corrupt to the bone, utterly lacking a morally good side, consistently unaligned with the good.

Given Soprano's extreme vices, he should be evil according to (ET). But that, Haybron thinks, is the problem, since Soprano is not credibly viewed as evil (Haybron 2002a). Haybron offers two arguments for this conclusion. He claims that, first, morally decent people are disappointed in Soprano at times; however, evil persons do not disappoint morally decent people since no one expects evil people to act any better. Of course, evil persons might disappoint if it was mistakenly thought that they were good persons—the neighbors of serial killers are often enough surprised to learn that their neighbor who seemed "so normal" was capable of murder. Still, upon learning that they are evil, little that they do disappoints. Second, the members of Soprano's immediate family are basically good people whom Soprano fits in with reasonably well; however, evil people do not fit in with good people (Haybron 2002a).

I suspect that neither of Haybron's arguments is sound. Focus first on the suggestion that evil people do not fit in well with morally decent people. Whether evil people do not fit in well with morally decent people surely must be determined empirically; it is difficult to see how it could be shown *a priori* that they could not get along. However, it is easy to explain the hope that they could not. Perhaps getting along well with evil persons comes too close to sanctioning or sympathizing with them. The insistence that decent people could not get along well with evil persons might then be an attempt to avoid cognitive dissonance, to avoid admitting that willing consort with evil persons ever happens. But precisely for those reasons, the thesis that decent people do not fit in well with evil people is suspect.

In any case, it seems rather unlikely that Soprano does fit in well with his family: besides cheating on his wife and threatening to kill his mother, he fights with his uncle Junior and his sister Janice, kills his cousin Tony and his nephew Christopher, and alienates his children. It is also far from clear that Soprano's family is composed of basically good people: Carmela is every bit as ruthless as Soprano himself and she rarely shows regret for the lavish lifestyle she lives, knowing full well where the money comes from; no one at the funeral of Soprano's mother

has a kind word to say about her; Junior is a narcissist who tries to have Soprano killed; Christopher is a racist, a murderer and a drug-addict who beats his fiancé. Perhaps it is not surprising Soprano fits in so well with his family, if he does; we could hardly imagine a more morally bankrupt lot.

It is also worth wondering whether evil persons never disappoint morally decent persons: if evil people are not without virtue, they might. Arguably, part of what makes Soprano such a terrible person *is* the fact that he could have acted better than he did, as evidenced by his right actions. Familiarly, most incompatibilists about moral responsibility insist that a person is an apt candidate for reactive attitudes like blame and resentment only if he could have done otherwise. If calling someone “evil” is a means for exercising the reactive attitudes then evil persons would have to be capable of doing otherwise and acting better: Soprano’s modest virtue does not disqualify him from being evil, but would rather be *essential* to it. To be sure, my case against (SCT) does not rest on incompatibilist intuitions, but those intuitions are not clearly implausible.

It is also far from clear that Chad fails to suffer from extreme vices. Chad suffers from some of the morally worst vices, including malice and malevolence, and suffers them in spades. Haybron doubts that Chad is extremely vicious as required by (ET), given that “whether he frequently does serious harm is questionable” and that Chad “does not represent the kind of danger that a Tony Soprano represents” (Haybron 2002a, 69). However, (ET) does not imply that an evil person must frequently cause serious harm or represent a significant danger, even if it requires that he is disposed to do so. And while it is plausible to suppose that evil persons will tend to perform the morally worst sorts of actions, it does not follow that they must or even that they will do so particularly often. So neither Soprano nor Chad is a clear counter-example to (ET) and Chad does not singularly confirm (SCT).⁸

VI. UNITY OF THE VIRTUES AND VICES

By definition, (SCT) rules out the possibility that someone could both be evil and possess some virtue. But since (ET) only demands that evil people suffer from extreme moral vice, it does not rule out the possibility that someone could be both evil and somewhat virtuous.⁹ So, (ET), unlike (SCT), is consistent with Fromm’s caution against supposing that evil persons must be devoid of any positive quality, utterly lacking in kindness and good intentions. Proponents of consistency accounts might dismiss Fromm’s warning, but only at a cost. (SCT) prematurely lends credence to evil-skepticism—that is, the thesis that either no one is actually evil or that very, very few actual people are (Russell 2006). Admittedly, it would beg the question against evil-skepticism to suppose that many actual evil persons exist, but since very few actual persons lack moral virtue entirely (SCT) all but reduces evil personhood to a mere conceptual possibility. Even Haybron supposes that there is something dubious about effectively defining evil persons out of existence (Haybron 2002b).

However, on a familiar line of reasoning that goes back to Plato and Aristotle, moral virtue and vice are mutually incompatible so that this alleged advantage of (ET) is incoherent. Worse, the fact that it implies something incoherent is a reason to dismiss (ET) altogether.¹⁰ So, some reflection on the relationship of the virtues and vices is called for if (ET) is not to be dismissed as implausible.

I propose to consider the assumption that moral virtue and vice are incompatible. On this view of things, a person cannot be courageous unless she is also, *inter alia*, prudent and generous and temperate; generally, possession of any one virtue implies possession of them all. Call this the “unity of the virtues” thesis or (UV):

(UV) A person can possess some moral virtue just in case she possesses every other moral virtue as well; failure to possess any moral virtue implies a failure to possess every other.

If (UV) is correct, then no one is just but impatient, honest but unkind, and so forth. (UV) still finds adherents (Annas 1993; McDowell 1998) though it is often enough rejected (Flanagan 1991; Foot 1983; Hurka 2001; Williams 1985). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider its merits, note that the proponent of (SCT) had best not embrace (UV). The model of the virtuous person suggested by (UV) is neither easily nor commonly realized: most of us suffer from some vices and, by (UV), most of us would have to lack moral virtue altogether. But then, by (SCT), most of us are evil and that result is simply implausible.

Still, whatever reasons there are to reject (UV), it is not terribly plausible that the virtues are *entirely* disunited—that someone could be genuinely kind but also unjust, stingy, intemperate, and cruel, for example. An argument that the virtues are not entirely disunited is available if we take seriously the thought that the virtues are grounded in multi-track dispositional states: some dispositions are bound to be constituents of more than one virtue. For example, the disposition to act in ways that benefit others is tied up with kindness but also with generosity and justice, and reliably telling the truth to others is tied up with honesty but also with helpfulness and magnanimity. In broad strokes, some virtues are consistently correlated—and hence, not entirely disunited—with others because they share constitutive dispositional states. Similar remarks apply to the vices: some dispositions are constituents of more than one vice and thus some particular vices are consistently correlated with others.

The reasoning of the above paragraph suggests that some virtues and vices are incompatible since their constitutive dispositions are incompatible with one another: if kindness is partly constituted by a disposition to help others while stinginess is partly constituted by the absence of such a disposition, then kindness and stinginess are incompatible, for example. But not all such dispositions are incompatible; even if courage and timidity are constituted by clearly incompatible dispositions, courage and patience are not. But then it should be possible for the same person to suffer from both extreme vice and modest virtue—say, extreme timidity and modest patience—so long as those they are not constituted by incompatible dispositions.

Another argument suggests that modest virtue and extreme vice are compatible. Interestingly, while he defends (UV), Aristotle also seems to claim that a person might be virtuous in his own affairs without being virtuous—that is, just—in his affairs with others (Aristotle 1999, 69).¹¹ Virtues and vices might be limited to particular domains, where a domain is understood as an area of important practical concern that can be psychologically isolated from other practical concerns (Badhwar 1996). For example, a person might be generous in his dealings with family and friends but not in his dealings with strangers and thereby possess and exercise generosity in one domain but not another. Now, the dispositions that are constitutive of any particular state of character may be more or less fine-grained: a person may count as being generous partly in virtue of being disposed to help others or in virtue of being disposed to help others in great need; a patient person may be disposed to tolerate others generally or children in particular. So long as various domains can be compartmentalized from one another—that is, so long as it is psychologically possible to care especially about one area of concern but not another—it may well be possible to possess enough of the dispositions constitutive of some virtue that one could rightly be said to be generous or kind or patient *tout court*.

What, then, to say of someone who exercises kindness towards his fellow citizens but appears strongly disposed to cruelty towards foreigners? In everyday moral parlance, we might say that he is *both* generous and cruel, shorthand for the more complicated (and coherent) assertion that he is both generous within a domain and cruel within a domain. It is strained to say that he is not kind at all, given his dispositions to act and feel rightly towards his fellow countrymen. But if his xenophobia leads him to be exceptionally cruel, it is surely reasonable to suppose that his kindness is modest, at best. But then he plausibly possesses both extreme vice and modest moral virtue.

If the arguments of this section are correct, there is no implausibility in claiming that someone could suffer from extreme vice and modest virtue. But (ET) is more than simply plausible; there are good reasons to suppose it is true.

VII. FOUR ARGUMENTS FOR (ET)

At least four arguments imply that (ET) is correct, that (SCT) is false, or both. I consider them individually.

A. THE NO-MOTIVE ARGUMENT

It is rather plausible to suppose that evil persons are disposed to act wrongly; any plausible account of evil personhood will clarify which psychological properties and states are constitutive of evil character in virtue of which evildoing is no accident (Card 2002). But then any account of evil personhood that fails to account for the fact that evil persons are so motivated is incomplete at best and implausible at worst.

If (ET) is correct, then it is no surprise that evil persons are motivated to act wrongly: being evil is a function of suffering from moral vices to rather significant degrees according to (ET), and being disposed to act wrongly is partly constitutive of having those vices. But if (SCT) is correct, evil people may well have no motive to act wrongly. On Haybron's account, evil persons might be unaligned with the good but not "aligned with the bad"—that is, they need not possess any motivation to cause harm or wreak havoc or otherwise act wrongly. Similarly, Garrard's evil person might be completely insensitive to moral reasons for action, but not "sensitive" in the least to immoral reasons for action—that is, they need not be receptive or reactive in the least to reasons to act wrongly. Generally, if (SCT) is true, being disposed to act wrongly is extrinsic to evil personhood—at best a contingent matter—such that it is an accident that evil people engage in wrongdoing.

In fairness, Haybron is aware of this objection. Against Garrard, he objects that her account "seems not to allow for more virulent strains of wickedness; those for whom the undeserved suffering of others is not silenced, but is rather a source of attraction" (Haybron 2002b, 281–282). Indeed, Haybron allows that "Evil persons could . . . be actively opposed to the good" (Haybron 2002a, 71). Obviously, such amendments go beyond anything like (SCT). But such amendments push the consistency theorist towards (ET). For it is unlikely that evil persons are only *slightly* motivated to perform actions that are *somewhat* wrong; more likely, they will be significantly disposed to perform morally wrong actions and particularly horrible ones at that. But a stronger desire to perform terribly morally wrong actions at least suggests an agent who suffers from the morally worst vices to significant degrees—that is, that she suffers from extreme vice.

B. THE DIFFERENCE ARGUMENT

It is not only evil persons who suffer from vices; many merely morally bad people—people who are not quite evil, however bad they are—suffer from them, and so do many of we morally decent folk. *Something* distinguishes evil persons from merely morally bad people, since merely morally bad people could be worse and, therefore, are not evil by (MP). A plausible account of evil personhood explains why and how the character of the evil person is qualitatively worse than the character of the morally bad person, for example.

(ET) can account for the difference. Evil people are not merely vicious according to (ET): they suffer from the morally worst sort of vices, vices like maliciousness and cruelty. They may also be slothful or rude but those are not the vices that justify calling them "evil." Of course, morally bad people might also be malicious or cruel, but probably not to the degree that evil persons are; evil persons are not just somewhat malicious or cruel but very much so according to (ET). By contrast, morally bad persons and morally decent persons may suffer from vices that are extreme in one of the two relevant senses but not both. The fact that (ET) allows for a principled way to distinguish between morally different sorts of persons is a reason to accept it.

C. THE NO-CHANGE ARGUMENT

(SCT) implies that if a person has any moral virtue then she is not evil. Thus, according to (SCT), if a formerly evil person comes to acquire some slight moral virtue, then she is no longer evil whatever else is wrong with her. So, (SCT) implies that a slight change in an evil person's aretaic properties yields a significant change in the overall moral assessment of her character.

However, it is not generally true that slight changes in a person's aretaic properties yield significant changes in her overall character. If a moral saint—more on them in a moment—becomes just a bit more caring or selfless, her overall moral character might not improve if only because she is already such a morally worthy person. Similarly, if she acquires just a bit of impatience or rudeness, her overall moral character still might not change if only because she is already so morally good: acquiring just a slight bit of a comparatively trivial vice does not “poison the well,” as it were.

For similar reasons the overall moral assessment of an evil person need not change simply because she comes to acquire a bit of moral virtue. Individual readers will have to consult their intuitions here, but imagine as vicious a person as can be imagined—as spiteful, hateful, malicious, malevolent, uncaring, unjust, callous, and cruel a person as can be conceived—with absolutely no morally redeeming qualities whatsoever; call him *V-1*. Then imagine that such a person acquires just a bit of virtue; call him *V-2*. By (SCT), that person is no longer evil, whatever else is wrong with him or her. Thus, by (MP), the consistency theorist must say that *V-1* is a morally worse sort of person than *V-2* since she supposes that the former, but not the latter, is evil. But not only is it not generally true that a slight change in a person's aretaic properties must yield a significant change in the overall moral quality of her character, it is not true in this case. It is absurd that such an exceptionally vicious person is exculpated from the charge of being evil by becoming just a bit honest or patient, for example. (SCT) implausibly suggests that a significant change in a person's character emerges when there is no such change; if the acquisition of just a bit of moral vice need not poison the well, acquisition of moral virtue need not clear the water either.

(ET) fares better, by contrast. Since both *V-1* and *V-2* suffer from extreme vice, (ET) implies that they are both evil, whatever slight moral virtue they also have: their extreme vices are sufficient to poison the well and justify describing them as evil.

D. THE MIRROR ARGUMENT

I offer this last argument in favor of (ET) more tentatively. (ET) allows us to make sense of a thesis that is sometimes defended in the literature on evil, namely, that the character of the evil person *mirrors* the character of the moral saint—that is, that the morally worst sort of person and the morally best sort of person mirror one another. Call this the “mirror thesis” (Barry 2009). No small number of philosophers

endorse something like the mirror thesis: David McNaughton (1988, 135) suggests that the evil person is “the mirror image of the virtuous person”; Colin McGinn (1997, 62–63) proposes, roughly, that while morally good persons derive pleasure from the pleasure of other morally good persons and pain from their pain, evil persons derive pleasure from the pain of others and pain from their pleasure; Hillem Steiner (2002, 185) claims that the actions of evil persons are the “negative counterparts” of the actions of moral saints; even Haybron (2002b, 274) suggests that the moral saint is “the positive counterpart to the evil person,” while Garrard (1998, 49; 2002, 329) suggests that the evil person occupies a space “at the other end of the moral spectrum” from the moral saint. The problem is that the mirror thesis is a metaphorical characterization that needs to be rendered literal. I submit that proponents of (ET) can offer a plausible literal rendering of the mirror thesis while proponents of (CT) cannot. So, if there is any plausibility to the mirror thesis, then the fact that (ET) suggests a plausible literal rendering speaks in its favor.

While I have been considering extremity and consistency theses about evil persons, there are similarly extremity and consistency theses about moral saints as well. Initially, consider a consistency thesis concerning moral sainthood that parallels (CT):

(CTS) A person is a moral saint in virtue of consistently lacking morally vicious states of character.

Haybron appears to endorse something like (CTS) insofar as he claims that the moral saint “has no significant moral flaws or vices, but is perfectly virtuous or nearly so” (Haybron 2002b, 274). (CTS) thus resembles (CT) insofar as it implies that the absence of vice suffices for being a moral saint—that is, the morally best sort of person.¹² Consider also an extremity thesis concerning moral sainthood that parallels (ET):

(ETS) Moral sainthood consists in the possession of extremely morally virtuous states of character.

(ETS) is most plausible if ‘extreme’ is understood unequivocally such that it has the same meaning as it does in (ET). Thus, the virtues of moral saints, so understood, are extreme in the sense of being the morally best sort of virtues and in virtue of being possessed to significant degrees. (ETS) resembles (ET) insofar as it implies that the possession of extreme virtue suffices for being a moral saint. Susan Wolf seems at least sympathetic with (ETS) in her seminal discussion of moral sainthood. For example, Wolf claims that that a moral saint “will have the standard moral virtues to a non-standard degree” and to “an extreme degree” (Wolf 1982, 421). But Wolf also claims that “a necessary condition of moral sainthood would be that one’s life be dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole” (Wolf 1982, 419–420). A person possessing such a commitment is, *inter alia*, generous and just and these are surely among the morally best sort of virtues. And since her life is “dominated” by such a commitment, she is not just somewhat generous and just but very much so.

Note also that while (CTS) precludes the possibility, (ETS) allows that even moral saints might suffer from some vices. And that is one problem for (CTS). For while there might be disagreement about just who counts as the morally best sort of person, most if not all putative moral saints suffer from not insignificant moral failings and corresponding vices: Martin Luther King was a philanderer; Mother Teresa confessed that for some period of time she lost her faith and on occasion declared suspect motives for caring for the hungry; Oskar Schindler's motives may not have been entirely pure; Gandhi was estranged from his family and arguably engaged in exploitive sexual relations with women to test his ascetic resolve; Socrates neglected his family; Jimmy Carter, a deeply pious and religious man, admitted to having lust in his heart, and so forth (Flanagan, 1991; Hamilton 1999). It is likely the case that (CTS) reduces the moral saint to a mere conceptual possibility, just as (SCT) all but defines evil persons out of existence.

There are other objections to (CTS)—objections similar to those against (SCT)—that suggest that it should be rejected: (CTS) surprisingly allows that moral saints lack virtue altogether since the consistent absence of vice suffices for moral sainthood; it does not suppose that moral saints are the least bit motivated to act rightly so that being disposed to help others or pursue justice is an extrinsic and contingent matter for moral sainthood; it implausibly implies that a perfectly virtuous person is no longer a moral saint if she becomes just a bit impatient or timid. As such, (CTS) needs to be rejected as an account of moral sainthood.

By contrast, (ETS) fares rather better. Putative moral saints surely possess and exhibit extreme virtue: King was not just somewhat courageous but *extremely* so; Mother Theresa was not just somewhat compassionate but *extremely* so, and so forth. Even Haybron allows that it is the "*profound* compassion" of the moral saint that impresses us (Haybron 2002b, 274). This observation also suggests an argument in favor of (ETS), one that resembles an argument for (ET). Moral saints should be distinguished from merely morally decent persons. Morally decent people certainly possess some virtue and they may even possess some of the morally best virtues, but while they may be somewhat compassionate and loyal and courageous and so forth they are surely not virtuous to the degree that moral saints are. So, (ETS) suggests a principled qualitative difference between decent people and moral saints: the virtues of moral saints are extreme in a way that those of merely decent people are not. Further, (ETS) suggests a reason to suppose that moral saints are rightly regarded as the morally best sort of person even if they suffer from comparatively slight moral vice: since the virtues of moral saints include the morally best virtues possessed to significant degrees, they dwarf and outweigh their comparatively slight moral vices rendering them morally insignificant to the overall evaluation of their moral characters.

Now, if, as I have argued, (ET) is a plausible account of evil personhood and (ETS) is a plausible account of moral sainthood, then there is a clear sense in which evil persons and moral saints mirror one another: the character of the evil person is marked by extremely vicious states of character while the character of the moral

saint is marked by extremely virtuous states of character. So, (ET) supports a literal reading of the mirror thesis. No similar literal reading is available to proponents of (CT). So, if the mirror thesis seems at all plausible, then the fact that (ET) allows us to make literal sense of it while (CT) does not is at least some reason to embrace an extremity account of evil personhood.

VIII. CONCLUSION

It is perhaps no surprise to learn that evil persons suffer from vices, but if my arguments above are sound, then it is extreme viciousness that suffices for being evil. Whether any actual people are evil remains an open question. For all that has been said, it may be that no one actually possess a sufficiently vicious character that he or she deserves to be described as evil and whether anyone does possess such a depraved character is a matter to be determined empirically. Still, (ET) represents an important start in enquiry into evil personhood and it suggests that Fromm was right: if being evil does not require curved horns and cloven hooves, neither does it preclude some kindness and good intentions.

ENDNOTES

1. A number of social psychologists are at pains to make this point. See Staub 1989; Waller, 2002; Zimbardo, 2007.
2. Dan Haybron introduces the terms “extremity account” and “consistency account” in Haybron 2002a, 63.
3. Stephen Whitfield boldly declares “Arendt had coined a phrase that has become an inescapable part of the language of modern intellectual life” in Whitfield 1981, 471.
4. My suggestion that the evil person just is the morally worst sort of person is at least sometimes met with skepticism. One anonymous reviewer fairly captures the typical concern in the following way: “just as it is always possible to be or do something worse than one is or has done, it is always possible to be a worse sort of person. . . . I think that you could always add something to this sort which would make it even worse.” By contrast, I do not think that it is always possible to be or do something worse than one is or has done. I have the intuition, and I suspect that many others do too, that our moral evaluations of some actions and persons simply “bottom out.” For example, it strikes me as plausible that there are some actions and events that are so harmful that we would not judge them to be still worse if we learned that they actually caused somewhat more harm; it is not uncommon to talk about the Holocaust this way. Similarly, it strikes me as plausible to suppose that some people are so vicious that that we would not judge them to be still worse if we learned that they were actually somewhat more vicious than we realized; it is not uncommon to talk about Hitler in this way. I pursue this matter further below.
5. Henceforth, I use ‘virtue’ and ‘vice’ to refer to the moral virtues and vices unless otherwise noted.
6. Such an agent may still be blameworthy, as one reviewer correctly notes, but that does not affect my objection here: perhaps genuinely feeling regret or remorse or shame at one’s

wrongdoing implies that a person is not evil but surely not deliberately and knowingly acting wrongly in the first place.

7. Hurka suggests, plausibly enough, that taking pleasure in another's agonizing pain is worse than taking pleasure in another's mild pain, presumably because another's agonizing pain is a comparatively worse object. See Hurka 2001, 58.

8. To clarify, I do not suppose that I have established that Soprano is evil, only that he does not clearly fail to qualify as evil. Perhaps Soprano's vices are sufficiently extreme in the relevant senses; if so, then he is evil. But perhaps Soprano's modest moral virtues do sufficiently mitigate his viciousness; if so, then he is not evil.

9. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for forcing me to clarify here.

10. As an anonymous reviewer suggested to me.

11. Aristotle 1999, 1129b31–1130a14.

12. A number of medieval philosophers, including Anselm and Augustine, appear to endorse a consistency account of moral sainthood insofar as they claim that the most saintly and blessed are those who are *non posse peccare*: not able to sin. However, it is unclear that the doctrine of *non posse peccare* ranges over human beings like us rather than divine or blessed creatures.

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