EVIL

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Introduction

"Evil" is a highly contested word. President George W. Bush polarized opinion in his 2002 State of the Union address, when he called the nations of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea an "axis of evil", and declared "Evil is real, and it must be opposed". The claim that evil is real strikes some people as being obviously true, but to others it seems to reflect a naive, chauvinist, or medieval moral outlook. Commentators have offered a range of analyses of this disagreement. Some see it as a clash between moral realists, who take wrongdoing seriously, and moral relativists, who treat morality as nothing more than an arbitrary social convention. Others see it as a clash between right wing conservatives, who want to impose free market capitalism across the world, and left wing liberals, who champion the cause of minority rights and the method of diplomacy. Alternatively, it could be described as a dispute between religious fundamentalists, who think that they possess moral certainty, and atheists, who are tolerant and humble in the face of inter-cultural disagreement.

None of these common analyses get at the core of the disagreement over the use of the word "evil". We cannot understand the dispute by jumping straight into arguments about cultural relativism and moral objectivity, or about the costs and benefits of realist foreign policy, or about the existence of God and supernatural forces. A group of people who agree that a particular action—say, the torture of a prisoner by soldiers—is egregiously morally wrong might disagree over whether this action is evil. This suggests that we need to step back and think carefully about the concept of evil itself. What does it mean to say that evil exists, or that an action is evil, or that a person is evil? What is the difference between an action's being merely wrong and its being evil, or the difference between a person's being bad and his being evil? Can the concept of evil be explanatorily useful, and, if so, what can it help to explain?

In this book I aim to answer these questions concerning the nature of evil, and to show that the concept of evil has a legitimate place in contemporary secular moral thought. In Chapter One: *The Secular Moral Concept of Evil* I address the questions of whether the concept of evil is exclusively religious or supernaturally loaded, and

what it means to say that evil exists or that evil is real. It is obviously true that many religious believers speak of evil, and that some atheists are unwilling to use that word because of what they see as its religious connotations. Yet many other atheists use the word "evil" both in condemning and in attempting to explain atrocities such as the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda, and the actions of serial killers such as Ted Bundy and Dennis Rader. I argue that the concept of evil, like that of forgiveness, is available for use by theists and atheists alike, in contrast to an exclusively religious concept such as that of sin. Evil exists in the way that courage, malice, or honesty exist; not as a mysterious supernatural force that is capable of taking over a person, but as a character trait and as a moral property of actions.

Having situated evil within secular morality, I will move on to apply the philosophical method of conceptual analysis to evil. In Chapter Two: *Evil Action* I argue that we ought to separate the concepts of evil action and evil person, and first give an account of evil action. A plausible account of evil action should be constrained to some degree by what ordinary people think and say about evil. I offer a list of folk intuitions about evil, and show how recent philosophical accounts of evil action can be classified according to which particular intuitions they accept and which they reject. I propose that all evil actions are extreme culpable moral wrongs. There could be no such things as trivial evils, or excusable evils, or evil actions that we morally ought to perform, and we should reject any philosophical accounts of evil that fail to respect these claims.

While it is relatively uncontroversial that these conditions are necessary for evil action, it is not clear exactly what kind of moral extremity is required. In Chapter Three: *Evil, Extremity, and Incomprehensibility* I assess various competing answers to this question. Some philosophers have claimed that evil actions must be extremely harmful, or that evil actions are extreme in the sense of being incomprehensible. I will reject both of these claims, arguing instead that there can be harmless evil actions, and that many evil actions are explicable and are comprehensible even to some morally decent human beings. Although not all evil actions are extremely harmful, I contend that all evil actions are connected in at least one of a specifiable variety of ways to actual or possible extreme harms. These actual or possible harms need not be maximally harmful, nor so extreme as to be life-wrecking. When it comes to specifying the degree of extremity required for evil action, the best we can do is to be guided by our intuitions concerning specific examples, and give a rough location of the threshold on the spectrum of harms.

There is much recent disagreement between philosophers on the question of whether there is a psychological hallmark of evil action. In Chapter Four: *Thick and Thin Accounts of Evil Action* I catalogue the competing views on this issue. Hannah Arendt and her followers believe that an action is evil only if it is an

extreme culpable wrong, but they think that evil actions could flow from a very broad range of motives. Arendt suggests that evil actions can be banal, in the sense that some evildoers are psychologically ordinary and unremarkable. An evildoer need not act out of malice or with sadistic pleasure, and need not know that what he is doing is morally wrong. This gives rise to what I call the psychologically thin account of evil action; the view that there is no psychological hallmark of evil action, and that an action is evil if and only if it is an extreme culpable wrong. The psychologically thin account is rejected by several contemporary philosophers. Some advocates of the alternative psychologically thick accounts of evil action directly contradict Arendt's claims regarding banality, and argue that an action can be evil only if it is malicious, or only if it is accompanied by sadistic pleasure, or only if the agent does what he knows is morally wrong. Other advocates of psychologically thick accounts think that Arendt is right to claim that evils need not be malicious, sadistic, or defiant, but that there is a complex psychological hallmark of evil action nonetheless.

In Chapter Five: *Assessing Thick and Thin Accounts* I move on to consider which, if any, of these competing accounts of evil action is correct. It is not clear that we could decisively favour one account on the grounds that it fits more closely with folk intuitions regarding which specific actions count as evil, because there is significant disagreement amongst the folk over particular cases. However, I contend that accounts which posit a complex, hidden psychological hallmark of evil action diverge substantially from folk thought about evil, and lack other benefits that might have outweighed this cost, and thus should be rejected. While it is true in general that we ought to favour those philosophical accounts that pick out the most useful conception, or the conception that maps onto an important natural kind, these criteria do not give us reason to favour the thin account over several of its thick rivals, or vice versa.

In Chapter Six: *Conceptual Pluralism about Evil Action* I consider two comparatively sophisticated philosophical arguments that might help us decide which out of the remaining viable theories of evil action is best. The first argument is that there is a sharp, qualitative difference between evil actions and ordinary wrongs, and that only certain kinds of thick account properly reflect this qualitative difference. It is not clear exactly what it would mean to say that there is a qualitative difference between evils and non-evil wrongs. I accept that a weak version of this thesis is true, but the weak version does not give us grounds to favour a thick over a thin account of evil action. The stronger version of the qualitative difference thesis, which would favour some accounts over others, turns out to be indefensible. The second argument that I consider in Chapter Six is that a psychologically thick conception of evil is morally dangerous and leads to mistakes in our moral judgements; mistakes that are easily

avoided by those who employ a thin conception of evil action. This argument, too, is unconvincing. Advocates of a thick account of evil action can avoid falling into these moral errors so long as they reject the claim that any particular evil action is morally worse than any particular non-evil wrong.

I maintain that an action is evil only if it is an extreme culpable wrong, and that we should reject any account of evil action that does not fit with this claim. I also believe that we should reject the view that there is a hidden, complex psychological hallmark of evil action. This still leaves several viable accounts of evil action on the table: the thin account, according to which an action is evil if and only if it is an extreme culpable wrong, and various folk versions of the thick account, according to which an action is evil if and only if it is an extreme culpable wrong that is also malicious, or sadistically pleasurable, or defiant. The arguments considered in Chapters Five and Six do not give us a decisive reason to think that any one of these accounts is the single best account of evil action, or that any one of these accounts picks out the actions that really are evil. Rather than arbitrarily favour one of these viable accounts, I advocate a restricted conceptual pluralism with regards to evil action. All of us should agree that if an action is evil, it is an extreme culpable wrong, but it is rationally permissible for a person to stipulate that by "evil action" she will mean "malicious and extreme culpable wrong", and rationally permissible for others to stipulate that they will mean "defiant extreme culpable wrong", "malicious and sadistic extreme culpable wrong", or simply "extreme culpable wrong".

Having given my account of evil action, I will move on to consider what it would take for someone to count as an evil person. Many philosophers agree that not every evildoer is an evil person, but that some war criminals and serial killers, for instance, are evil. It is not clear how we ought to characterize the difference between the merely vicious person and the evil person. Chapter Seven: *Aggregative Accounts of Evil Personhood* begins with a list of common intuitions about evil personhood, which will help us assess competing accounts of evil personhood. These accounts fall into two broad classes. The first group are the aggregative accounts, according to which an evil person is someone who has done enough evil. The second group are the dispositional accounts, according to which an evil person is someone who is disposed to do evil. In Chapter Seven I aim to develop the strongest possible version of the comparatively neglected aggregative account, before assessing its plausibility. Unfortunately, even the most sophisticated aggregative accounts cannot make sense of the fact that evil personhood can play a role in explaining evil action. Aggregative accounts also fail to allow for some possible kinds of moral conversion, and do not fit with important intuitions concerning luck and evil action. Each of these failings would be avoided by a dispositional account of evil personhood.

Despite its obvious strengths, a dispositional account of evil personhood threatens to produce two counterintuitive consequences. If an evil person is someone who is disposed to perform evil actions, then it is possible for there to be evil persons who have done nothing wrong because their disposition has not manifested itself in action. It is not clear that such a blameless person would deserve our strongest moral condemnation. Moreover, experiments performed by social psychologists suggest that a very large proportion of us are disposed to perform evil actions when instructed to do so by authority figures. There is also ample evidence from history that in some societies the ordinary citizens have been led to perform horrible atrocities. If evil persons are those who are disposed to do evil, then it seems that a very large proportion of us will turn out to be evil. In Chapter Eight: *Dispositional Accounts of Evil Personhood* I set out these objections to a basic dispositional account, and explore a variety of more sophisticated versions of the dispositional approach that might preserve the intuition that evil persons are comparatively rare. I reject the view that evil persons are bad in every respect, and propose instead that evil persons are those who are strongly and highly-fixedly disposed to perform evil actions when in conditions that favour the exercise of their autonomy. In other words, an evil person is someone who is markedly likely to do evil when he is allowed to do what he wants to do, and whom we cannot easily change into a good person by using everyday techniques such as moral reasoning.

In Chapter Nine: *Evil Feelings* I consider whether the dispositional account of evil personhood should be modified to allow for the possibility that someone could be evil merely in virtue of having evil feelings. For instance, malevolent quadriplegics and sadistic voyeurs take great pleasure in the extreme suffering of others, but they inflict no harm themselves. Yet people of these kinds are disposed to perform evil acts of appreciation, I claim, and hence can be accommodated within the existing dispositional account. It is more difficult to evaluate persons who have involuntary or conflicted evil feelings. I will argue that our answer to the question of whether such persons are evil does not depend on whether their feelings are part of inverted moral values, or whether their feelings can be narratively integrated into the story of their lives, but whether they repudiate their evil feelings. Persons who are strongly and highly fixedly disposed to have unrepudiated evil feelings are evil.

Having set out my account of evil action, evil feeling and evil personhood, I will conclude by responding to a range of objections to the use of the concept of evil. In Chapter Ten: *Evil and Explanation* I try to show how and to what extent the concept of evil can be used in explanations of actions. Some philosophers have argued that the claim "He did it because he was evil" is vacuous or pseudo-explanatory. I defend the view that the concept of evil action and the concept of evil personhood

have roles to play in our explanations of some actions, although they are limited roles, and evil does not provide a complete explanation for any action. Moreover, I argue that we have reason to believe that there really are some evil persons, who are not only strongly disposed to perform the worst kind of wrong actions, but are beyond redemption, for practical purposes, and should be treated as write-offs.

In endorsing the concept of evil, I am not suggesting that we should accept each and every folk claim about evil. In Chapter Eleven: *Doing Away With Evil?* I concede that the concept of evil is often misused, sometimes with disastrous effects. My recommendation is that we continue to use the concept of evil, but that we do so cautiously, and that we disambiguate and clarify our claims that certain actions and persons are evil. Much of our moral discourse, including talk of freedom, virtue, and weakness of will, is equally vague, ambiguous, and in need of clarification. As philosophers, though, we should aim to engage with the folk discourse that occurs outside of philosophy. One significant advantage of analysing and clarifying our talk of evil, rather than attempting to replace it, is that doing so will aid our ability to engage with these everyday moral disagreements.

There are many important questions concerning evil that I do not address in this book. I do not set out and defend a general systematic normative ethical theory identifying which actions are right and which are wrong. Rather, I assume that we have a fairly good intuitive grasp of which actions are wrong, and focus instead on the differences between wrong and evil, and between vice and evil. Obviously there remain significant and often recalcitrant disagreements over which specific actions are wrong, but I hope that my account of evil will be compatible with the various views about wrong action that are most popular amongst philosophers. This book also does not contain a metaethical argument for moral realism as opposed to non-cognitivism, error theory, or relativism. Rather, I assume either that moral realism is true, or that, if some other metaethical theory is correct, it will be compatible with our continuing to care deeply about morality, our deploring murder, torture, and rape, and our continued use of first-order moral discourse to condemn wrongdoers and to persuade others to share our opinions. For instance, I think that non-cognitivists and fictionalists should care about the difference between wrong and evil, and might argue about whether Mao Zedong or Jeffery Dahmer were evil.

Another important task I do not undertake here is that of identifying the dividing line between those human beings who are so mentally incompetent that they fall below the threshold for moral responsibility, and those who properly are held responsible, despite the depravity of their desires. This is a very difficult question, and answering it in detail would be beyond the scope of this book. Nonetheless, it is plausible that very many of the most extreme wrongdoers are capable of reasoning,

planning, and carrying out their intentions, are aware of the moral standards to which we hold each other, and hence are morally culpable for their deliberate and voluntary actions, as horrible as those actions might be (cf. Stone 2009, 35–6). Where "illness" is used merely a label for depravity, illness is no excuse. Where compulsion to act comes from within the agent's own character, compulsion is no excuse. Even if there are some cases in which it is not clear whether a particular serial killer is morally culpable or merely mentally ill, there remain plenty of cases in which extreme wrongs are performed by rationally adept persons who should be held responsible.

Some of the recent philosophical, psychological, and historical literature on evil aims to identify the causes of extreme wrongdoing and the causes that contribute to the development of extreme vice. In pursuit of this goal, authors including John Kekes, Claudia Card, David Cesarani, Daniel Goldhagen, Christopher Browning, David Velleman, and Herlinde Pauer-Studer, Michael Stone, and Phillip Zimbardo offer detailed case studies of particular societies or situations in which great wrongs were committed, or of particular human beings who have committed atrocities. These issues too are deeply important, and I draw upon the work of some of these authors at various points in my argument. However, I do not aim to identify the specific causes of evil in this book, nor do I give detailed or elaborate descriptions of specific evil actions and evil persons. I intend to delineate the concept of evil by considering a very broad range of examples, some of them sketched in comparatively minimal detail. While it is true that often we cannot fully understand why a specific evil action occurred without locating that action in its detailed context, it is also true that theories of evil action can be skewed and incomplete if they focus too closely on only one kind of example of extreme wrongdoing. The breadth of my approach is intended to remedy this tendency and provide a comprehensive overview of the main philosophical issues concerning evil.

It is plausible that many of the most harmful wrongs are performed by groups of human beings acting together, while each individual member of the group herself remains ignorant of the entire action, and perhaps does nothing that would be particularly harmful if considered in isolation from the activities of the group. In this book I do not attempt to answer the important question of whether a corporation or an institution could be a morally responsible agent, or could be evil. Nor do I explore in any detail the relationship between responsibility for individual actions and responsibility for collective or corporate actions. It is clear that people who contribute to such actions can be culpably negligent and morally responsible for participating in extreme wrongdoing. I simply assume that this is true, but I do not provide any detailed explanation of the nature of corporate action or its moral properties.

Finally, it is important to note that in defending the usefulness of the concept of evil I am not defending every declaration that certain actions or persons are evil. Some recent discussions of evil have been undermined by the assumption that people who disagree over whether evil exists are likely to be diametrically opposed on all significant moral and political questions. By clarifying what we mean when we talk about evil, we will be better able to understand exactly what is at issue in these disputes, and better able to sort merely linguistic disagreements from substantive moral disagreements. It is obviously unrealistic to think that any philosophical account of evil will lead to complete agreement on which particular actions or persons are evil, but my hope is that my account will help us to understand disputes about evil, and will make egregious misuses of the concept of evil stand out in greater relief.

1

The Secular Moral Concept of Evil

Some people assume that the concept of evil is exclusively religious, and that those of us who deny the existence of God and other supernatural beings should also deny that anything is evil. In this chapter, I will try to show that this would be a mistake. Atheists and theists alike can believe in the existence of evil. Of course, when we assert that evil exists we cannot expect everyone to understand exactly what we mean, and it turns out to be quite difficult to identify the nature of evil. In part, this is due to the fact that the word "evil" is ambiguous. "Evil" can be used to express the broad concept of bad, or to express a more extreme moral concept. It is the latter that deserves to be called *the* concept of evil, and it is this concept that I will investigate in this book. Our best hope of forming a clearer view of the concept of evil lies in a method of inquiry that philosophers call conceptual analysis. Since the process of conceptual analysis will be unfamiliar to some readers, I will conclude this chapter by setting out this methodology.

1.1 A Naturalistic Argument for Error Theory

Like many other philosophers, I believe that there is no supernatural God, nor any other supernatural agents, such as demons, spirits or angels. I could be described as an atheist and a metaphysical naturalist, and I intend to give a broadly natural-istic account of evil.[1] Given that the word "naturalistic" is used by philosophers in many different ways, I ought to specify the sense in which my project is naturalis-tic. It is not my aim to adopt a naturalistic standpoint and then explain evil away, as a metaethical error theorist might try to show that so-called moral obligations are nothing more than an illusion. Instead, I want to defend a kind of realism about

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[1] For the sake of simplicity, I will assume that atheists believe not only that God, as conceived of by theists, does not exist, but also believe that there are no other supernatural agents, such as ghosts, spirits, angels, or demons.

evil; a realism that is compatible with a broadly naturalistic worldview. My goal is not to uphold the kind of narrow or austere naturalism which would demand that, if evil exists, it must be reducible to that which is the subject matter of the physical sciences. My more modest aim is to show that evil is no more metaphysically odd or problematic than wrongness, justice, or generosity. Insofar as atheists can believe that there are such things as injustice and generosity, I contend, we can also believe that there is such a thing as evil. That said, my account of evil is not intended to be unsuitable for people who do believe in the existence of a supernatural God or other supernatural agents. Perhaps it is best to say that I will offer a secular account of evil.

Some people think that the concept of evil is supernaturally loaded, or is exclusively religious, and hence that any secular accout of evil must be misguided.[2] For certain audiences, the word "evil" brings to mind tales of demonic possession, and horror films populated with ghoulish villains and inhuman monsters.[3] To some, "evil" sounds distinctly Biblical, and conjures up thoughts of divine commands and Satan's disobedience. The journalist Lance Morrow notes that in

enlightened political conversation, the word "evil" has been disreputable for a long time— and still is, to a large extent. . . . The word "evil", in many minds, still smacks of an atavistic, superstitious, and even medieval simplism, of a fundamentalist mindset that might be inclined to burn witches. (Morrow 2003, 12)

As Peter Dews claims, some people believe that the term "evil" has an "inherently antiquated ring about it . . . [that] suggests a vision of the universe as the stage for a battle of supernatural powers" (Dews 2008, 2). When President G. W. Bush declared that evil is real, Dews claims, it seemed that he was implying that there are "menacing forces at large in the world, working at a level deeper than individual human agency" (Dews 2008, 2).

In order to establish the possibility of a secular, naturalistic account of evil, I must address these common concerns about the metaphysical status of evil. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, there are several other possible grounds for scepticism about evil that deserve our attention. Yet the worries about religion and

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[2] For the purposes of this argument, I will use the labels "exclusively religious" and "supernaturally loaded" interchangeably. Of course, not all people who describe themselves as religious and who participate in religious practices also believe in supernatural agents, and not all people who believe in supernatural agents are religious. Nonetheless, belief in supernatural agents is an important part of religion for very many religious people, and I think that those who claim that atheists cannot believe in evil typically would assume that belief in evil involves belief in such agents.

[3] Following a common philosophical convention, when I am mentioning a word rather than using that word, I will enclose the word in inverted commas. Thus, "evil" contains four letters, whereas evil is worthy of condemnation. This use of inverted commas should not be mistaken for the use of so-called scare-quotes.

supernaturalist metaphysics can act as an immediate barrier that prevents some atheists and agnostics from even engaging with more complex questions regarding the nature of evil. For this reason I will respond to the metaphysical objections in this first chapter, and, in the process of doing so, will bring the target of this book into sharper focus.

Some atheists suppose that they ought not say that anything is evil because evil-talk has religious connotations. What certainly is true is that the word "evil" makes many people think of religion. Yet it would be a mistake to believe that anything that makes people think of religion is out of bounds for those of us who are not religious. When we hear people talk about stained glass windows, mosques, or prayer wheels it is hard not to think of religion, but we do not infer that everyone who speaks of those things is a religious believer, nor that in using such language we would implicitly uphold a religious worldview. Talk of forgiveness also makes many people think of religion, but it would be not only foolish but tragic if atheists felt that we had to deny the existence of forgiveness, or, indeed, if we always refused to forgive. It could also be the case that the word "evil" makes many people think of religion, but that not everyone who believes that evil exists is thereby committed to a religious worldview.

Alternatively, some atheists might shy away from judging that anything is evil because they believe that the concept of evil originated in religious belief or practice, and hence remains exclusively religious. It is not clear whether the concept of evil did have these beginnings. The word "evil" derives from the Old English "yfel" meaning "over" or "beyond" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), but it is at least possible that the concept of evil is much older than this (cf. Jackson 1998, 33; Robinson 2009, 336). According to one genealogical story, it originated in the dualistic theology of Zoroastrianism, entered Judaic thought with the Persian dominance of the Near East, and subsequently spread through Western culture via the theology of the Christian church (cf. Stone 2009, 10). Even if this genealogy of the concept of evil were correct, though, it is not the case that all concepts that originated in religious practices are out of bounds for atheists. The idea of a scapegoat, for instance, is derived from a Jewish religious tradition involving a goat that was part of the observance of Yom Kippur, but it is possible to claim that Lee Harvey Oswald was a scapegoat without thereby expressing commitment to the Jewish faith, or belief in a supernatural realm. It seems possible that atheists could believe in the existence of evil just as easily as in the existence of scapegoats.

If atheism really is a significant barrier to believing in evil, then there must be some deeper problem than the mere fact that the word "evil" is used in religious texts, and makes many people think of religion. There would have to be some kind of inconsistency between atheism and evil-realism. This view can be encapsulated

in what I will call the naturalistic argument for error theory about evil (cf. Garrard 2002, 325):

1. Evil exists only if God or other supernatural agents exist.
2. God and other supernatural agents do not exist.

Therefore,

3. Evil does not exist.

The plausibility of this argument depends, in part, on the truth of the second premise; namely, that God and other supernatural agents do not exist. Instead of directly assessing this highly contentious second premise, I will try to undermine the conditional claim that evil exists only if God or other supernatural agents exist. If this first premise is false, then theists and atheists can agree that the naturalistic argument for error theory is no good.

Let us begin by asking why some of us might be inclined to think that the first premise is true. It is undeniable that the word "evil" is often used when people are talking about a supernatural realm. Evil, some say, is a supernatural force that can enter our bodies and influence our actions. Although it is hard to know exactly what people mean when they speak of evil as a force, many of those people describe it in agential terms, suggesting that the so-called force is malevolent, goal-directed, and controlling. Often the word "evil" is used not as a name of a supernatural agent, but as a description of such an agent. Fire-and-brimstone preachers, for instance, say that Satan is an evil fallen angel who tempts us into wrongdoing. As Phillip Cole points out, it is also common for extreme wrongdoers to be described as evil monsters, and as demonically evil. According to Cole, describing someone as an evil monster implies that he has "demonic and supernatural powers" (Cole 2006, 215).

If the word "evil" functioned merely as a name for a supernatural agential force, or as a label for a supernatural property of supernatural beings, then it would be true that atheists ought not believe in the existence of evil. Yet it is common for people who believe in the existence of supernatural agents to apply the word "evil" to natural objects and events as well. For instance, some theists might say that Satan is an evil being, that Charles Manson is an evil man, that atheism is an evil doctrine, and that murder is an evil act. The fact that even theists judge that some things in the natural world are evil is *prima facie* evidence that atheists can believe in the existence of evil. After all, atheists believe in the existence of Charles Manson, and in the existence of murder. It is possible, though, that the theists who say that Charles Manson is evil believe that Manson was causally influenced by a supernatural being, such as an evil spirit. Similarly, theists might believe that an action such as murder, which is part of the natural world, could be evil only if that action is performed in defiance of the commands issued by God. Maybe supernatural agents need somehow to be involved

whenever something in the natural world counts as evil. If this were true, then atheists, who deny that any supernatural beings exist, should not believe in evil.

Advocates of a secular account of evil must admit that some people use the word "evil" with an intent to refer to supernatural entities, and that some of those same people would say that any part of the natural world could be evil only in virtue of being connected to a supernatural agent. Yet the same is true of other moral concepts that are accepted as being available for use by atheists. Some theists believe that there are supernatural beings who do wrong, and that human actions count as morally wrong only in so far as they clash with the commands issued by God. This gives us no reason to suppose that the concept of moral wrongness is out of bounds for atheists, or that every person who says, for instance, that sexual harassment is morally wrong thereby expresses commitment to a supernaturalistic worldview. Theists and atheists use the same concept of moral wrongness when they agree that gratuitous torture is morally wrong, even though they might disagree about which other actions are morally wrong, and might give different explanations of why a particular action is morally wrong. As yet, we have been given no reason to suppose that this is not equally true of the concept of evil.

1.2 Supernaturally Loaded Concepts

Perhaps the way forward is to identify some examples of other concepts that *are* supernaturally loaded, and note what leads us to place them in that category. It is plausible that the concept of God, the concept of ghost, and the concept of sin are supernaturally loaded in the relevant sense. Strictly speaking, this is not to say that they are concepts that can be used only by people who believe in supernatural agents. There are ways we can use a concept that do not commit us to the belief that the concept in question picks out something real. For instance, when I say "G. W. Bush believes in God", or "If God exists then God will be angry with me", I use the concept of God, but I do not express a belief that there is a God. In contrast, if I assert that God is worthy of worship, or that God commands that we love one another, then, *ceteris paribus*, my audience would assume that I believe in a supernatural being.[4] Similarly, if I say "There is a ghost in the next

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[4] In relation to the word "God", sometimes other things are not equal. There is a long-running tradition of arguing that God exists, and that "God" refers not to a supernatural being, but to the entire physical universe, or to a sense of the sacred (e.g. Johnston 2011). Arguably, this tradition is motivated by a desire to save what is good and significant about religious discourse and practice while rejecting contentious supernaturalistic metaphysics. Regardless of whether this project is worthwhile, it remains the case that the everyday sense of the word "God" is that of a supernatural creator of the universe. Deists who wish to talk about God and to be understood by a general audience must preface their claims with a specification of the non-standard sense in which they use the word "God", and Deists must maintain that many common beliefs about God—that God wants us to be happy, or that God is watching over us, for instance—are incoherent on their understanding of God. We might say that Deists use the word "God", but do not use the common supernaturalistic concept of God.

room", then, *ceteris paribus*, listeners will ascribe to me a belief in supernatural beings. When atheists are being honest and speaking literally, they simply do not make such claims, and their refusal to make assertions about the nature or the activities of God or ghosts is the clearest indication that the concept of God and the concept of ghost are supernaturally loaded.

It is harder to know what we ought to say about sin. In order to see why this is the case we must consider the relationship between the English word "sin" and the concept of sin. The primary definition of the word "sin" offered in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) is an "act which is regarded as a transgression of the divine law and an offence against God; a violation (esp. wilful or deliberate) of some religious or moral principle". The first half of this definition suggests that the word "sin" picks out a supernaturally loaded concept, but the second half suggests that "sin" also applies to violations of moral principle, whether they are religious or not. However, as the *OED* makes clear, "sin" can also be used to mean a violation of some non-moral and non-religious standard of taste or propriety, as when an author admits to being guilty of certain literary sins. This meaning of the word "sin" clearly does not carry any supernatural baggage at all. If an avowed atheist says that combining blue and green in the same outfit is a sartorial sin, we would know exactly what she means, and would not be tempted to ascribe to her any beliefs regarding God's commands about clothing. In light of these various definitions of the word "sin", what should we say about the concept of sin? Should we say that all of these definitions get at one and the same concept? Or does each definition pick out a distinct concept? And if so, which counts as *the* concept of sin?

There are many cases in which a single word can be used to express two different concepts. For instance, the word "bear" can be used to express the concept of load-carrying, and also to pick out an animal of the family Ursidae. The case of "sin" is more complex, though, because the various meanings of "sin" are more closely related. The broadest definition, according to which a sin is the violation of a standard of propriety, includes the narrower definitions, given that moral rules and divine laws count as standards of propriety. This overlap might lead us to suppose that all of these definitions pick out a single concept of sin. I think that this supposition would be mistaken. The supernaturally loaded definition of "sin" picks out a concept that plays a role that is significantly different from the role that is played by the broader concept of violation or transgression.

People who believe that an action is a sin in the supernaturally loaded sense are comparatively less likely to perform that action, are more likely to feel shame or guilt if they do perform that action, and are likely to warn other people against performing that action. To some degree, this will also be true of people who believe

that an action is a sin in the broader sense of being a violation of a standard of pro-priety. The difference between the two concepts becomes apparent when we note that people who believe that an action is a sin in the supernaturally loaded sense are likely to take the violation more seriously, are likely to provide evidence for the action's wrongness by pointing to religious texts or other sources of supposed divine revelation, and are likely to believe that people who perform that action thereby incur the risk of divinely administered punishment in this life or in the afterlife. We could expect that someone who asserts that adultery is a sin would have a cluster of these dispositions and beliefs. In contrast, a critic who accuses an author of committing certain literary sins is not at all likely to justify her claims by pointing to commands in religious texts, nor to believe that the author will incur divine disapproval, or burn in Hell for his transgressions. Given this significant difference, we ought to conclude that the word "sin" is ambiguous. It picks out two distinct but related concepts, only one of which is supernaturally loaded. This ambiguity can cause confusion. For example, if we hear a stranger say that com-bining meat and cheese in the one dish is a sin, we may have to ask whether she means that it is a mere violation of some culinary standard or that it is a violation of a divine law concerning food.

Even though the word "sin" picks out two distinct but related concepts, there are several reasons for concluding that *the* concept of sin is the one that is picked out by the supernaturally loaded definition. The first reason is that there are other terms in English which clearly pick out the alternative concept, and which are more obvi-ous labels for that concept. Thus it makes sense to ask "Do you mean that adultery is a sin, or merely that it is a violation or transgression?" Imagine that we are asked to label the common concept that is in play in the following three thoughts: that being offside is against the rules of football, that eating with your mouth open is rude, and that lying for profit is immoral. It would be not only odd but misleading to say that in these three thoughts the common concept is that of sin, but not at all misleading to say that the common concept is that of violation.

A second reason for concluding that *the* concept of sin is the supernaturally loaded concept is the fact that people who use the word "sin" to mean mere viola-tion tend to do so when speaking or writing in a comparatively light-hearted or playful register. There is a hint of comic exaggeration in the claim that wearing odd socks is a sin. When someone who makes this claim is challenged to explain her meaning, she is likely to say that she does not think that wearing odd socks literally is a sin, but merely that it is a violation of a sartorial rule. A third reason for saying that *the* concept of sin is supernaturally loaded is that a person who is religious and who describes certain actions as sinful is likely to retract these claims upon aban-doning her religious beliefs. For instance, someone who has lost her faith might