Topic Number: 2

INTRODUCTION

The present paper will make attempts to approach the notion of evilness as a tripartite idea deriving from ignorance, active individual intention and societal influence drawing evidence from the fields of philosophy and psychology. On these grounds, this essay will primarily discuss the ambiguous definitions of "goodness" and "evilness" based on the Socratic and consequentialistic principles as well as the dynamic choice theory and will proceed by seeking the borders of human responsibility that potentially render actors proper moral agents. The fundamental philosophical debate presented in part II alludes to whether evil should be judged in terms of intentions or in terms of consequences. Finally, on the basis of argumentative reasoning, a critical overview of Hannah Arendt's consideration that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil" will be offered as a synthesis of the interdisciplinary approach proposed.

PART I: DEFINITIONS OF "GOODNESS" AND "EVILNESS"

In this first part of the present paper, a summary of commonly accepted philosophical analyses aiming at disambiguating the dipole arising from the ideas of "goodness" and "evilness" will be put forward given that defining "good" and "evil" is a key function in the attempt to transcend the phenomena and understand human motivation and actions in greater depth. Socrates, representing ancient Greek philosophy, was amongst the first to conceive "evil" as being the lack of actions promoting goodness, i.e. as being a state of ignorance in which the individual is not aware of the consequences of his actions. On these grounds, Socrates argues that no human being is evil out of free will, but, rather is a being that is not in the position to correctly design the long-term set of actions that will allow her to do any "good". Hence, evilness derives from wrong choices which, in turn, derive from lack of knowledge or information concerning the alternative options.

A constructive synthesis of Socrates' ideas with the approach proposed by St Augustine would further the research for the definition of "evilness" and its necessity in the present question. Quoting an excerpt from St Augustine's book *The City of God*, the former claims that: "No man can be held responsible for what he has not been given, but can be held responsible for what he was given but did not do". It is evident that the medieval philosopher raises a core issue: If one acts in a certain way out of lack of information, is it justified to consider her a moral agent worthy of appraisal or condemnation? This question definitely stirs the debate as to whether an evil person (who is an ignorant person if one were to accept Socrates' definition) is a proper moral agent who has made an informed choice and, thus, ought to be judged or, whether she does not constitute a moral agent by virtue of her ignorance itself, the answers to which will be sought in the second part of the present paper.

Contrary to Socrates' and St Augustine's approach to the notion of "evilness", the school of consequentialism seeks this definition by examining the results of a certain action. This latter approach indeed does not intend to examine the righteousness in the intentions that provoked a violent or harmful action aimed at either an individual or society as a whole, but is absolutist in that it perceives as evil whatever action promotes suffering/pain and/or diminishes happiness. As a result, no matter what the intentions or motives behind the action, this theory definitely considers the actor to be a moral agent fully responsible for his actions.

In support of the aforementioned idea, T. Nagel proposed the concept of “moral luck”. According to this theory, given that it is not possible to judge an actor based on his intentions, due to the ambiguity and obscurity of the latter, this person is judged upon the results his action brought about. He depicts his idea by asking his readers to consider the following example: Assume two drivers A and B driving their cars on the same road. Driver A passes while the light is red and fatally injures a by-passing pedestrian. Driver B passes while the light is red, but, luckily, there is no pedestrian crossing the street at that moment, thus, nobody is injured. Although the actions committed by both A and B are exactly identical and seen under identical circumstances, all legal systems would consider the action committed by A to be more worthy of condemnation compared to action B on the basis of its result. Therefore, exactly because intentions are difficult to be explored, evil is taken to be judged by the consequences and is, thus, considered to be independent of whether the actor made an informed, intended choice or was willing to commit the action in the first place.

Proceeding with the definition of “goodness”, it is critical to seek a definition which is closely linked with the context of it constituting the opposite of “evilness”. What is considered to be “good” according to utilitarianism is the set of actions that maximizes collective happiness and welfare and/or minimizes suffering if one were to consider the branch of negative utilitarianism. Hence, to be good, primarily means to act in a way that promotes the happiness of the majority or as J. Bentham put it “the greatest happiness for the greatest number”.

Overall, this first part of the essay carefully considered various approaches on the ideas of “good” and “evil”, ranging from theories seeing evil as ignorance to theories which disregard the factor of whether the action was the result of an informed choice or not, but judge it as evil based on the results it brings about. Finally, the concept of goodness was seen under the scope of utilitarianism as clearly correlated to maximization of social happiness. The question emerging is whether evil should be defined as “actions intended to consciously and actively diminish societal happiness and promote suffering” or whether evil should be seen as a broader concept being the result of “actions diminishing societal happiness and promoting suffering independent of the actor’s intentions”.

PART II: CHOOSING TO BE “GOOD” OR “EVIL”...

Presentation of the pillars of the philosophical debate

Proceeding to the second part of the present essay the notion of choice as “making up their minds to be good or evil” in Arendt’s context will be examined. On these grounds, three questions will be carefully analyzed and debated over:

1. To what extent should a society distinguish between acts which diminish societal happiness on the criterion of intention?

2. Are people free not to choose between being good/evil or does this mere lack of choice constitutes a proper choice which renders humans fully accountable for their actions?

3. If one is not to choose between good/evil, are his actions to be termed as “evil”?

All questions deal with whether the criterion of choice should be critical in naming an action “evil”. If this proposition were to be accepted, then Arendt’s thesis that “evil” is too caused by people who “never make up their minds to be good or bad” would seem logical and correct. Nevertheless, here

comes the dilemma proposed by St Augustine's analysis (see Part I) as to whether an uninformed decision or a decision based on unknown data should hold the actor morally accountable.

Thesis A: *Moral Accountability is dependent on intentions, upbringing and stimuli and actions deriving from agents whose intentions were benevolent are not to be termed as "evil".*

In support of the thesis that accountability requires informed, intended choices calls for understanding the uncertainty inherent to human nature. According to the dynamic choice theory (drawing evidence from the common fields of philosophy and psychology), especially in relation to long-term objectives, people wrongly choose their actions in the short-run in a way that leads to a complete deviation from the initial objective. To exemplify, assume a person who has made the decision to diet herself. If everyday she excuses herself to eat an ice-cream more (short-term choice which individually does not affect the long-term goal), she might end up being fatter that she initially was. Although not an example of a noble intention being converted into an evil action, this example proves the point that human beings have the propensity to sacrifice long-term rewards for the sake of short-term ones in a way that accumulatively may lead to the opposite result. Other than that, a number of reasons including the preferential loop or, formally, termed "intransitive preferences problem" in which A>B>C (where A, B, C be the individual preferences and > denoting "more preferable than") does not exclude the arrangement C>A>B may cause confusion to the actor and may also distort the relation between initial intentions and the final result. Hence, this argument begs not to hold human beings accountable for their actions unless certain about the nature of their intentions on the basis of complexity and the inherent inability to foresee accumulatively the consequences of our individual choices.

A second argument advocating the proposition that accountability of the actor is tightly woven to the actor's intention is that actors being humans cannot be seen independently from their environment. People who "never make up their minds" about being "good" or "evil" are probably people who have not been taught how to distinguish between right and wrong, i.e. how to distinguish between actions that promote happiness and actions that promote suffering. The fact that they have not attained moral values which, according to Aristotle are acquired through addiction to righteous deeds in interaction with the social network, eliminates any moral responsibility on their behalf. To better visualize this argument assume the extreme example of a child whose mother is a drug addicted and whose father is an alcoholic. The father rapes the mother and the child is sent out to steal money. The child grows up and, expectedly, reproduces the values he has received by her interaction with his family environment. In his family he treats his wife violently and exploits his children. His actions are "evil" in the sense that they diminish welfare and promote suffering, but can this person be held responsible for he has not chosen between "goodness" and "evilness"? The point is that in his case the terms "good" and "evil" are heavily distorted as a result of the distorted messages he had been receiving by his familial environment. Thus, this example proves once again that although the notions of "good" and "evil" are easy to be defined in terms of quantitatively measuring collective happiness (a method which is also dubious as the definition of happiness and the tools to measure it are still pending), good/evil action being the ones promoting or not happiness can never be defined universally for different individuals consider different values depending on the stimuli received, in the context of ethical relativism.

Further on, are these two notions of “good” and “evil” so clearly distinct and separable so that anybody could actually make a choice? The answer is that “goodness” and “evilness” are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are usually found to co-exist in human nature because the individual cannot bind herself to a choice. What does it mean to be a priori “good”? Is this a binding decision that I am not allowed to be “evil” for one or multiple instances throughout my life? The argument implied is that “never making up one’s mind to be good or evil” is not a rare state, but, rather the range, the intermediate within the vast majority of humans lie. Hence, if it were true that “evil” should not take the perplexity of human psychology into consideration because “most evil is done by people who never make up their minds”, then one would argue that most people are “evil” for most people have never really “made up their minds”. Obviously, if the aforementioned proposition were to be accepted, all human efforts towards a “better” world are futile for people are innately “evil” and thus unable to capture and realize any long-term goal aiming at the enhancement of society. As a result, hope for the future which constitutes the animating force of progress would completely disappear.

Overall, three arguments were proposed in support of thesis A them being the dynamic choices problem, the intertwinement of “good” and “evil” and the role of the stimuli received as part of the actor’s interaction with his environment.

Thesis B: *Moral Accountability is independent of intentions, upbringing and stimuli. Evil is universally defined as any action diminishing collective happiness and/or promoting suffering/pain.*

In support of the thesis that accountability of the actor is independent of intentions, the reader should refer to J.P. Sartres’ famous thesis that not choosing still constitutes a choice. The fact that the actor has not actively chosen to be good means that he has not rejected the choice of being evil in intentions. Or, were one to consider the Socratic definition of “evilness”, the choice not to know or the choice to be ignorant is still a choice because the actor is fully aware of his unawareness and, thus, of the possible dangers that might arise from this unawareness. Considering an everyday example, assume a car crash takes place in front of your eyes and you are the only eye-witness. You have taken a first-aid course but feel really unsure as to whether what you remember is correct and applicable in the given situation. You immediately realize that the person has been injured in the back and that the injury will not prove lethal before the arrival of an ambulance which happens to be 10 minutes away. You call the ambulance and, meanwhile, in your attempt to relieve pain you tell him to move, causing him a serious spine injury and condemning him to paralysis. And the question is: are you good or evil? Have you “made up your mind to be good or evil”? Truth is that your intentions seem to be virtuous. Equally true is the fact that you knew you did not remember your first-aid course instructions correctly and still undertook the risk to relieve this person’s pain although you were certain the ambulance was 10 minutes away. It is obvious that you made a choice and, thus, you are by definition a moral agent who needs to be held responsible for the outcome of your action. The outcome of your choice was “evil” in the sense that it condemned another human being in long-term suffering while this could have well been prevented. Hence, this example clearly disproves the thesis of Socrates and St Augustine in that “evilness” is ignorance and should thus be excused, for if not the moral agent is certain of the outcomes of her actions or at least certain to the extent empirical knowledge allows her to be, then she has made a choice to take the risk and should be accountable for whatever the outcome of this action.

The second argument explores the possibility of moral hazard. If people were to be excused for wrong-doing on the basis of not "having made up their minds to be good or bad", this would create an incentive for people not to actually decide between being "good" or "bad" because this would allow them to feel morally unblemished by the results of their actions and would elevate any restrictions as to what moral behavior should be based on. As a result, "evil" should be universally defined independent of intrinsic intentions and motivations in order to avoid using motivations as an excuse to avoid the responsibility of wrong-doing.

Thirdly, the concept of evilness should also be examined from a social perspective in terms of practicalities. Given that humanity is not still in the position to penetrate human thought and see objectively whether intentions are benevolent or not, it makes sense to seek the definition that covers the greatest extent of cases possible. Hence, because it is preferable to safeguard societal benefit even though running the risk of wrongly accusing an actor of being "evil", it follows that societies should be concerned with the results rather than the incentives. Further on, elaborating on the concept of practicalities, attempting to consider psychological factors into defining evilness introduces the uncertainty and bias involved in every normative statement, i.e. value judgment, thus, endangering the integrity of a judicial system if one were to apply this reasoning to everyday life in the context of practical philosophy. If a judge were to excuse an accused on the basis of "not intending to cause harm", then the former opens a large debate as to how this conclusion was drawn undermining the objectivity and fairness of the system itself.

In a synopsis, three arguments were proposed in favor of thesis B them being the inability of the actor not to make a choice which implies that even "not making up one's mind" still constitutes a choice worth of accountability, the risk of moral hazard and, finally, the practical applicability of the thesis.

PART III: CLEAR APPLICATION OF THE DEBATE ANALYSIS ON THE PROPOSED QUOTATION

This paper has so far developed by presenting two possible interpretations of the term "evilness" in section "Part I" and has continued by presenting argumentation on whether actions deriving from non-evil intentions should be held morally accountable and, subsequently, be termed as "evil". The aforementioned analysis will, thus, constitute the base for evaluating Arrendt's proposition that "The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds".

If a reader were to abide by thesis A, she would find herself opposing Arrendt's viewpoint. This would be so because the reader would believe that from the moment one did not intend to cause pain or to diminish happiness by means of his actions, the latter are not "evil". Clearly, if one did not intend to cause pain or to diminish happiness, the actor is very likely to be one of those who "never make up their minds to be good or evil" and, thus, her actions should not be evil. On these grounds, Arrendt's proposition is wrong.

On the contrary, if a reader were to abide by thesis B, she would find herself in agreement with Hannah Arendt. If evil is independent of intentions, then given the argument that the majority cannot commit themselves to either "good" or "evil", it follows that indeed most evil will be done by those people who "never make up their minds" by virtue of numerical analysis alone.

CONCLUSION - PERSONAL NOTE

Given that the whole paper has objectively tried to approach Arendt's proposition in a bi-directional way, the author feels, in this last part of the essay, free to express her personal viewpoint given that both options are available for close scrutiny. Despite not seemingly being the most significant argument raised, it is important to realize that extending the notion of evilness so that it includes cases of actors not having actively chosen to be evil, (i.e. to diminish the happiness of the majority and/or to promote pain) could have catastrophic consequences. The philosophical theory of emotivism captured in D. Hume's famous quote that "reason is a slave of emotions" realizes the equality (if not the superiority) of emotions and reason. On these grounds, it becomes evident that whatever actions humanity has undertaken so far have been largely co-motivated by emotions. Such actions are the ones promoting evolution in the long-run and such actions are the ones which have been initiated on the idea of commonness in objectives, objectives aspiring to enhancement and optimism for the future. Under this perspective, the factor of belief calls for positive encouragement which **does** note the fallacies meanwhile carefully trying to create a tendency for future improvement. It is my personal conviction, thus, that defining evil on the consequentialists' grounds would spurge the feeling of defeatism in human nature and, thus, would suspend any intrinsic motivation for well-doing or "eu pratein" in the future.

Note: In impersonal references, the personal pronouns "she/her" are used in the context of political correctness.