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Explorations into the Secular Existence of Evil

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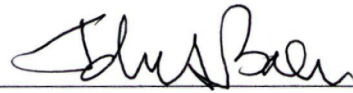
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommended to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Explorations into the Secular Existence of Evil" submitted by Helen C. Huzzey in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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ABSTRACT

Much of the philosophical literature regarding the conception of evil discusses evil within a religious context. This thesis however explores and develops a purely secular, naturalistic account of what moral evil exists as and importantly distinguishes evil from mere moral wrong. After examining different theories which suggest what evil could be, it is suggested that the best approach to understanding evil is to start from an account of morally evil acts. An act then should be considered as evil if it is an intentional act, caused by an agent, and that act produces an effect that consists of significant harm. This consequential significant harm is a moral wrong but what then distinguishes the act as evil is that the desire to produce the act which causes the significant harm is “unintelligible”. This thesis is an exploration into the conditions of what a concept of evil could exist as.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL Page.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER I.....	1
Evil and the Problem of Evil.....	1
CHAPTER II.....	11
Evil According to Neiman	11
Why Evil is a Problem According to Neiman.....	15
“Conceptual Devastation”.....	21
Why a New Conception of Evil is Needed	25
The New Nature of Evil	27
CHAPTER III	32
The Problems with Neiman’s View of Evil as Conceptual Devastation	32
Evil as Conceptual Devastation	32
The Euthyphro Argument	41
The Rape Argument.....	46
The Guantanamo Bay Argument	48
Chapter IV.....	51
Exploring Evil Through Desires	51
Nagel and Sexual Perversion	57
Evil and “Unintelligibility”	67
Chapter V	77
Conclusion	85
Bibliography.....	90

CHAPTER I

Evil and the Problem of Evil

Philosophers for the past two thousand years have understood that the concepts of right and wrong can be discussed without reference to God. Unfortunately many, maybe even most, laypeople cannot make sense of a moral right and wrong in a purely secular context because there then exists no authority on the matter, an authority which apparently a reference to a God provides. Whether it is people in the media commenting the topic, extended interviews in the media with purported experts on the topic, or columns and headlines in the press, they all echo the belief that talk of moral right or wrong makes no sense, unless there is a God. Of course, there have been many conceptions of God developed over the years and so, if a person is to discuss moral right and wrong then it would seem that religious background beliefs about God and her or his nature must be taken into account and it would seem to follow that what can be said to be morally right and morally wrong will be a function of such various religious background beliefs. It seems in other words that the thought is out there that morality is in some way dependant on God, and even on which God a person believes.

All of these views linking God and morality are confused. Firstly, in everyday use people talk of moral right and wrong in a way that does not require the existence of God. The reference to God comes into play when people reflect on how they *think* they use the terms or how they *think* the terms should be used. So, it is in their meta-ethical ruminations and in

their justifications of their first order views that the confusions about God appear.¹ People use the words in a secular way all the time but are mistaken when they think that such words require the existence of God or reference to him.

I want to suggest that the same is true for the concept of evil. However with 'evil' it is not just laypeople who think that claims about evil are inextricably linked to claims about God, there are also some philosophers who think that the way in which the word is used and how it should be used does require essential reference to God. However, again, as a matter of fact, I will argue, it can be cogently argued that, like the use of the concepts of moral right and moral wrong, the concept of evil *can* be used without any reference to God and evil *can* be discussed with no reference explicit or implicit to either God or religion. In everyday settings people do seem to judge acts, intentions, motives, and states of affairs as evil without any apparent reference to God or religion. Again, it tends to be in their justifications of such ascriptions of evil and in their meta-ethical ruminations about evil that God first appears. I suggest that such references to God and religion are *not* needed and that a secular conception of evil can be perfectly intelligible. Moreover, the concept of evil would be a much more useful concept if did *not* make any essential reference to God and in fact I would argue, more strongly, that we *need* a concept which might in fact look like religious conceptions of evil but which has no religious baggage attached to it. We need such a concept, I will argue, for

¹ People's first order views are those views that people hold and accept without any second thought at the time to the justification of them. Second order views then justify or make sense of, and explain the first order views. An example of this would be if you asked someone what their favorite colour was. They would presumably have an answer for you, say green, and this would be the first order view. However on closer examination there would most likely be a second order view explaining why it is that green is their favorite colour, for reasons such as they find it relaxing, it is the colour of jade which is a stone they really like, or perhaps they prefer spring and summer months and green represents them. Or on a second order view someone may realize that green is in fact not their ultimate favorite colour, but rather their favorite colour to wear. Second order views are reflections about the first order "knee jerk" views. My point here is that people use the terms right and wrong in everyday language all the time in a way that does not require the existence of any God, but it is in their second order views where the reference to God may appear because it may all they have as an ultimate deciding factor or authority of what makes something right or wrong. This need not be the case as I will show.

at least the following reasons: (i) there are situations where atheists and agnostics want to condemn something in ways that the words *bad*, *wrong*, *etc.* do not capture and in ways that resemble what is being claimed by religious writers using the word 'evil', (ii) there is a sense in which things can be beyond wrong and bad and would be what we want to call evil regardless of *any* God's existence and (iii) the word 'evil' seems to fit our linguistic intuitions in such cases. So, I suggest, for all of these reasons, things can and should properly be called evil without any reference to God or her or his existence. I myself think that the secular account of the concept of evil just alluded to would be a correct analysis even for theists, references to God being viewed as one possible justification for the ascription of evil, but, even if one is not immediately convinced of this it at least seems clear that it would be very useful if we could develop a different though perhaps related concept which could be usable without such reference; that is, we could develop a secular conception of the term 'evil'. It might be, for example, that we could offer as an account of evil something along the following lines: something is evil if and only if it is an act which causes great harm, and is done intentionally from a desire to produce the resulting harm (as a matter of fact this particular analysis is considerably less complex than the account I will in the end develop, but even this simple account is good enough for my present point). In other words, even if the analysis of the concept of evil required essential reference to God, which it does not, a different though related concept could be developed that allows for evil to be used in secular terms with no reference to God. This latter approach might be viewed as a sort of backup position if the stronger position which I will argue for turned out not to be completely defensible. But in this dissertation I propose to take the stronger line and aim to show that the analysis of the concept of evil requires no essential reference to God and hence use of the

concept of evil is not limited to contexts where there is discussion of God and his commands, but can be used in many others contexts. In sum, this dissertation will develop a conception of evil that is not a religious conception, requires no reference to God, but rather is a purely secular conception. This said, I think it would be useful in the rest of this chapter to make a few remarks about some points which have emerged from the history of discussions of what is, of course, an essentially religious issue – what is often referred to as *The Problem of Evil*, for the points concern some distinctions between *kinds* of evil, distinctions which will be useful as I develop my own account of evil.

When modern philosophers think of philosophical issues concerning evil they tend to think of moral/religious discussions that concern *The Problem of Evil* — the theodicy, as it is sometimes called — that is, of the question of whether, if evil exists, God *could* exist. This thesis is *not* in fact addressed to *The Problem of Evil*. However, a brief summary of some of the main approaches taken to this problem will lay some of the ground for my discussions of the issues which *will* in fact form the substance of the thesis.

There have been various approaches taken in the literature to *The Problem of Evil*. One approach that is taken by both Leibniz and Pope is to affirm the existence of God and deny the existence of evil. Both Leibniz and Pope saw the purported existence of evil as a worry for the view that God exists: correspondingly, they seemed to think that, in order to defend the claim that God exists, they needed to deny the existence of evil because both could not exist. Their denial of evil is attempted in various ways. At risk of oversimplification, it is plausible to say that Leibniz took two approaches. One approach is that God could not have created the world in any other way than the way he did because to think that God did not create the best world is to deny God. God is all good and all powerful,

and so on, and so God, being who he is, created this world and since he did this world is the best of all possible worlds that could have been created. So then to deny that this is the best possible world is to deny God. Another argument from Leibniz continues that while this is the best possible world that God could have created, all God's actions do in fact happen for the best, and there is no *real* evil.² In a way Leibniz was covering all his bases — not only did God create the best possible world he could have, (which may seem to include evil, but it is the best of all the possibilities, since any other world would have been worse, for example: one with no free will) but also all God's actions do in fact happen for the best and anything that might be seen as evil is not *really* evil. On Leibniz's view there is no problem of evil because there is no real evil.

Pope took a similar approach, though he stated it much more directly. Pope attempted to *explain evil away* by straightforwardly claiming that there is no evil. This is most clear from the following passage from *Essays on Man*.

All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee

All Chance, direction which thou canst not see

All partial Evil, universal Good;

And in Spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite

One truth is clear, **WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT.** (Pope, 289-95, Bold added)

So, according to both Leibniz and Pope the world that exists is the best world and any evil is only apparent and in actuality not *real* evil, since, as Leibniz claims, all God's actions do in fact happen for the best which includes the creation of this world, the best of all

² Leibniz's explanations are much more complex than the brief explanation I have provided, but a complete explication of Leibniz's reasoning is not necessary for the purpose of this thesis, and doing so could be a thesis on its own. The point to be taken out of my using Leibniz is that Leibniz says that 'God created the best possible world', and if this best possible world seems to leave room for the existence of evil, Leibniz also claims 'any evil that seems to exist actually is not real evil because all God's actions happen for the best.

possible ones, and as Pope claims, evil is an illusion that we do not yet, or cannot, understand.

The kind of approach I have just described is sometimes connected with another approach, one which distinguishes moral and natural evil, and says of natural evil, that it only seems evil, but really is not. Evil then only really exists as moral evil. The distinction between natural and moral evil can be found in Rousseau.³ Moral evil, on his view, is counted as genuine but is ascribed to humans as its creator. God's existence then is not an issue because evil is limited to moral evil and God is only responsible for natural evil. God is not directly responsible for moral evil because he gave us free will. Very briefly the idea behind the free will defence is that God gave human beings free will so that we could act and choose freely, but if we can act and choose freely we can choose to do evil. Such a choice is not to be viewed as a fault of God since it is better that God give us free will than not, and so moral evil is a fault of human beings, not God. It was through free will that *we* created evil, so according to this type of view evil exists as both natural evil and moral evil but natural evil does not exist as real evil; and moral evil does exist as real evil: but the existence of *moral* evil is not inconsistent with God's existence.

All I really want from this brief discussion is the point that a distinction *was* drawn between natural and moral evil and that only *moral* evil is 'really' evil, or, as I will put it, *evil-properly-so-called*.

While the above is all I want to say regarding *The Problem of Evil*, I do want to acknowledge that my account is by no means an exhaustive account of the approaches taken to resolve *The Problem of Evil*, though they are the most common and any solution (at least

³ The distinction does not first arise in Rousseau but he does clearly distinguish between the two and discusses the distinction.

any claim which was to preserve the claim that God might exist) would, I think, have to adopt one of these approaches to resolve the theodicy. *Either* (i) God's existence is affirmed and then evil becomes 'unreal' for whatever reason, be it Leibniz's; (that God created the best possible world and all his actions happen for a reason so there is not real evil), or Pope's (that evil does not actually exist and if we knew the whole story we would realize this); *or* (ii) God is to be taken out of the problem by separating evils into natural evils (which are God's responsibility but not really evil) and moral evils (which are the creation and responsibility of humans). The only other approach would, I think, of course, be to deny god — that is, allow that evil exists; say that this is inconsistent with the existence of God (at least of good God); and so deny *God's* existence.

The issue of evil in relation to God's existence, I suggest, is not the *only* thing we can discuss *using* the concept of evil, and not the only thing we can discuss *about* evil. This said, I will use this traditional distinction between natural and moral evil, to demarcate the place of the issues I am interested in investigating. I am interested in the question of moral evil, and I am interested in developing a modern secular conception of moral evil, and more specifically I am interested in what kind of a conception of evil we *should* develop.

As I have just said, a useful distinction is to be found in the distinction between natural and moral evil, since in my development of a modern secular conception of evil, moral evil is where any real evil will exist. In this dissertation, without wanting to argue the issue here, I will take it that the marker between natural evil and moral evil lies in the place of agency of some sort or another in the creation of the evil. It would also seem that the distinguishing factor between natural evils and moral evils would need to specifically be human agency because God can be taken to be an agent in natural evils, because God would

be seen as causing and creating natural evils. A *natural* evil is something which is truly terrible and/or truly tragic, but which does not essentially involve human agency, but God could be seen as the responsible agent. *Moral* evil is similarly something truly terrible and maybe even tragic, but something which essentially does involve human agency and involves it in the sense that the evil is at least in part *caused* by human agency. I will suggest that the concept of evil best, or in the end *only*, fits this conception of moral evil. A volcanic eruption, a hurricane, a tornado, and all other natural disasters and epidemics, while horrible and devastating and indeed terrible and tragic, are not really evil. Evil seems to truly exist only in moral evil, that is, when human agency is involved. A volcano is not trying to make people suffer, it is not intentionally killing a large amount of people. While the consequences may be truly horrible, we would not say, and it would not make sense to say that the volcano was evil, or that the actions of the volcano were evil. Evil truly exists in moral evils, done by human beings. Of the Holocaust for example, we would say, and it makes perfect sense to say that the Holocaust was evil, and the actions of Hitler and the Nazi's during the Holocaust were evil.

In this dissertation then I want to examine what makes what we seem to want to call evil actually and distinctively evil, as opposed to merely morally wrong. I will address the questions of how to analyze and make sense of evil in this sense, that is, what I will investigate is evil (i) in the domain of human agency, and (ii) evil as opposed to mere moral wrong, and as opposed to mere right infringement, and as opposed to mere inappropriateness. I want to identify what it is that marks evil off from *mere* moral wrong. Moral wrong, I acknowledge, can be terrible: however, moral evil seems to be an especially strong and distinctive phrase and to say something is evil as opposed to morally wrong or wicked is to

say something special about it and my inquiry aims to distinguish what it is that is special. I therefore want to examine what is special about something being evil, and to specify what is special without reverting back to any reference to God.

My motivation for pursuing a secular conception of evil, apart from the fact that it is an interesting and useful conception not yet sufficiently discussed in philosophical literature, is the idea that such a conception of evil might lend itself to an analysis that treats it as cross culturally constant, and as being amenable to a moral realist conception. The methodology behind this inquiry is to attempt to develop a secular account of evil that catches people's linguistic and moral intuitions about the kinds of things we want to class as evil.

It might be useful if I close this introductory chapter by very briefly and without argument providing an outline of what in the end I will suggest are the core ideas which make up the concept of moral evil: I will suggest (i) that the best approach to understanding moral evil is to start from an account of morally evil *acts*, (ii) that an analysis of morally evil people, intentions, plans, ways of life, beliefs, attitudes, institutions and so on can be explicated using the notion of morally evil acts as described. I will argue more specifically (iii) that a morally evil act *x* by an agent *A* is an *intentional* act by the agent *A* which produces an effect *E* where the effect consists in the occurrence of great harm (for example, a large number of deaths, a horrific death, attempted extinction, extinction, brutal violence, and the dehumanizing or deconstruction of a or many qualities of life). I will also suggest more specifically that (iv) evil acts are acts done by a human agent which produce (a) *very* harmful effects of certain kinds, and (b) the harmful effects are being produced in, as a first approximation, a "wanton" or perhaps "uncalled for" or perhaps "incomprehensible" way. In the end, I will suggest with Neiman, that the term needed here is "unintelligible", though the

exact details of how unintelligibility is relevant to evil must for the moment be left unspecified.

In order to display some of the advantages of the above hypothesis I think it would be useful to outline and discuss a competing hypothesis about the nature of evil, but a hypothesis which shares many of the features of the hypothesis I have just outlined. This hypothesis was spelled out in the very interesting monograph *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* by Susan Neiman.

CHAPTER II

Evil According to Neiman

Susan Neiman, in her book *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, presents an account of moral evil which includes no reference to religious beliefs and no reference to God. Neiman presents a secular account of evil as opposed to a theistic account because, as she says, “it is not clear that God should play a role [in defining evil] at all.”¹ Neiman explicates her secular account of evil in the fourth chapter of her book, the chapter called “Homeless”. I will argue that her account must in the end be viewed as being flawed but, this said, I think the account can serve as an interesting starting point for my discussions. Neiman does seem to incorporate *some* of the ideas which would probably need to be in *any* account of evil, and she also seems to want her secular account of evil to include some features from traditional theistic accounts.

Basic to Neiman’s account is an idea with which, as I said in the last chapter, I am very sympathetic — the idea that for something to be what we want to call evil, or as I will put it, for something to be evil *properly so called* it must be something that is caused by some *agent*, and caused, moreover, through the agent’s acts. Typically, of course, we will think of human beings as being the agents (and certainly this is Neiman’s focus): and she repeatedly suggests that central to any theory of evil is the essential involvement of agents, and here she always thinks in terms of *human* agents who in some direct way cause an evil event or consequence. Human agency is, she suggests, a requirement if something is to be properly understood as evil though it will be a matter of discussion *how and what kind of agency* should be counted as a requirement.

¹ Susan Neiman made this comment to CBC *Tapestry* interviewer, Andre Alexis, in an interview on that programme in the summer of 2004.

Neiman's account also recognizes a "mistake" made in the traditional theistic accounts of evil, accounts which use the word 'evil' to refer to both acts of human cruelty and instances of suffering not caused by any agent, least of all a human agent. I think even though she does not explicitly say so she might also say that this "mistake" was perhaps masked by the way in which the discussions in the theodicy proceeded. The initial assumption would be made that everything that happens, except those effects produced by human agency, is caused by God. This then would involve the participants in the worry that God had produced effects (terrible suffering) which were hard to make sense of if God was taken to be good. These effects *could* (perhaps – though see my discussion of the theodicy in Chapter 1) be classed as evil because the evil was the result of agency (in this case God's agency) and the choice now for the participants in the theodicy discussion would be either to take God's agency out of the picture in relation to the 'evil' effects and classify them as *natural evils* or to leave God in the picture and deny that the effects are *really evil*; the former choice would result in what is (both Neiman and I think) a mistake of separating evil from agency. And so the traditional accounts of evil would include both human suffering caused by human agency and also human suffering caused by 'natural' events — and so a distinction was eventually made between natural evils and moral evils.

Neiman follows the line found in traditional accounts of evil and accepts and recognizes (as I do), the important distinction between natural "evils" and moral evils. In the rest of my comments in this paragraph, I am elaborating and in a way going beyond what can be found in Neiman, but the basic idea is in her text, and I think that my refinement is quite sympathetic to her view. Moral evils are classed as instances of human suffering caused by agency, which she assumes is always human agency. Natural "evils" are instances of human

suffering which are caused in other ways. The Lisbon earthquake of the year 1755, which is her chosen paradigm example of natural “evil”, was truly tragic and caused much human suffering, but was a natural “evil”, what “insurance companies call natural disasters” (3). Clearly, if we think, as both Neiman and I do, that evil *properly so called* has to be something caused by agents (human or superhuman), then, if we talk carefully, the phrase “natural evil” must be viewed as an oxymoron and we should say that “natural evil”, while truly horrible and tragic, is not really evil, because it lacks agency. The only way such “natural evils” could count as evils properly-so-called would be if God was indeed left as the agent which created them and *that* leads directly in to the theodicy. The implication of these points about agency is that, if we leave God out as the agent of natural events, i.e. those not caused by human agency, then such natural events should not be classed as *evil* — tragic, but not evil.

Moral evils caused by an agent are what should be classed as evil and for Neiman “*Auschwitz*, ... stands for all that is meant when we use the word *evil* today: absolute wrong doing that leaves no room for account or expiation” (3). Human beings are responsible for the Holocaust, while plate tectonics produced the Lisbon earthquake. Human suffering, torture and murder caused by Nazi’s in concentration camps is what should be properly understood as evil. Evil should not be found in the fact that immense rigid plates of the Earth rub against each other and sometimes sink below one another, even when human suffering results. Neiman’s account, and the account I want to accept and will argue for later, both recognize that evil can only exist when agents are directly responsible and involved — as so, assuming we can leave God out of the picture in the causal story of natural events, evil can only exist when *human* agents are involved, which is Neiman’s view.

According to Neiman two mistakes were made by the traditional accounts of evil. Firstly, they did not or did not always take the extra step of denying the term 'evil' to human suffering caused by things other than agency, such as rock movement. Natural evils were, and mistakenly in some cases still are, considered a form of evil even if there is no direct agent responsibility. Secondly, she suggests that traditional accounts of evil were too preoccupied with the question of *God's* role in the creation of human suffering. In summary then, both Neiman's view and the view I am suggesting claim that God need not enter into an account of evil, and that a secular account of moral evil, which we both want to say essentially involves human agency and responsibility, is central to what is meant by the word *evil* as it is used today.

The next point in Neiman's discussion is a very interesting development from her complaint about traditional discussions of the evil. She first points out that, while traditionally The Problem of Evil has been taken to be the problem of whether God and evil can co-exist, but the Problem of Evil can in fact exist in *two* forms: it can exist in a theological form *or* it can exist in a secular form. Thus, the puzzle can be set by expressing the problem as 'How could a good God allow for a natural order that causes innocent suffering, and, if God exists how could evil exist as well?' *or* the problem could be spelt out as: 'How can human beings behave in ways that so thoroughly violate both reasonable and rational norms?' (3). In either form The Problem of Evil is "fundamentally a problem about the *intelligibility* of the world as a whole" (9, *Italics and Bold added*), and it is this very interesting and attractive suggestion I want to explore in detail. The former theological form presents a problem about the universe as a whole and the latter secular form presents a problem about human motivation and human capacity to make sense of ones place in the

world. To quote Neiman, “The fact that the world contains neither justice nor meaning threatens our ability both to act in the world and understand it” (7). So Neiman is suggesting that the problem of evil both theistic and secular *can* and *should* be viewed as a problem of the *intelligibility of the world*: in the theistic context *how can we make sense of a world in which a good God causes such awful things as cancer*, and in the secular context *how can we make sense of a world in which human beings cause such awful things as Auschwitz?* This is the core suggestion in her account of the problem of evil; let me spell out her ideas in greater detail.

Why Evil is a Problem According to Neiman

Neiman suggests the possibility that a modern conception of evil could be developed construing evil as something that is *threatening to us as agents because it challenges our hope that the world makes sense* (Tapestry Interview, cited earlier). The Problem of Evil then according to Neiman need not have anything to do with the problems regarding God and the existence of evil, rather the Problem of Evil exists because *evil interferes with our ability to make sense of the world in which we exist and act*, and the theodicy is just a special case of the difficulty of making sense of a world. Evil is something then that is a problem because it threatens the *intelligibility* of our world. This desire to make sense of the world is guided, she suggests, by a version of ‘The Principle of Sufficient Reason’. The Principle of Sufficient Reason as articulated in Neiman “expresses the belief that we can find a reason for everything the world presents” (320). As a matter of fact, the Principle of Sufficient Reason comes from Leibniz and states that for every fact there must be a sufficient reason — causal or otherwise — for why whatever exists or occurs does so, and does so in the place, time and manner that it does. Neiman does not spend much time discussing how the principle should

be formulated but I think that the version which her explanation of the nature of evil requires, emphasizes just one kind of *reason* — that cited in the uninformative phrase ‘or otherwise’.

I return to this later, but for now let me just say that I suspect that in the end the kind of ‘otherwise’ reasons will need to be cashed out in teleological terms in some way or another.

Neiman does not in fact offer an argument for the Principle of Sufficient Reason but rather I take her as using the general idea behind the principle as it applies to human life, that for everything that happens some sort of story can be told causal or otherwise. Neiman uses this as a way of explaining what she thinks makes something evil since for her evil involves a clash with the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Something is evil on her account if it threatens or damages our belief that the world we live in and orient ourselves in somehow makes sense (causally or otherwise). Neiman seems to be appealing to the idea that there exists both a desire and a need to make sense of the world, and evil is something that challenges the deep seated belief that the world somehow makes sense and perhaps *must* make sense. Neiman’s suggestion that the problem with evil is that it is something that confronts our ability to make sense of the world is not actually as abstract as it may seem; let me explain. Most people, it would seem, behave *as though* they accept the Principle of Sufficient Reason in its most general form, which is that for every state of affairs that obtains there must be a sufficient reason for that state to obtain when, where, and how it does, i.e., what happens in the world can be made sense of. In its causal form, making sense of the world involves finding causes for whatever happens: in its teleological or purposive form making sense of the world involves identifying and, perhaps, making rational sense of the *point* or *purpose* or *goal* what happens. Philosophers aside, most people do not even give much thought to the truth or falsity of this principle, or even the principle itself. But the idea found in Neiman, that I am

now expanding on, is that most people seem to act *as though* they accept the Principle of Sufficient Reason, because they behave and react in ways which can be made sense of by reference to the principle —so people behave at least as if they accepted the principle. When something happens that is considered evil, most people are shocked, appalled, confused, and left wondering for example: “how could somebody do that?” People question how the result occurred because the cause or reason does not suffice as a viable, understandable, or sufficient reason. Evil then can easily be understood as something that confronts our capacity to make intelligible sense of the world — either causally or teleologically.

D.S Shwayder in *The Stratification of Behaviour* introduced his term “Conceptual Epiphenomenalism”, a term which I found captured the sense in which it can, I think reasonably, be claimed that people act *as though* they accepted the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Shwayder was interested in developing the conceptual and methodological tools by which it can become possible to develop a coherent account of how we conceptualize the world. His useful suggestion was that, when attempting to develop such a conceptualization of the world the approach that can usefully be taken is to “consider what would be implied by an observer’s true report on some behavioural episode” (6). His theory represents:

“an attempt to explain and understand what it is to see certain things in the movements of animate creatures. What we thus see and report upon might be styled as a kind of epiphenomenon with respect to animal movements and situational elements. They are phenomena which we see as residing in movements only because we have these ways of thinking about these movements” (13).

He then called this theory ‘conceptual epiphenomenalism’. Without wanting to assess or discuss Shwayder’s theory in any detail, I mention it to help illustrate the sense in which, it

seems to me, we can say that people act *as though they accepted* the Principle of Sufficient Reason. When I observe most peoples' behaviour and actions they act *as though* they accept the basic idea that for every event B there was a cause A such that 'A caused B' and 'B' happened because 'A' happened and/or *as though* for every *action* B there is some reason, purpose or goal, A because of which B was done. It seems *to me* that they act this way because *I* have this way of "thinking about these movements" — that is, I have in my conceptual framework the idea of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, and so it seems to me that people behave and react in ways which can be made sense of by reference to the principle. If you were to ask probably any random person — "Why did X happen?" they would give you a reason — causal or otherwise — for why X occurred. For example, if you were to observe someone throwing a rock at window, and ask why they were throwing the rock at the window, they might reply by saying "to break it." And then you might continue to ask "So why throw the rock?" And they might wonder what is wrong with you for asking this question again, but the point here is that while the person may not recognize the Principle of Sufficient Reason they they are acting *as though* they do since they would seem to believe that throwing the rock hard enough at the window will be sufficient to cause the window to break. So the idea I am trying to make as plausible as possible is this: firstly, people's behaviour, actions and reactions proceed *as though* they accepted the Principle of Sufficient Reason and, secondly, acts are to be called evil, according to Neiman, if they are beyond morally wrong in the sense that their acts threaten our capacity to make sense of our world, that is, threaten the viability of the truth of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, and, finally, *this* point can be expressed by saying that such acts threaten the *intelligibility* of our world. I think that this is Neiman's core idea regarding the problem of evil and I find it to be

an extremely interesting idea and that is why I think it is worth making the effort to spell out the idea in detail. I think that –it just may be that we do act *as though* we accepted, in some basic way, and are guided by, something like the Principle of Sufficient Reason, so that, in some very general sense, we act *as though* the principle were true, though it may not in fact be true.

Another consideration that *seems* to suggest that people do in some sense accept or act *as though* they accepted the Principle of Sufficient Reason is the fact that it seems to me that if most people *did not* believe that their lives and the world they live in could be understood, and that every state of affairs that exists does so for sufficient reason, and if people *did* believe that nothing they did would have an effect on anything else, then there would be absolutely no reason to do anything- everything would mean absolutely nothing, and existence would be utterly futile. I am here again going quite a lot beyond on what Neiman in fact says but I do think the point I am making is a useful and sympathetic supplementation of her ideas. Though I would like to acknowledge that she in fact might be working with some more basic version of the principle of sufficient reason which would suggest merely that we *want* the world and our lives to have meaning and make sense, and this is how most human beings view their world and maybe the only way humans *can* view the world. It might not be so much that we want it to make sense but rather that we thoroughly believe it somehow does and we need to believe that it does.

Very generally and in summary, Neiman seems to re-formulate the Traditional Problem of Evil, that evil threatens beliefs about God and God's existence into a secular version of The Problem, where evil threatens beliefs about our understanding of the world.

Her idea is that the Problem of Evil results from something conflicting with or challenging the sense and understanding that we have attributed to the world we exist and act in.

On Neiman's account The Problem of Evil is connected to our dependence on the Principle of Sufficient Reason in a very general way, evil threatens our belief that that the world is intelligible to us since everything either has a cause, or that there is a reason for everything that exists as it does, where, when and how it does and/or everything which everyone does is done for some understandable reason, maybe even done, as the medievals put it, *sub specie boni* — done as something which is worth doing or even good. So, I suggest, Neiman explains why we feel the need to talk of evil rather than just wrong doing, by appealing to the Principle of Sufficient Reason: to say that something is evil is to say that it is something which clashes with or challenges our belief or perhaps our need to believe that the world makes sense and that something can be done in the face of evil to maintain the understanding we have of the world.

Thus far her suggestion seems very tempting and indeed it will emerge that I am tempted by this idea. What we now want from her is, of course, some account of what evil *consists* in. What she seems to say on this question is interesting and worth exploring. I will take it that indeed one way of reading Neiman's account of 'evil' involves the core idea that an act or a sequence of acts x by some agent A is evil if the result compromises our understanding of the world and creates an inability to react and respond to the event that has taken place. But that is not all there is to her suggestion. I think that she also wants to suggest that actions and events in the world that we may want to call evil threaten *both* (i) our *understanding* and *comprehension* of the world, and as a consequence (ii) our ability to *appropriately act* in the world. Neiman views the problem of evil as a problem both about

how humans can *act in the world* and as a problem about how humans can *make sense of the world* and thus seems to view evil as something which *both* renders unintelligible our understanding of the world *and* at least undermines our ability to find a way of acting appropriately in a world where people do do such acts. What she seems to claim is, surprisingly, that it is this clash which accounts for what *makes* something evil or what makes that *count* as evil. Neiman's account suggests then that this resulting incomprehension is what is to be understood as what is evil. Neiman introduces the term "conceptual devastation" to capture what she seems to suggest the incomprehension consists in and she suggests that this conceptual devastation is what evil consists in and what evil *is*.

"Conceptual Devastation"

That evil consists in conceptual devastation is in fact what Neiman is suggesting in *Evil in Modern Thought* and I want to now turn to the task of explaining and assessing this interesting suggestion and its implications. As my comments thus far, I hope, make clear, I want to take her suggestions not only as suggestions about why evil causes problems for us, but also and more importantly as a suggestion about what evil *consists in* — about what evil's essential nature is since despite her explanation of why the existence of evil seems to be a serious problem, Neiman nevertheless also seems to want to suggest that what is evil is the resulting "conceptual devastation". This is Neiman's phrase chosen for capturing the idea that evil essentially involves the hindering of our ability to know what to think and what to do when confronted by evil. She uses the example of the Holocaust and specifically the events that occurred at Auschwitz to explain that it is in the conceptual devastation that evil exists, and it is the conceptual devastation that is evil. However before proving and then

assessing her claim that it is the conceptual devastation that is evil I want to examine what exactly Neiman means and implies by the phrase “conceptual devastation”.

She compares the paradigmatic example of Auschwitz with the Lisbon earthquake to show what she means by ‘conceptual devastation’ and how it is the conceptual devastation that makes Auschwitz, what she claims stands for all that is meant when we use the word evil today, evil.

Lisbon and Auschwitz, for Neiman, are two paradigms of evil in its various senses. The Lisbon earthquake killed several thousands of people, and at Auschwitz, the concentration camp in Poland, 1.5 million people were killed in less than five years. According to Neiman the Lisbon earthquake and the response afterward prompted a change in the way we think about evil as it exists in the world. There was a change in our conceptions of evil somewhat prompted by Lisbon, she suggests, and that change was the growth of the view that evil was something human beings do. This change can be seen as the division between natural evils and moral evils. Such things as earthquakes and natural disasters were no longer considered evil and according to Neiman the Lisbon earthquake can be seen as prompting a change in what could be considered ‘evil’. *Before* Lisbon what was considered evil was both natural evils and moral evils and therefore included both human suffering caused by ‘natural’ disasters *and* human suffering caused by human agency, but *after* Lisbon the conception of evil changed. Evil after Lisbon was viewed as being limited to something that is done by human beings intentionally, knowingly and with a clear goal in view. More formally, after Lisbon evil was conceived: (i) as in some sense a “bad” effect, (ii) an *effect* produced by an intentional act or group of acts, (iii) these acts or group of acts being each done intentionally by an agent or group of agents, (iv) the acts or group of acts

were each done with *the intention of producing or helping in the production of that effect mentioned in (i)*. The only question now was whether God could be conceived of as doing such acts, at least if he or she was good and the conclusion was that he could not be so conceived, so natural and moral evil were distinguished.

Turning now to Auschwitz. *After* Auschwitz, she suggests, everything was different, for Auschwitz presented yet another new form of evil. After Auschwitz, evil could not be understood as something “bad” done intentionally in the way set out in the formal account in the last paragraph. For Auschwitz seemed to present us with a situation in which it was clear that acts were done by human beings, *but* where it was less clear that these acts each were done intentionally with the full and conscious intention of producing the “bad” effect. As she said in her Tapestry interview (cited earlier) Auschwitz was “clearly a case of acts of human beings but less clearly an act of people acting with full and conscious intentions. Before Auschwitz we apparently had a picture of evil and its place in the world, but the events at Auschwitz for the most part did not fit this picture.” It was a new form of evil because before Auschwitz and after Lisbon “moral categories were confined to one small piece of the world, those human beings who might realize them. Auschwitz raised doubt about the sense in which we apply them (the moral categories) at all” (240). Auschwitz “undermined the modern rejection of theodicy that locates evil in intention” (240), the intention here presumably being the intention to produce the “bad” effect. The acts committed at Auschwitz challenged the sense that, after Lisbon, had been made of the nature of evil action. For at Auschwitz, it was not clear that the most accurate understanding of the situation was that humans were intentionally acting in order to produce the “bad” effect: things were much messier and more complex than *that*. The actions done by people that produced the horror at

Auschwitz were done with a wide variety of intentions and with a wide variety of goals. Auschwitz and its evil was the *outcome* of all of these various actions and maybe *some* people were acting *in order* to produce the evil, but the full horror of Auschwitz cannot be comprehended if we view it as the outcome of *these* actions. Instead, Auschwitz needs to be conceived of as the outcomes of all of the acts done with all of the various goals and intentions: Auschwitz would still have been evil even if no one had in fact intended to create the evil found there.

The importance of all of this is that our ability to make sense of the acts and evil done in our world was challenged by Auschwitz, for Auschwitz seemed to show that human intention was no longer the authority on what makes an act evil, so then our previous conceptual tools and understanding of evil were rendered useless and we were in effect at a loss in trying to comprehend and understand what had happened. The absence of the previously required element of intention to produce the “bad” effect is the main reason Neiman claims that there is a change in our conception of evil and why we needed a new conception of evil when presented with Auschwitz. According to Neiman traditional conceptual resources for coping with evil do not work for attempting to comprehend the evil that Auschwitz presented us with.

Before exploring in further detail Neiman’s suggestion of what a new conception of evil should look like, I think it would be useful to review the reasons she *explicitly* offers for why the traditional conceptual resources available for addressing with and dealing with evil do not account for or explain what happened at Auschwitz.

Why a New Conception of Evil is Needed

In the twentieth century before the Second World War, the conception which had been developed of evil and the typical motivating factors for doing acts that were counted as evil was developed in light of our knowledge of and experience of WWI. According to Neiman, World War I “now seems both intelligible and contingent, the lethal fruit of imperialism and early modern technology. From where we are standing, it remains within the outer limits of normal. Auschwitz does not” (251). I take Neiman to be comparing World Wars and claiming that what happened in WWI is now understandable and not completely devoid of straightforward explanation. Unlike the Holocaust which occurred in World War II, World War I was (i) conceived as an effect produced by an intentional act or group of acts, (ii) intentionally done by an agent or group of agents, (iii) the acts each being done with the *intention of producing or helping in the production of that effect*. So with World War I we were able to understand it with our traditional conception of evil. She also claims that “Auschwitz beggared expectation” (215), in a way that WWI did not. So after World War II our conception of evil had to change because we judged that Auschwitz was evil but we judged that it was not evil in the same way World War I was. Actions and consequences of WWI could have been and perhaps were expected, while what happened in WWII especially at Auschwitz could not have possibly been. The fact that Germany was held responsible for starting a war “that caused untold devastation and unforeseeable consequences” (251) reinstates Neiman’s idea that our resources for dealing with WWI would not suffice in understanding WWII. Instead to understand the evil which was Auschwitz we need to recognize that (i) Auschwitz was an effect which was “bad” but (ii) Auschwitz was an effect which was produced by a set of acts by a variety of people, each of

these acts being (iii) intentional, but (iv) the intention of the individual acts was not necessarily to produce the (total) effect but rather (v) there were various intentions behind the individual acts and (vi) the total effect was the product of these separate acts interacting with one another.

Finally Neiman attempts to illustrate how Auschwitz cannot be dealt with by employing traditional conceptions for coping with evil by providing two examples of attempts that have been made. One attempt is to view Nazi's as no worse than other war criminals and anti-Semites, and the other views the Nazi's as singularly demonic and uniquely diabolical.

According to Neiman it is not enough to say that the Nazi's were no different a scourge from any other group of anti-Semites, and it is certainly ridiculous to suggest as some orthodox Jews apparently have that Auschwitz was "God's judgment on European Jews since God abandons those who abandon his ways, and Judaism is a religion of collective responsibility so collective punishment fell on the pious and secular Jews alike" (251). The second attempt to place Auschwitz into traditional conceptual resources for dealing with evil which claims the Nazi's were singularly demonic is to say something like 'only Germans could have produced something like Auschwitz', and that something about Auschwitz was essentially German. This attempt only tries to claim that Auschwitz was a national problem and did not reflect anything about the human race, unfortunately this is not only pushing a racist stereotype but is ignorant and ridiculous, seeing as how Germans are part of the human race.

The differences between World Wars, our traditional and seemingly mistaken conceptions of what it took to do evil, and failed attempts to fit Auschwitz into traditional

conceptions of evil are why Neiman argues that we need a new conception of evil after Auschwitz. According to Neiman our traditional conceptual resources for dealing with evil do not work in the case of Auschwitz. Whether these are good arguments on Neiman's part are not of great importance because as it will be shown her account of a new conception of evil will not do and in fact we do not need a new conception, because once we get straight how to properly conceive of evil then the same conception will work both before and after Auschwitz.

The New Nature of Evil

So since according to Neiman a new conception of evil is required she provides an interesting and provocative suggestion about *what is* new in contemporary evil, the paradigm of which is Auschwitz. She claims this is best found by "looking more closely at what conceptual resources were destroyed by Auschwitz..." She suggests that "What seemed devastated, nay entirely thwarted, by Auschwitz was the possibility of intellectual response at all" (256). Auschwitz is characterized as a place that defied and was beyond meaning and sense. She notes Primo Levi's report of a guard's statement which was "Hier ist kein warum", ('Here there is no "why"' (333)). The contemporary evil that Auschwitz embodied left people with the idea that "we lack the conceptual resources to do more than bear witness....Contemporary evil left us helpless" (240). Neiman focuses on the fact that Auschwitz resulted in "conceptual devastation", and it is this that marks this form of evil as different and new.

Our inability to make sense or understand this evil is due, according to Neiman's account, to the impotence intention seemed to play while the resulting evil took place. Auschwitz presented a case where the acts that were done did not necessarily involve humans

fully intending the consequences and this absence of intention in doing the acts and causing the results conflicted with the understanding of evil we thought we had established. Neiman suggests that both before and after Auschwitz it was clear that human beings showed the capacity for cruelty that words fail to capture but Auschwitz presented a problem for thinking about evil because it seemed that evil could exist and be done without the people who were carrying out the evil acts, fully intending the consequences. For example, some of the Nazis involved were just 'doing their job' rather than fully wanting or intending on the complete extermination of the Jews. Adolf Eichmann was a bureaucrat who wanted to keep the trains running on time and on schedule, regardless of whether they were transporting people to death camps. Neiman claims, "the problem is not that Nazi murders were either particularly brutal or heartless-but precisely that they were not" (252). Neiman seems to be illustrating the point that at Auschwitz the human suffering which occurred was *not* fully intended by everyone who played a part in making it happen and that is what makes it so confusing and adds another element that makes it awful. Evil makes more sense if it is done by bad people who want to do bad things, it is not as understandable when it is done by regular people who are not doing it for malicious reasons. According to Neiman Auschwitz presented a new form of evil, and this new form of evil could not be understood by utilizing our previous concepts of evil.

What caused our inability to comprehend this new evil without intention, she is suggesting, seems to be what Hannah Arendt called the 'banality' of evil.² Neiman seems to be in favor of Hannah Arendt's classification of evil as banal but that it is, is where our inability to understand it lies. The example of the actions of Adolf Eichmann can again serve as an instance of evil occurring without the required intentions. It is claimed in Ardent's

² Hannah Arendt . *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Penguin Group, 1994.

account of Eichmann and his role during the Holocaust that not only was malice missing from his actions but also a view of the consequences of his actions. Neiman also expresses her view that:

“Auschwitz was an act that in its end was intolerably evil, that’s structurally intentional, that is it involved a vast amount of planning and coordination, it did not simply happen. But when you look at the individual cases of individual Nazis who were responsible for different pieces of it, they don’t fit the picture of the sadistic, Sadeian villain, they don’t fit at all. The thing could not have been carried out if there hadn’t been a gigantic number of mindless bureaucrats each doing his or her piece of the job without fully intending the result” (Tapestry).

The view of evil that made sense to us, that people do evil intentionally, knowingly and for a ‘purpose’ was disrupted by Auschwitz. Here was a situation where the banality of evil was a huge factor in the events that occurred, the acts that occurred seemed not to require intention, depth or demonic dimension, but at the same time there clearly existed intention at the structural level as well as the clear intention to promote the Aryan race. With all this in consideration Neiman rightly claims our conceptual resources and comprehension ability were thwarted because “at every level the Nazi’s produced more evil, with less malice, than civilization had ever known” (271). This resulted in confusion as to what sort of conception of evil should and does exist, because Auschwitz seemed to present two conceptions of evil – one where evil is produced intentionally and the other where evil is banal. But the two forms of evil did not function exclusively apart from each other, as our previous understanding of evil would suggest that they might. That is just Neiman’s point: Auschwitz destroyed any

previous understanding of evil and left humanity confused and lost as to how to make sense of evil as it presented itself in and after Auschwitz.

There is no doubt that our understanding of the world and of evil was significantly challenged by Auschwitz. Neiman seems absolutely correct in claiming that the conceptual challenge Auschwitz presented for thinking about evil was new. Auschwitz presented something humanity had yet to experience and so did not know how to make sense of it. Until Auschwitz, evil was conceived as an effect produced by an intentional act or group of acts that were intentionally done by an agent or group of agents, these acts each being done with the *intention of producing or helping in the production of that effect*. This account of evil alone could not capture or explain the disgustingly evil events that occurred at Auschwitz and other concentration camps during the holocaust.

Neiman is correct on her view that our ability to make sense of the world and maintain our belief in the Principle of Sufficient Reason was significantly challenged after Auschwitz which provided us with a new form of evil. However Neiman seems to want to take the idea of what makes evil a problem to be what evil *is*. She does, as the next chapter will show, want to suggest that along with the fact that the events at Auschwitz and of the Holocaust conceptually devastated us as we were presented with such a new and different situation to respond to, she suggests that this resulting conceptual devastation is what *is* evil. But even given that the Problem of Evil could be connected to our dependence on the Principle of Sufficient Reason in some basic form, and even given that evil is something that threatens the intelligibility of the world, Neiman's attempt to make conceptual devastation what *is* evil as opposed to just what the problem of evil consists in, is seriously flawed. I will

now show that Neiman does claim that evil exists as the resulting conceptual devastation and will examine this contentious claim.

CHAPTER III

The Problems with Neiman's View of Evil as Conceptual Devastation

I want now at this point to address some objections that can be raised regarding Neiman's account of what is the determinant of something being evil. All three objections argue against Neiman's suggestion that the resulting conceptual devastation of an act or event is, or is the primary source of, evil. Neiman argues that what should be considered evil are not acts or events, or the people involved and their motivations and intentions, but rather what should be properly considered evil or at least the primary cause of evil on Neiman's account is the consequential conceptual devastation to humanity. I will offer three arguments against Neiman's account of what constitutes as evil, and I will refer to them as The Euthyphro argument, the Rape argument and the Guantanamo Bay argument. The Euthyphro and Rape arguments are designed to show how Neiman's account has a problem with what I will refer to as "The Direction of Fit." The Guantanamo Bay argument is designed to show that conceptual devastation should not be considered a *determinate* of something's being evil, though it may in fact be a *result* of something's being evil. However before immediately illustrating what is wrong with Neiman's account and why, I first want it to be clear that she is in fact offering as an account of evil what I am claiming she is.

Evil as Conceptual Devastation

By 'conceptual devastation' it initially seemed to me that Neiman meant that our conceptual resources for comprehension and understanding are devastated, a sort of intellectual devastation as opposed to an emotional devastation. I was wrong however in initially limiting the meaning of 'conceptual devastation' to a situation where our available

conceptual resources are rendered useless in an attempt to intellectually understand or make sense of what has happened or is happening. This initial understanding and explanation of 'conceptual devastation' is what I will refer to as 'conceptual devastation properly-so-called'. However there is much more involved in what Neiman means by conceptual devastation and that she means more than this can be seen through everything she says about, and attributes to being conceptually devastated. As mentioned in Chapter II, Neiman suggests that actions and events in the world that we may want to call evil (and so are therefore conceptually devastating) are so because they threaten *both* (i) our *understanding* and *comprehension* of the world, and as a consequence (ii) our ability to *appropriately act* in the world. It seems then that there can be least three ways in which people and humanity can be devastated: (i) in relation to conceptions, (ii) in relation to emotions and/or affects, and finally (iii) in relation to reactions. It does seem that while Neiman is claiming that people are conceptually devastated she is also suggesting that they are devastated in relation to emotions and affects, that is they are confused as to how to feel, how to relate to other people, what should be said or felt, and they are devastated in relation to reactions, that is, they do not know how to respond and therefore act, and appropriate actions are unknown.

To completely understand everything that is, and should be meant by 'conceptual devastation', a wider sense of the term needs to be explored. Neiman does direct her focus towards conceptual devastation properly-so-called, as opposed to emotional devastation or devastation in relation to responses, but the reason I think she does this is because to be conceptually devastated in the wider sense of the term is the worst way in which our understanding of the world and how to act in it can be threatened by evil. When understood in the wider sense of the term conceptual devastation is the worst of the three forms of

devastation because if we are *conceptually* devastated properly-so-called, we are *also* both devastated in relation to emotions or affects as well as in relation to responses. Once conceptual devastation occurs it seems inevitable that emotional devastation and devastation in relation to responses will also be present.¹ However it is not the case that either of the other forms of devastation would carry with it the other two. It seems that a person could be emotionally devastated by an event but not at a loss for how to react or how to understand an event. The same seems true when a person may be confused or not know how to appropriately respond to an event or know what should be done in light of an event, but they may still maintain an understanding of the event and also not be emotionally devastated. People can be devastated both in relation to emotions and affects and in relation to reactions without being devastated conceptually or otherwise. However to be conceptually devastated by an event is to *also* be emotionally devastated and devastated in relation to ones reactions to an event. 'Conceptual devastation properly-so-called' is understood as a purely cognitive kind of devastation, and while it may have seemed to have meant only that on a first glance, to truly understand and appreciate what conceptual devastation should involve and actually does involve, it must be understood in the wider sense of the term which encompass all the kinds of devastation which stem from conceptual devastation properly-so-called. I am suggesting that this understanding of conceptual devastation in the wider sense will capture all that should be meant by conceptual devastation. Neiman uses the term *conceptual devastation* in the wider sense to capture the idea of a loss of our capacity to comprehend, to understand, to make sense of some event along with the fact that we are also devastated emotionally and in relation to how to react or respond. While Neiman does not make the

¹ It is not clear that this is Neiman's view: however a sympathetic reading of what she does say would suggest that this is something she *ought* to have said.

distinction between conceptual devastation properly-so-called and conceptual devastation in the wider sense of the term, she seems to use just the phrase 'conceptual devastation' to mean conceptual devastation in the wider sense of the term, which encompasses all three kinds of devastation. Given that conceptual devastation (properly so-called) is always associated with other two, it is not unnatural to use the phrase 'conceptual devastation' to mean the complexes of all three kinds of devastation, which is what I have called the wider sense of the term.

So while Neiman may not, a theory of devastation can be developed in two ways.

(a) We might say that there are three kinds of devastations, conceptual, emotional and responsive and of these three the first is the most serious because it is always followed by the other two, whereas the reverse is not always true; (b) we might say that (a) is true and as a consequence it would not only be reasonable but also very natural to start using the phrase conceptual devastation more widely, in fact to cover not only conceptual devastation the kind already described but also the effects of such, that is, the other two kinds. I think that in fact the wider use is worth adopting for it catches the core ideas that I am trying to spell out here and in fact, though Neiman does not say this and indeed might not accept it, it provides a sympathetic way of reporting her thinking. So from now on in using the term 'conceptual devastation' I will use it in the wider sense of the term and mean it to capture devastation in relation to conceptions and also devastation in relation to emotions and affects, and in relation to reactions.

With this notion of a wider sense of conceptual devastation in mind I want to return to Neimans's paradigm of evil which is Auschwitz and which according to Neiman "*stands for all that is meant when we use the word evil today*: absolute wrong doing that leaves no room

for account or expiation”(Italics added) (3). So if Auschwitz is evil, it is evil because and in so far as it caused conceptual devastation, as she even states in the quote above, it ‘left no room for account or expiation’, that is, there was no possibility of knowing how to understand what had happened or how to appropriately react. And this is just what ‘conceptual devastation’ when understood in the wider sense, is. When humanity was presented with what happened at Auschwitz all previous accounts of evil, any previous understanding of evil, and all previous responses to evil came to be inadequate conceptual resources for explicating the nature of the evil found there and in the Holocaust generally. The previous conception of evil seemed inadequate for explaining, for describing and for understanding. ‘Evil’ as it was understood before Auschwitz was not an accurate enough term, nor a strong enough term to describe or explain the evil found at Auschwitz. More than that, our previous conceptual resources lacked the capacity to provide us with the means to even understand the events of the Holocaust. We did not have the conceptual resources even to *describe* what happened; hence we were at a loss when trying to figure out *what* we were *explaining* (explaining how it came to happen: since we cannot describe it we are not sure what *it* is), and we then also did not know how to *understand* it since we experienced an inability to *comprehend* what had happened, and how it had happened, and the fact that it had *actually* happened. There was no straightforward or even appropriate explanation or response available and arguably it was the banality of the evil which played a huge role in the failure to comprehend all that had occurred. The banality of evil played a role in the incomprehension of Auschwitz because it seemed to work in two ways.² The sheer number of people murdered was, and still is, impossible to completely comprehend, and the banal

² I am using “banality of evil” in the way that Hannah Ardent uses it and explains it in *Eichmann in Jerusalem; A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

nature in which it was done is almost inexplicable. This may be due to the two directions the banality seems to work. Without the goal to rid Germany of certain groups of people the banal acts and jobs would never have existed, and without the banal acts and jobs the huge atrocity could not have been achieved. But most people carrying out the banal acts, such as making sure the trains ran on time or sitting at a desk checking people's names off a list, were not doing so for much more of a reason than they were doing their job. So while these banal acts only existed because of the hugely evil act of eliminating specific groups of people, the people doing them were not necessarily doing the act for that reason or with that goal in view. Due to the fact that our previous conception of evil was inadequate for describing, for explaining, and for understanding, what had happened Neiman seems correct in claiming that "Auschwitz destroyed the possibility of intellectual response itself" (256) since conceptual and affective responses, and any kind of enlightened response, was halted by the events of the Holocaust.

Auschwitz left people conceptually, emotionally and otherwise devastated in much the same way as strong believers in God were devastated after the Lisbon earthquake. It was not understood how or why God could or would have allowed such a disaster as the Lisbon earthquake. People were left so conceptually and responsively devastated after Lisbon that they questioned what they had previously believed and trusted and consequently changed the way God and their world would be viewed. When confronted by Auschwitz, people were similarly conceptually, emotionally and responsively devastated. It challenged the way people viewed humanity, fellow humans, their beliefs, their beliefs about themselves, and about the world in which they lived, and this was devastating. This then is, I suggest, the core of what Neiman means by conceptual devastation.

I think it is worth noting that, *if* the account offered by Neiman of the connection between evil and conceptual and consequential emotion and responsive devastation were to stand as a general theory of evil, then the account would need to provide an adequate explication of the sense in which not only Auschwitz was evil, but also an adequate explication of the sense in which events previous to Auschwitz were also evil. For example, consider Neiman's preferred earlier example of evil – the Lisbon earthquake. The view that the Lisbon earthquake was an evil was previously explicated using only theistic accounts. On Neiman's new account we would now have to explicate the sense in which the earthquake was an evil. On Neiman's account of evil we would have to say that the Lisbon earthquake is to be counted as evil because and insofar as when it happened it produced conceptual, and consequential emotional and responsive, devastation. It would seem that we can say that and we can say it in a way which is not *essentially* a theistic explication. Here, presumably, is what Neiman would say about the sense in which the Lisbon earthquake was an evil: it was an evil because and insofar as people at the time found that the conceptual tools available to them seemed inadequate to the task of making sense of the occurrence of the earthquake. The conceptual tools which they *tried* to use to make sense of it were tools which required that *god* be viewed as being a *good* god loving people *and* as directing everything which happens. But with those conceptual tools for understanding what happened in the earthquake the obvious and now familiar problems arise– for amongst those that died were many children and many apparently innocent people. What then with these conceptual tools were people to make of the earthquake and of a god who would cause such a thing to happen? As Neiman describes, people were conceptually devastated by the event. So, I

suggest, we can indeed make sense of the suggestion that on Neiman's account of evil, these two paradigms of evil are so because from both situations conceptual devastation resulted.

This then is the core building block of Neiman's account of the nature of evil and perhaps also her account of what it is about something which licenses us calling it evil, as opposed, perhaps, to tragic, or horrible, or just wrong. But to spell out in full what her account comes to more is needed.

When developing an account of evil or attempting to explain what evil is or can consist in there seems to be at least three broad areas to focus on; acts, consequences and people. Neiman's view of evil takes evil to be something that is a consequence but a very particular consequence. For any reality that exists that is truly tragic, horrible, wrong, or inhumane, that reality enters into the realm of being evil, Neiman argues, only if as a result conceptual devastation for humanity ensues. For Neiman something is evil if something horrible and/or tragic and/or wrong and/or inhumane occurs and it results in conceptual devastation, and it is evil *because and insofar as* it is conceptually devastating. Humanity can be emotionally devastated by a horrible act or tragic event in the world but that by itself would not be enough for Neiman to call that act or event evil. Humanity may be at a loss for knowing what to do in light of a horrific situation in the world, but that situation would also not necessarily be evil according to Neiman. Emotional, responsive *and crucially* conceptual devastation are essential and the most fundamental of these, according to Neiman, is the conceptual devastation. There are many, probably too many horrible, horrific things occurring in the world but on Neiman's account those things are not what should be properly understood as evil unless, as in the case of Auschwitz, humanity runs the risk of finding itself unable to come close to understanding or comprehending the act, event, or consequences of the

act or event that has taken or is taking place. Our conceptual resources are what we rely on when faced with new or difficult situations that we must try to understand and respond to and when these are rendered useless we are left according to Neiman, conceptually devastated. Conceptual devastation is or is the root of what is evil, and what evil exists in and as.

Neiman's account is appealing since it at least provides us with a specification of what is evil and why; evil is something that conceptually devastates us, and that it is conceptually devastating is why it is evil. There is however a serious flaw in Neiman's account and this is the problem already mentioned, that, while evil may be conceptually devastating, that is not what makes it evil, and not what *is* evil. Conceptual devastation of the kind just described, whether the conceptual devastation was to the possibility of believing in an all powerful god who loves men (as in the case the Lisbon earthquake) or to the possibility of understanding and responding to the motivations and acts of perpetrators (as in the case of the holocaust), was undoubtedly a consequence of Lisbon and Auschwitz, it is not however what makes the earthquake or Auschwitz, and the entire holocaust, evil. Neiman's theory that evil is and consists in consequential conceptual devastation has many attractive features and suggests interesting and intriguing ideas, but I wish to argue that, as a theory about what evil is, it will not in the end suffice. Neiman has importantly drawn our attention to something that may be true about evil, but I want to firmly argue that she is mistaken in thinking that conceptual confusion is what *makes* something evil: instead, conceptual devastation is at most a consequence of something being evil. I want to suggest that Neiman's mistake is a mistake of a kind which has been familiar since Plato's *Euthyphro* and what I will call the Problem with the Direction of Fit.

The Euthyphro Argument

This is a common type of mistake that dates back to a question raised by Socrates in conversation with Euthyphro, “The point I wish to first understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved by the gods.” Euthyphro initially thinks that something is pious because it is loved by gods and Socrates says to him “Are you sure that that is what you want to be saying? That is, do you want to say that it is pious because it is loved by gods OR do you want to say that it is loved by gods because it is pious?” Euthyphro realizes that he does not really know *what* he wants to say. While it may not be decisively clear whether that which is pious is so because it is loved by the Gods, or is loved by the gods because it is pious, I am arguing that that Neiman is wrong in claiming that something is evil because it is conceptually devastating. It is the following kind of mistake, where it is thought that x is A because x is B, when REALLY it is the other way round, that is, the way it is is that x is B because it is A. The confusion involves mistaking the reason and explanation of something with what actually causes it. The problem here is the *direction of fit problem* – it is not that Auschwitz was evil because of the conceptual devastation: the conceptual devastation arises because it was so evil that previous concepts could not handle it. Neiman is claiming that x is A because x is B, that is that Auschwitz is evil, because Auschwitz caused conceptual devastation, but REALLY it is the other way around, x is B because it is A, that is Auschwitz was conceptually devastating because it is evil. While Neiman wants to claim that it is the conceptual devastation that makes it appropriate to call Auschwitz to *evil*, in fact, it is the other way round: it is because *what happened* at Auschwitz and in the holocaust was evil that we are conceptually devastated. To suggest that the conceptual devastation is what makes Auschwitz and the

Holocaust evil is not to properly understand what truly captures what was, and still is, evil about Auschwitz and the entire Holocaust. The mistake in Neiman's account is similar to the one Socrates draws attention to and is a problem with the direction of fit.

I would like to now address another related problem with Neiman's account of evil but in addition to this being another objection, this mistake may possibly serve as a partial explanation of why her account faces the direction of fit problem just described. The second objection to her account of evil is that she fails to adequately distinguish what she wants to say makes Auschwitz a *new* form of evil and what *is* evil about it. She seems to confuse an account of the nature of evil with her account of what is *new* about the evil found in Auschwitz. Auschwitz presented, she thinks, a *new* form of evil, and it is new in that our previous understanding of evil could not explain or capture the evil that resulted from Auschwitz, and we could also not rely on our previous conceptual resources in comprehending what happened. We were left therefore, conceptually devastated. Neiman seems to be saying that Auschwitz is conceptually devastating because or at least in part it because it presented this *new* form of evil. Obviously, what makes Auschwitz a new form of evil is not the same as what makes it evil. The fact that we were left conceptually devastated because of this new form of evil does not make it the case that the evil or the root of the evil is the conceptual devastation. The existence of a new form of evil may be conceptually devastating but that does not entail that evil *is* conceptual devastation. This could possibly contribute to Neiman's mistake regarding the direction of fit, as she does not sufficiently separate the two ideas, that Auschwitz was conceptually devastating and that Auschwitz was a new form of evil. On Neiman's account the two ideas run together and become one in the same.

While it is the case that Neiman links her account of the nature of evil with what is new about the evil presented at Auschwitz, it may be the case that she does not mistakenly do so, rather she may have meant to tie the newness of evil together with an account of the nature of evil where evil is the conceptual devastation. Neiman may actually find the evil to be in the consequence of conceptual devastation, which is shown through the newness of the evil presented at Auschwitz. Since according to her “to call an action evil is to suggest that it cannot (be ordered, fit in some manner into the rest of our experience) - and that it thereby threatens the trust in the world that we need to orient ourselves within it” (9). If something then ‘cannot be ordered, and fit in some manner into the rest of our experience’ it would be something new, and if it is evil then on Neiman’s account it would be conceptually devastating, so her position may be a ‘heroic’ position that does find the consequential conceptual devastation of a new evil to be what is evil.

I will take Neiman’s account to be that what is evil or at least the root of what is evil is the conceptual devastation that results from the acts judged to be evil, but also that a major contributor to the conceptual devastation for Neiman is the ‘newness’ of the evil presented by Auschwitz. So whether the newness and the conceptual devastation are intentionally not distinguished or it is in fact a mistake on Neiman’s part, will not be of much consequence because regardless she still gets the direction of fit wrong regarding evil and conceptual devastation. These are still two objections I will hold against her view, but they function as a combined argument — the combined argument saying (i) that Neiman has the direction of fit wrong regarding conceptual devastation and evil, and (ii) that this claim may be due to the failure (intentional or not) to distinguish between an analysis of evil and analysis of the newness of the evil that resulted from Auschwitz. My argument against Neiman remains that

she has got the direction of fit wrong since it is not the case that Auschwitz is evil because it is conceptually devastating, nor is it the case that Auschwitz is evil because it presented a new form of evil that resulted in conceptual devastation. Auschwitz was and is conceptually devastating because what happened at Auschwitz was evil.

I want to now look more closely at Neiman's account to show that her account does not in fact truly capture what it is for something to be viewed as evil, and that her account does not do this because she has gotten the direction of fit wrong in the manner displayed by the Euthyphro argument. These further comments are designed to address the concern that the direction of fit worry is only a worry if indeed she *did* get the direction of fit the wrong way round: *that* is something I have yet to show.

While Neiman claims that evil exists because "Auschwitz destroyed the possibility of intellectual response itself," (256) that Auschwitz did this does not appropriately account for why Auschwitz, the holocaust and such like horrors should be considered evil. The closest Neiman comes to defining evil is when she claims that "Evil is not merely the opposite of good but inimical to it. True evil aims at destroying moral distinctions themselves (287)." This may represent what she means when she claims that the evil that occurred at Auschwitz conceptually devastated human kind because it threatened any understanding we thought we had about our world, about people, and about the idea of evil, but again this is different than what is truly evil about Auschwitz.

What is so horrendously evil about Auschwitz and the Holocaust is *what* was done to the Jewish people and all other people involved. That they were loaded into trains and transported off to concentration camps where they were tortured, turned into accomplices of murder, themselves murdered in various forms, treated as sub-humans, along with many

other atrocities, all under the premise held by the leader of their country who wanted all the Jews exterminated in favor of an Aryan race. That all this was done is what was, and is remarkably evil, not as Neiman suggests, that it is evil because it caused us to be at a conceptual loss of understanding. Neiman states, "Of all the losses humankind sustained at Auschwitz, I will argue that this (the inability to rely on a clear notion of evil intention) is the most devastating" (258). The "inability to rely on a clear notion of evil intention" as the most devastating loss humankind sustained may support the view of evil Neiman is suggesting, but it is surely completely implausible to suggest that a loss of a clear notion of evil is the most devastating loss humankind sustained at Auschwitz. The loss of human life is certainly a more devastating loss, and I think most people would take a loss of a clear notion of evil intention over the loss of their entire family. I know I would prefer a loss of a clear notion of evil intention over the loss of the lives of one train load of people taken to a concentration camp to be tortured and then gassed to death, and over the loss the lives of the people who made up just one of the piles of bodies to be discarded. Neiman argues this to promote her claim that what is evil is the resulting conceptual devastation, because if it were defensible that a loss of a clear notion of evil intention were the most devastating of all the losses humankind sustained than her claim that that evil exists in the resulting conceptual devastation would be strengthened. She is however just wrong on both these claims. Regardless of the fact that Auschwitz and what happened in Nazi Germany threw into disarray everything humanity may have understood about their world, themselves, and what to think or do, this is not what is evil about Auschwitz and the holocaust. The impossibility of intellectual response, the complete conceptual devastation, the "inability to rely on a clear notion of evil intention", is not what should be considered the most devastating loss

humankind suffered. The fact that the murders of more than six million Jews alone occurred, not counting the other races and groups of people murdered, in the attempted elimination of specific groups of people is what is evil, and is only one of the losses more devastating than a loss of a clear notion of evil intention. The fact that civilization was left dumfounded and without the conceptual or intellectual resources to attempt to understand all the elements of the holocaust is not what is evil about it. The evil done is what caused this conceptual helplessness; it is not evil because we cannot understand it.

The Rape Argument

That Neiman has gotten the direction of fit wrong with regard to evil and conceptual devastation, should be clear by the argument just provided. It is the acts done that are evil and conceptual devastation is a consequence of evil, not as Neiman suggests that the things done are evil because we are left conceptually devastated. A similar type of argument is used against the theory of Divine Voluntarism.³ What is wrong with rape for example, is not that God does not want people to rape or be raped: what is wrong with rape is **the act itself** — for example, the degradation, the lack of respect for a persons rights, the violation and assault of the victims body, and in some cases the physical pain. What is wrong with rape is **what is involved in the act**. Similarly, what is evil about Auschwitz is not the reaction it caused, but what was involved, the acts done, the murdering, torturing, and attempted elimination of millions of people. There is no doubt, and no argument against the fact that Auschwitz resulted in conceptual devastation, a complete lack of possible understanding of what had happened, a confusion as to how it happened, and an inability to place this sort of act into any

³ Taken from discussions in John Bakers 449 and in private discussions with John Baker in 2005, regarding the direction of fit problem.

pre-existing concept of what evil was. The argument is against the suggestion that this helplessness in comprehension is what makes what happened at Auschwitz evil.

I now want to provide a third argument against Neiman's suggestion that it is conceptual devastation that marks something off as being evil. As mentioned before Neiman does not sufficiently distinguish what is evil about Auschwitz and the fact that Auschwitz presented a new kind of evil and on her view a major reason that Auschwitz was and is conceptually devastating is because of the "newness" of the evil that resulted from Auschwitz. A major reason if not the main reason that Auschwitz, according to Neiman, is conceptually devastating is that it presented humanity with something new, as she states: "What occurred at Nazi death camps was so absolutely evil that like no other event in human history it defies human capacities for understanding" (2). It is an entirely acceptable idea that 'conceptual devastation' is something that can be imagined as resulting when humanity is confronted with a new kind of evil. However, the problem with Neiman's account is that if the causing of conceptual devastation is made to be a *defining* feature of evil, that is, if the causing of conceptual devastation is *essential* to evil, then this means that things can only be evil if they are things which cause of conceptual devastation and this may suggest that only new things can be evil. Auschwitz was indeed conceptually devastating but again this is not what makes it evil, and all other things that may be considered evil do not have to necessarily be conceptually devastating in the way Auschwitz was. The following hypothetical example will show why conceptual devastation is not essential to something being evil, though it may be a result of evil, and therefore why Neiman's account that claims conceptual devastation *is* what is evil, is wrong.

The Guantanamo Bay Argument

Suppose the United States were to get to the point where the threat of terrorist attacks drove the government and some American people to start arresting, gathering up and killing all Muslim people and people of Muslim descent and taking them to Guantanamo Bay and there torturing, gassing, and killing them. Imagine this situation gets to the point where the Muslims are treated as the Jews were, and Guantanamo Bay becomes a 21st century Auschwitz, all under Bush's belief that America must be rid of these people to ever be safe. In theory then and what this example is supposed to reflect is replica of Auschwitz. Now for Neiman a major factor which made Auschwitz and the Holocaust conceptually devastating was that we were presented with such a new and different situation to respond to, so she suggests that this resulting conceptual devastation is what *makes* it evil. In the hypothetical Guantanamo Bay replica of Auschwitz, what is happening is not going to be something new that we have to respond to, it is a replica of Auschwitz. In changing the race from Jewish people to Muslim people, and Germany to The United States of America, and Hitler to Bush, everything that happened in Auschwitz, is now hypothetically happening at Guantanamo Bay. Guantanamo Bay then is not "new" in the same way Auschwitz presented something "new". *But* that would and should not make it any less evil — actually it might be argued that it makes it *more* evil because of course Auschwitz should have taught the Americans that such actions are evil. So given that Guantanamo Bay is not "new" in the same sense, can it be said to conceptually devastate humanity? Certainly it could not be said to conceptual devastate us in the same way that Auschwitz did, as we are all aware of Auschwitz and what happened and recognize it as something absolutely horrific. But the idea that we would not be conceptually devastated in the same way should not make Guantanamo Bay any less evil.

Certainly the response would not be something along the lines of, “Well Germany already did this in the 1940’s so it’s not so bad.” It can then not be the case that what conceptually devastates humanity is that it is faced with something horribly *new and different* to respond to. It would also be the case that it would seem, and I think Neiman would even want to say that this replica Auschwitz, occurring at Guantanamo Bay would be evil, and it might also be conceptually devastating. However the conceptual devastation caused by Guantanamo Bay would presumably not be caused by the same major factors that caused the conceptual devastation after Auschwitz. One major factor that would cause humanity to feel conceptually devastated would be the thought that this kind of atrocity had *already* occurred, and a question that would result in conceptual devastation would be “how could it happen *again?*”

So on a Neiman type account either Guantanamo Bay would not be considered evil, because it would not conceptually devastate us, or it would be considered evil and conceptually devastating but conceptually devastating in a different way than Auschwitz. I am going to assume that Neiman would not claim that this replica Auschwitz at Guantanamo Bay would not be evil. So Guantanamo Bay then would be something that Neiman would want to be considered evil and conceptually devastating, but clearly it would not conceptually devastate us in the same way Auschwitz did since the factor of “newness” is removed. Moreover, if anything is going to conceptually devastate us it is going to be that this sort of situation happened again. Therefore there is *something that causes us to become conceptually devastated*. It seems to me, but apparently not to Neiman, that this *something* that causes the conceptual devastation consists in the acts and things done, which are what are evil. It is the evil done that conceptually devastates us, not the fact that we are

conceptually devastated that makes something evil. In the case of Auschwitz it may be the “newness” of the evil, and in Guantanamo Bay it may be the “again-ness” of the evil that causes the conceptual devastation, but it is because something done is evil that conceptual devastation results, something is not evil because it is conceptually devastating. For Neiman the same conceptual devastation caused by Auschwitz would not be found in this hypothetical replica at Guantanamo Bay. It is the very point of the example that it be a replica so everything that happens at Guantanamo would have already happened at Auschwitz and while it might conceptually devastate us in other ways, we would have already witnessed this situation so it could not conceptually devastate us in the same way Neiman says Auschwitz did. This should not have any consequence on the fact that we would call this hypothetical Guantanamo Bay evil, or any less evil than Auschwitz. However Neiman’s account of evil suggests that this Guantanamo Bay example might not be evil, or would at least be less evil, if her account says that what is evil about Auschwitz is the conceptual devastation.

The acts done and that would be done, the events that occurred and would occur, and the fact that they occurred at all, in both Auschwitz and Guantanamo Bay are the causes of the conceptual devastation because they are evil. This is why what causes conceptual devastation should be properly considered as what is evil and not the resulting conceptual devastation itself as Neiman suggests.

Chapter IV

Exploring Evil Through Desires

In attempting to understand completely what Neiman suggests the nature of evil is, and in an attempt to develop what an account of the nature of evil should be, it would be sensible not to set Neiman's account entirely on one side. Although it is mistaken (as I believe I have sufficiently proved), there are interesting ideas that can be derived from her account which will help in understanding why we call something 'evil' rather than, for example, using the vocabulary of "wrong doing". Also in criticizing Neiman I certainly do not want to be guilty of straw-man argumentation. If only for these two reasons, I think it is worth attempting to find a sympathetic interpretation of her view and in fact, I think that as it turns out the attempt was worth the effort, for I think that interesting accounts of why we might want to call something evil result.

Common to these views which result from using her ideas and making them more precise, richer and unambiguous is the idea in one form or another that what makes something evil is not only the fact that the evil involves some truly horrible acts, that is, acts which tend to produce horror in normal people who come aware of them, but also the fact that the evil has amongst its results something else, and specifically some effects on the conceptual framework of "normal" people – in Neiman's words, "conceptual devastation". It is this idea of the relationship between what we feel we need to call evil and *conceptual devastation* which is, I think, worth exploring.

Neiman's idea is that when an act causing great harm to another person or a large number of people is done intentionally for whatever motive and warrants being viewed as evil, then, whatever else you say about the act which warrants calling it evil, at least this is

true, that there will be a dimension that is going to be missed if you focus exclusively on the nature of the *act*. The extra dimension which needs to be present for an act to be classable as evil as opposed to horrendously wrong is something like a reflective relationship between people other than those doing or suffering the evil and the act which is classed as evil: this reflective relationship is fundamental. Her suggestion is that the reflective reaction to the evil that needs to be taken account is one of conceptual devastation – “normal” people becoming aware of the act which is evil suffer conceptual devastation. So, on Neiman’s account of evil, on this interpretation, an evil act is not only one which intentionally causes enormous harm, nor one which merely produces horror and perhaps revulsion in people, it is also one which causes in third parties some extreme disordering of the *conceptual* framework with which people view the world and in particular the world of human action. In other words, along with the act itself and possible direct psychological responses which it produces in people (revulsion, horror, disgust, etc.), there are also more complex effects, effects of a ‘second order’ kind, effects on the concepts which people rely on when trying to make sense of other people’s actions – again in her words, the second order reaction of conceptual devastation in people individually and collectively on their civilization.¹

This idea of ‘second order’ effect and its relationship to a decision to categorize an act as evil rather than merely wrong, or horrible, or revolting, is not easy to come to grips with. One way of coming to grips with the way the interpretation might be spelled out might

¹ What is meant by ‘collectively’ here is the idea that it is not just each of us who in some very important way cannot understand what the Nazi’s wanted to do, why they so hated the Jews, it is not just that we are devastated each on our own individually, but what is devastation in addition is that we are devastated as well collectively. It is horrible enough what they did but on top of that we are deeply perplexed as to their motivation, individually as also collectively- the framework with which our culture addresses wrongdoing is not complex enough to make sense of the Nazi wrongdoing.

be to bring to bear a suggestion by Thomas Nagel about how to make sense of a rather different idea – the idea of perversion and specifically of sexual perversion.

To bring these ideas to bear I need to step back from my discussion so far and modify its structure a little – the reason for the modification will emerge shortly.

In my discussion of evil so far, I have taken it that the primary notion is that of evil *action*. Nagel frames his discussion in terms of perverted *desires*. To bring out the possible relevance of Nagel's ideas I will need to suggest an account of evil *goals* or *desires*. In fact, I think it would anyway be useful to examine what in detail an account of evil *desires* might look like, even though, as I said earlier, I think that we need to make such an account secondary to the account of evil *action*. The suggestion might be this: to acts which are merely morally wrong, even terribly morally wrong, but not evil, observers may react with anger, even with revulsion and disgust, but *sense* can be made of the act by observers of the act – the acts are done for comprehensible motives, we might say. The goals and motivations of the people who do the wrong acts are sufficiently similar to the goals which 'we' (a perplexing word in this context, as we will see) observers have that they can make sense of them. We observers may indeed respond to the act by being angry, disgusted, horrified, appalled, what have you, but the motivation or reason behind the act is understandable in at least one sense of that phrase. It is not beyond the observer's power of imagination to see why the act may have been done, even if they/we do not agree with the motivation and even condemn it.² What then, on my suggested account, separates evil acts from wrong acts is that with evil acts the goals and motives of the agents and the acts done in fulfillment of these

² I have and will continue to use the words 'we' and 'normal' in my account and explorations. I am intentionally leaving these words unexplained. While there is an implicit idea in the words 'we', 'them', and 'normal', an examination of these terms would need to be the subject for another thesis.

goals have a nature which may produce all of the same affective responses, but also one which, to use Neiman's words, involves also second order conceptual confusion – the acts are *incomprehensibly* wrong. The desire and the motivation to produce these acts and then to actually produce them is unimaginable to the point where observers are not only horrified at the act but cannot even begin to make sense of someone even possessing the desire to produce the act — the words they are tempted to use to describe the act and the desire to do the act seem *conceptually* inadequate — that is, conceptual “devastation”, to use Neiman's phrase, is involved in the response to the act. With this preliminary move, I will now turn to Nagel's ideas about perversion.

I begin with two caveats. Firstly, only traces of this idea are found in Nagel himself, so I am not prepared to spend time discussing whether this truly is Nagel's view. But the discussion might be revealing even if in the end it will not work even as an interpretation of Nagel. The second caveat is more substantial. It is important to be clear *both* that it is no part of Nagel's suggestion that perversions are by their nature evil *and* that I am not planning to examine his ideas about perversion with the goal of countenancing any such suggestion, though I am not completely averse to the idea that the reverse may be true — that is, that evil desires are perverted desires. My idea is very different. In brief my idea is this. Nagel gives an account of non-perverted desire and contrasts that account with an account of perverted desire. This structure of his account of perverted desire, and specifically his idea that perverted desires have a kind of complexity different from that of non-perverted desires, I suggest, might serve as a template for a *parallel* account of evil desires as apposed to the desire which a person might have when that person does a wrong act, even a terribly wrong act. My suggestion will then continue by investigating the possibility that when we “normal”

people are confronted by evil acts we have a difficulty in making sense of the acts and the desires which led to them, a difficulty which parallels the perplexity which a person with non-perverted desires has when confronted by someone with perverted desires – the reaction can be viewed as being one of incomprehension (“How could someone enjoy doing that or want to do that?”), even *conceptual* incomprehension (“I simply do not know the words to describe their desires, for words I might be tempted to use seem inadequate to the task”).

Therefore the evil act produces ‘conceptual disruption’ in someone who learns of the evil act and tries to understand it. Thus, in the case of the Holocaust, the reaction of “normal” people is “Why would and how could anyone hate Jews so much that they would treat them that way – what conception of Jews must they have had? And how could they have believed what they believed about the Jews? How could they have come to have their conception in the first place? I don’t seem to have the words that can describe their attitudes to Jews”. Or in the case of other examples such as the crimes of Jeffery Dahmer the reaction of “normal” people is usually “How could that be something anyone would want, why would and how could that be something they felt they needed to do? I don’t seem to have the words that can describe what it was he wanted”. It is incomprehensible that someone would truly have the motivation set which contains such desires and beliefs and so the language we might otherwise be tempted to use to describe their view of the world seems inadequate to the task. I will then suggest, as a partial explanation of why our words seem inadequate to the task of describing their view of the world (and this is an amplification and maybe a modification of Nagel’s view), that while it may, perhaps, be possible at some level or other to *cognitively* or *intellectually* ‘understand’ an evil or perverted desire, what is **not** possible is any *affective* or *conative* understanding of the desire itself and *that* is at least part of the reason why our

everyday concepts seem inadequate to the task of describing these people's views of the world. Let me briefly explain. We can "understand" that a particular Nazi truly hated the Jews and even enjoyed "exterminating" them because they hated them. Intellectually or cognitively we can to a point understand that this is their desire: we can to a point even describe the desire. We can make sense of hating a person or a group of people and perhaps wanting bad things for them: that is understandable in the sense that we can describe that this is what certain people wanted and perhaps describe why, though maybe the language maybe seems in a way and to a point inadequate to the task. However we cannot affectively or conatively imagine *actually possessing* a hatred that is so strong and truly held and from this a genuine desire for the extermination of certain people like the Jews and that the idea of accomplishing this was truly a source of enjoyment or perhaps satisfaction, or at least something made investment of time and effort "worth while". It is the actual possession of such a motivation set, or desire set, that such things belong to that is incomprehensible, and the thought is "Human beings that I know could not want/desire to do that kind of thing even to people they count as enemies. I am perplexed as well as being horrified. What are they thinking? How could they do such a thing?" So while we may be up to a point able to intellectually understand that the Nazis had this desire, we only understand it in a cognitive sense, that is we can describe it (though we may be unhappy with our characterization because the words *seem* unsuited to the task), what we cannot do and what remains unintelligible is *what it would be like* to have that desire, that is we cannot affectively or conatively imagine possessing such desires.

This then might be an account of evil desire, an account which, as I will now explain, seems at least in the tradition of what Nagel was trying to do for the concept of perverted

desire, and will hopefully exhaust the possibilities of what Neiman's notion of 'conceptual devastation' could mean.

Nagel and Sexual Perversion

In his paper "Sexual Perversion"³ Nagel begins by suggesting that if the concept of perversion is to be viable at all then three conditions must be satisfied – two will be of interest to us, but for completeness here are his three conditions: (a) If there are any sexual perversions, then there will have to be sexual desires or practices that can be plausibly described as in some sense unnatural, (b) If there are any sexual perversions, then certain practices will (i) be perversions if anything is, and (ii) other practices, will not be perversions, and (iii) about yet other practices there will be controversy.⁴ That is, there will be some paradigms of perversions and a theory about perversions should recognize them as such and if not then the theory will not do. And if there are paradigms of perversions then there will be paradigms of acts which are not perversions as well. And finally (c), if there are perversions, then the perverted practices will be the outcome of unnatural sexual inclinations rather than merely being (unnatural) practices which have been adopted not from inclination but for some other reason or reasons. From this spelling out of Nagel's conditions it would seem that clause (a) ties the concept of perversion to the concept of the unnatural, that clause (b) provides a sort of test of whether any analysis is on the right lines, the test starting from a list of paradigm perversions, and that clause (c) emphasizes the point that perverted practices are the product of unnatural desires and so emphasizes the point that at the core of perversion is the idea of unnatural inclinations, that is, the root of perversion lies in a problem with the motivations — desires, intentions, inclinations, urges, etc. — of people, the problem being

³Thomas Nagel, "Sexual Perversion." *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 66, Issue 1 (Jan. 16, 1969), 5-17

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

that they are “unnatural”. As the last comment makes clear, if I was to draw a parallel between my project of understanding evil and Nagel’s approach to the project of understanding sexual perversion, I would have to reframe my account so that I was treating evil desires, intentions, inclinations as primary and evil acts or practices as secondary, for on Nagel’s approach it is the idea of evil *intention* or evil *desire* which is fundamental. In a word, my approach, like Nagel’s, would have to treat as primary some problems with agent’s motivations. I have in effect already laid the ground for such an account (see above) and I will shortly make some further comments about how, though only in outline, this might be done. Nagel explicates the notion of the unnatural in a way which assigns a role to the concept of unintelligibility or incomprehensibility — his suggestion being that the motivations/inclinations/desires which are unnatural are in some sense unintelligible or incomprehensible, and it is this idea I want to use to attempt to make sense of Neiman’s theory by cashing in the idea of conceptual devastation in terms of the unintelligibility or incomprehensibility of the desires which give rise to the evil acts. On this modified account of evil then, *acts* become evil because and in so far as they are done with evil *desires* or *intentions*, just as perverted sexual desires are perverted because of the desire set involved. Neiman is not claiming that it is desires that are evil or that makes acts evil, but this is one way of attempting to understand why *conceptual* devastation might exist — the suggestion being that desires or intentions are evil because and in so far as they are, in Nagel’s words, “truncated” or “incomplete” (13) and therefore not something “normal” people would have or be able to understand or really make sense of. Nagel suggests a theory of perversion powerful enough to make sense not only of perverted sexual desires but also of other perverted desires more generally. His idea is that a perverted sexual desire and a perverted

hunger desire for example are desires which have a certain strikingly complex structure. He points out the sexual desire for another person is already very complicated – this is obvious if only both from the diversity of facts about a desired person which can prompt and nourish the desire but also from the fact that one and the same person can be the object of sexual desire for one person but not for another and from the fact that two people may share features at one level of description but one be desired by a person but the other not desired by that same person.⁵ The kind of complexity which he wants to say marks perverted sexual desire is of a different kind. He begins with a description of the level of complexity which can be found in non-perverted desires⁶ and then contrasts this complexity with the complexity for in perverted desires.⁷ According to Nagel's view of perverted sexual desire, perversion exists in deviations from the normal, deviations which constitute "truncated" or incomplete versions of the complete configuration of non perverted sexual desire. Nagel provides examples of such deviations, such as "narcissistic practices and intercourse with animals, infants, and inanimate objects" (14). These are his paradigm examples (see my summary of his methodology above).

To truly see how these are, according to Nagel, to be classified as perverted and not just things that are preferences different from our own, the complex and complete configuration of non-perverted desire needs to be understood.

It seems then, on Nagel's view, that non-perverted sexual desire involves "reflexive mutual recognition," (12) which is a reciprocal "mutual awareness" (12). This mutual and reciprocal awareness generally proliferates and levels of awareness of oneself, the object of sexual desire, and the complex levels of mutual awareness and reciprocal desire result.

⁵ Ibid., first full paragraph of page 9.

⁶ Ibid., starting in second last paragraph of page 10.

⁷ Ibid., starting in bottom paragraph of page 13.

Nagel points out that his description of non-perverted sexual desire is schematic as it must be to achieve generality. “The general schema is important, however, and the proliferation of levels of mutual awareness it involves is an example of a type of complexity that typifies human interactions.”(12) Nagel is providing a *schema* and this schema can play out in individual cases in various ways –note the comment that the mutual and reciprocal awareness *generally* proliferate: the proliferation can, he clearly thinks, unfold in various different ways. “The account is only schematic, as it must be to achieve generality” (12). So, as a methodological point, his account is best viewed, perhaps, as an account of a *syndrome*: if a set of desires fits the syndrome then it is a candidate for being classed as non-perverted. We will see that the same remarks should be made about the concept of *perverted* desire too: he will describe a syndrome. Non perverted sexual desire then involves various levels of mutual awareness, and these need to importantly be reciprocated mutual awareness, or, as he sometimes calls it, “reflexive mutual recognition”.⁸ Nagel does provide an example to help understand the way in which, on his account, levels of mutual recognition and reciprocal awareness are to be viewed as playing out in various forms of a “complete”, “untruncated” configuration of sexual desire. But before I review his account here, it is worth noting that sexual desire, importantly, can involve a proliferation of levels of mutual awareness without becoming *for that reason alone* perverted. The example which Nagel uses to illustrate his theory is an example of “normal” and “untruncated” sexual desire and it involves a man, Romeo, and a woman, Juliet. Romeo and Juliet are at opposite ends of a cocktail lounge. The cocktail lounge has many mirrors on the wall which permit for unobserved observation, as well as mutual unobserved observation. Each of them are observing and studying other people in the mirrors. Romeo begins observing Juliet. Attributes of Juliet sexually arouse

⁸ Ibid., 12.

him, such things as her hair, or the way in which she sips her drink. Romeo regards Juliet with sexual desire: however at this stage he is aroused by an un-aroused object. Then Juliet notices Romeo in the mirror on the opposite wall and is sexually aroused by him and regards him with sexual desire. At this point neither Romeo nor Juliet knows that they are being regarded with sexual desire by the other. Romeo then begins to notice subtle signs of Juliet's arousal, such as heavy-lidded stare, dilated pupils, faint flush, etc. His additional arousal from regarding Juliet with sexual desire, and now regarding her as sexually aroused, is still solitary at this point until he calculates the line of her stare and realizes that it is directed at him through the mirror on the opposite wall. He now regards her with sexual desire and notices that she is aroused and that he is the object of her sexual desire. This development provides Romeo not only with self-awareness of his own desire but now he is aware that he is being regarded with sexual desire from that which he regards with sexual desire. The different and varying levels of awareness continue as Juliet realizes that the object of her sexual desire is regarding her with sexual desire and additionally, that the object of her sexual desire is aware that she regards him with sexual desire. As Nagel states "Once she takes the same step...it becomes difficult to state, let alone imagine, further iterations, though they may be logically distinct" (11). Clearly physical contact and intercourse are perfectly natural extensions of this visual exchange, and ordinarily things will not happen in this ordered fashion. Given this, Nagel claims "that some version of this overlapping system of distinct sexual perceptions and interactions is the basic framework of any full-fledged sexual relation and that any relations involving only part of the complex are significantly incomplete" (12).

Non-perverted desire then involves or at least can involve complex proliferations and reciprocated mutual awareness of sexual desire. As Nagel states "the most characteristic

feature of a specifically sexual immersion in the body is its ability to fit into the complex of mutual perceptions that we have described... sexual desire leads to spontaneous interactions with other persons, whose bodies are asserting their sovereignty in the same way, producing involuntary reactions and spontaneous impulses in them. These reactions are perceived, and the perception of them is perceived, and that perception is in turn perceived; at each step the domination of the person by his body is reinforced, and the sexual partner becomes more possessible by physical contact, penetration, and envelopment” (13).

As it should be clear by now, on Nagel’s view, perverted sexual desire consists in some deviation from the above norm of unperverted sexual desire, a deviation that consists in the fact that the perverted sexual desire is in some sense an incomplete or, in his words, a “truncated” version of the above described complete configuration of non-perverted sexual desire, a desire which “may therefore be regarded as perversions of the central impulse (13).” Untruncated versions involve recognition of the other as a person with whom it is possible to communicate. The truncations can take various forms, it seems: for example, in some cases the truncation consists in the fact that the object of sexual desire is not able to communicate or is indeed not the kind of thing which can intelligibly be viewed as capable of communicating. Truncations can consist in treating non-(or not yet)-persons in ways which persons are to be treated, or relating to non-or not-yet persons in ways which ought to be restricted to relations to persons.⁹

To fix ideas, let us now turn to some other examples which Nagel offers as paradigm cases of sexual perversion and see how this account of *perversion* applies to them — that is,

⁹ It is hard to resist noticing that Kant and Kantians might view such relations between people as being morally unacceptable because they involve failing to treat people as persons, maybe even failing to treat them as ends in themselves. However, the truncations Nagel is talking about do not always involve humans, since truncations can involve non-human animals and inanimate objects.

see how Nagel explicates the idea of *truncation of non-perverted desire*. Nagel first provides, as his paradigm examples, the examples of “narcissistic practices and intercourse with animals, infants, and inanimate objects” (14). These practices seem “stuck at some primitive version of the first stage” (14). In any of these practices the experience contains only the awareness of one’s own sexual desire. There is no mutual recognition of sexual desire and no possibility of such recognition. “If the object is not alive, the experience is reduced entirely to an awareness of one’s own sexual embodiment. Small children and animals permit awareness of the embodiment of the other, but present obstacles to reciprocity, to the recognition by the sexual object of the subject’s desire as the source of his (the object’s) sexual self awareness” (14). There can be no possibility of reciprocity in the first case and no true reciprocity in the other cases since in these practices there is no possibility of any or any real mutual awareness and hence do not allow for the reciprocity involved in each regarding the other as objects of sexual desire. Animals, infants, and inanimate objects can only be regarded as objects of someone’s sexual desire, the desire counting as *perverted* because it is an incomplete version of the complete configuration of sexual desire that includes reciprocity and mutual awareness. Narcissistic practices are incomplete versions of sexual desire because they fail to view the object of their desire as anything else than an object of *their* desire. No mutual sexual desire is needed, and therefore no mutual awareness can be had. This incompleteness of the configuration of sexual desire occurs at the first level, so to speak.

Incompleteness of the configuration can also occur at a second level and sadism and masochism are examples of this. Neither the sadist nor the masochist can see themselves properly as the object of another’s desire. Just as desire is truncated if the object of desire can not recognize and be aware that they or it is an object of the desire, (as is the case with

non-, or not-yet humans and inanimate objects) it is also truncated that a person not be able to, or want to recognize and be aware of *themselves* as an object of desire. The sadist does not desire to be the object of another's desire, the sadist instead "concentrates on the evocation of passive self-awareness in others, but the sadist's engagement is itself active and requires a retention of deliberate control which impedes awareness of himself as a bodily subject of passion in the required sense. The victim must recognize him as the source of his own sexual passivity, but only as the active source" (14). However the masochist cannot find satisfactory embodiment as the object of another's sexual desire, but only as the object of another's control. Both of these disorders are truncated versions of the complex nature of sexual desire, because the sadist or the masochist cannot accept being viewed as, or do not want to be desired as, an object of sexual desire from another. Nagel's schema of a 'normal' sexual desire claims that after viewing someone as an object of sexual desire, the desirer becomes aroused on a second level by the fact that the object of their desire, desires them as an object of sexual desire. Sadists and Masochists miss this second level in the complex configuration and are therefore incomplete version, as thus perverted.

It is worth noting that, on Nagel's view, the sexual perversion of an act need not have anything to do with the act itself and rather has to do with the desire to do the act. Indeed, to engage in a sexually perverted act is to do a sex act such that a part of the satisfaction of engaging in the sex act comes from a reflection about the act. There then is not anything inherently perverted in the act but that it is perverted comes from the reflection on the act, so that it is a perverted act if it is the case that one is not only engaged in the act but part of the complexity that makes it perverted involves reflection about the nature of the act. Acts can

be perverted on Nagel's account but since his theory is one of perverted desire if an act is perverted it is so derivatively, that is it is an act done out of a perverted desire.

I should at this point clear up a possible source of confusion about what I am saying about Nagel and about what Nagel is saying. In my interpretation of Nagel I have acknowledged the importance of the idea that perverted desires are "truncated" desires, but I have also laid great emphasis on the point that perverted desires are in some important sense "unintelligible". Now as a matter of fact Nagel claims that he is "defending the concept of sexual perversion against the charge of unintelligibility" (5). It would clearly be a mistake to think that this comment of Nagel's could be the basis for an objection to the accuracy of my account of what Nagel is suggesting. What he means by this comment is that he can offer an account of the *concept* of perversion — the *concept* is intelligible. Importantly, that claim leaves untouched the question of whether perverted *desires* are intelligible and, if they are, in what sense they are intelligible. In one clear sense Nagel wants to say, and I would agree that we can provide an 'intelligible' account of perverted desires: they are desires which are in certain ways 'truncated' desires. We can even spell out the ways in which they are truncated. What I am saying about the relation between perversion of desire and intelligibility is importantly different from this. What I want to suggest as a reasonable interpretation of what Nagel is driving at is that, although we can both say that perverted desires are *truncated* desires (and saying this in one sense give an intelligible account of them) and although we can both say that perverted desires can be made *cognitively* intelligible (we can *say* what the object of the perverted desire is), both of us would agree that in *another* very important sense perverted desires are *not* intelligible, at least to "normal" people. He offers an account, then, which allows that perverted desires can be *cognitively* intelligible: we can find ways of

describing the content of the desire and of explaining why it counts as perverted — it is truncated. What I am suggesting is that though, perhaps, all of this might be true, *that does not mean* that we can imagine affectively or conatively [see my discussion earlier in this chapter of the relations between what we can imagine cognitively and what we can imagine affectively or conatively] what it would like to have that desire: we can not imagine having it, in other words. In effect, then, what I am saying is that even if we can say that the *concept* of perverted desire is intelligible — a desire is perverted, roughly, if truncated — this does *not mean* that the *desire itself* is intelligible and what I would suggest is that we focus on that point. I suggest that the desire *might* be cognitively intelligible but that does not make it conatively or affectively intelligible — see my earlier discussion of this point. In other words, what I am doing is taking Nagel's account of the intelligibility of the desire further, and I am setting the threshold of intelligibility higher than he sets it and suggesting that for “normal” people such truncated desires are in this higher threshold sense not intelligible to us —while the perversions may be explained, descriptively, i.e., cognitively, what still cannot be made sense of is the actual possession of such a perverted desire, for there is still no affective or conative understanding.¹⁰ Nagel may have made the concept of sexual perversion intelligible in that he has explained that it exists as a truncated and incomplete version of sexual desire, but the unintelligibility still exists in a third person observer who cannot make comprehensible sense of *the desire* to do the act. For us “normal” people with our available conceptual tools and affective and conative imaginations we can still not make sense of the perverted inclinations, or what it would be like to have such desires. We can relate to the situation where there exists a mutual awareness and reciprocal desire, *but* we

¹⁰ Whether this is a refinement or a correction of Nagel I am not clear but for my purposes I find the idea useful and it is a help in understanding how the concept of evil works.

find incomprehensible the truncated desires (even if they can be described intelligibly) and we react to them by asking either out loud or in our hearts “How could anyone want sex only with shoes?” “How could anyone want only sex with corpses (after all, they don’t respond)?” “How could anyone want to eat only regurgitated food?” etc., and we simply do not know how to answer our questions.¹¹ So while Nagel may have succeeded in intelligibly describing what sexual perversion is, even with such an intellectual understanding, any affective or conative understanding of such perversions remains unintelligible. It is still incomprehensible to most “normal” people that someone could have such a desire and what it would be like to have such a desire.

This then is Nagel’s account of perverted desire as modified and amplified to bring out a possible role for the concept of intelligibility in the account. Let me return now to Neiman’s account of evil to see how Nagel’s ideas might be used to throw light on Neiman’s theory, at least as I have interpreted it. Neiman’s view of evil and conceptual devastation might be made more understandable and persuasive if we used this type of view to fill out what Neiman might be driving at.

Evil and “Unintelligibility”

The idea behind bringing Nagel’s account to bear on an attempt to develop Neiman’s ideas would be that just as wanting to engage in sex is not, by itself, enough to make the

¹¹ The argument could be raised that maybe the inability to comprehend the perverted desire is due to a lack of imagination on our parts (parallel to the question some have about string quartets “How could anyone enjoy that?” — and it could be objected that maybe if people just worked a little harder and practiced listening they would come to understand and then to enjoy them). I find Nagel unclear on this question. But in response to this kind of worry the reply is that if I was to work a little harder and really try to affectively and conatively understand the desire I would have to change from the kind of person I am. To become affectively and conatively involved, which I would to comprehend and conceptually realize the perverted desire I would have to change my nature. And I would resist doing that and I think it would be resisted by most people, if such an exercise and change is possible at all. Changing one’s nature and the person they are and being able to then relate and comprehensibly understand the desire, does not make it any less perverted, especially if such an exercise involves the changing of one’s nature.

desire perverted, so wanting to cause great harm to some person or persons would not make that desire evil and, correspondingly, just as in fact engaging in the sex *act* is not enough to make the act perverted, so causing or trying to cause great harm to a person by itself might not be enough to make it evil. There is a world of difference between harming someone and doing evil, just as there is a difference between engaging in sex and engaging in perverted sex: for a sexual desire to be perverted, there has to be a sexual desire, but that is not sufficient, and for there to be an evil desire, there has to be a desire to cause harm but that is also not sufficient. For the act to be a perverted sex act it must both be the case that the act is a sex act of some sort (and that classification can be tricky) *and* the act must be accompanied by a desire which is embedded in a psychological stance which is in some sense ‘truncated’.

So my suggestion about using Nagel’s ideas to develop Neiman’s idea would be something like this: when an act causing great harm to another person or a large number of people is done intentionally for whatever motive and it is evil, on whatever theory of evil you like, *then there will be a dimension that is going to be missed if you focus exclusively on the nature of the act*. She would not then be denying that what makes something evil is the nature of the act (or, indeed, the desire to do the act) — and she would be saying that to call it evil requires something in addition to that. There might be something like a reflective relationship of other people to the evil act and to the doer of the evil act, a reflective relationship reference to which needs to be incorporated into account. The reflective reaction to the evil that needs to be taken account is that the act and the desire to do it is “conceptually devastating”, *that* idea now being explicated as follows: something is evil if it is difficult or impossible for a third person observer to make intelligible sense of the act and the desire to do the act that produces the horrible effect categorized as evil. Neiman’s account may be

suggesting on this interpretation that to understand the nature of evil you need to look at the nature of the act, but also look not only at the horror but, more importantly, the *perplexity* it causes in other people. Along with the act itself, it is the second order reaction of conceptual devastation in people and civilization that is the root basis for our decision to count it as evil. On this adjusted Neiman-like view, where the theory becomes a theory not of acts that are evil, but a theory rather of inclinations that are evil, what this theory then says is that these inclinations are evil, and they are evil because we (observers of the act) are conceptually devastated because and in so far as we seem, with the conceptual tools available to us, unable to make sense of the inclinations and in that sense the inclinations are incomprehensible to us. On this theory inclinations lead to evil acts, and *like* the inclinations leading to perverted acts, they are in some sense non-standard and to that extent, to “normal” people are hard or impossible to make intelligible (hard to imagine cognitively, affectively, conatively what it would be like to have those desires). The reasons, desire and inclinations are not what “normal” people normally think of as the kinds of reasons that people might have to do various things.

This idea of incomprehensibility and unintelligibility of the desire to do the evil act does seem to shed light on why we count something evil versus just morally wrong. With wrong acts “normal” people who are people who do not in fact want to do the act that is wrong, can in some way, though it may be a stretch of the imagination, understand the motivation or desire to do the act even though they recognize the act as wrong. The desire to do an act which is wrong is something that “normal” people could relate to. For example, lying to protect someone you love and allowing someone innocent to suffer for something your child did may be morally wrong and accepted as morally wrong, but “normal” people

can understand the motivation behind doing so, even if they strongly disagree with it and regard the act as wrong. Severely emotionally and even physically hurting another human being for selfish reasons such as money for example is something that is morally wrong, but again even though people may condemn the act they can still understand something like that person's reasons for doing so even if they are appalled by it.

Incomprehensibility and unintelligibility of the desire to do the act are, then, what differentiate between evil acts and merely morally wrong acts on this new way of looking at Neiman in light of Nagel's view. I think that construed this way, the suggestion has great attraction and I will in fact incorporate this unintelligibility factor into my proposed theory of evil and say that what makes an act evil as apposed to merely morally wrong is that, with evil acts, the motivation, reason or desire to produce the evil act is, like perverted desire, something which "normal" people cannot understand or make sense of. "Normal" people cannot map it onto their own experience and their own motivations or desires as they can with morally wrong acts, which they can do even if they condemn or do not agree with the reason to do the morally wrong act. To use Rawls' phrase, with morally wrong acts "normal" people can 'identify with project': they cannot do so with evil acts. With evil acts people's affective imaginations are unable to understand the possession of such desires or inclinations. With wrong acts even if it is something a person could never imagine themselves personally doing or wanting to do they can imagine someone else feeling that way or wanting to do that. This is not the case with evil acts and is what separates and distinguishes evil from merely wrong. When it comes to evil acts people find the desire, inclinations, motivations, and reasons unintelligible.

Let me use the example of Jeffrey Dahmer to illustrate and make vivid what I am suggesting.¹² The desires and motivations of Jeffery Dahmer are an example where someone's motivations, inclinations and desires are something that I and most people cannot begin to comprehend. The fact is that I can understand *that* killing young boys and having sex with them as he kills them is something that Jeffery Dahmer enjoys. I can perhaps *list* the reasons he enjoys this (though here I will not). I can, in that *intellectual sense* or perhaps *cognitive sense*, understand and I have the words available to say why he likes it, as he has explained it, and I can use my imagination to come up with possible reasons why he might like this. But what is totally and completely incomprehensible is the possibility for me of imagining *having* the desire for those things, in the sense of being able to put myself in his shoes and imagine *myself* having the desire to do those things: it is in that sense that it is totally and completely incomprehensible to me *that* anyone could *desire* those things. I can understand *that* he desires it and is motivated by such things, I can say the words and have an intellectual understanding, but I *cannot* affectively or conatively comprehend the actual desiring of such awful things. I cannot imagine myself in his shoes *actually having* his reasons, motivations and desires. So, in not having an affective or conative understanding there exists in a way an intellectual/conceptual lack, because though in a way I can bring concepts to bear to describe his desires, in another way these concepts seems inadequate to the task and so we still do not really know what concepts to bring to bear to make sense of why he wants to do what he wants to do. There exists, with evil acts as apposed to merely wrong acts, a conceptual imaginative gap in trying to completely comprehend the possession of that desire. The conceptual framework behind having the desire is incomprehensible or

¹² My knowledge of the acts committed by Jeffery Dahmer come from the Federal Bureau of Investigations file on Jeffery Dahmer that I acquired.

perhaps absent – we don't have the conceptual framework. The inability to "understand" is more than an inability to find words to describe the content of the desire. This can, or can often, be done. The inability to understand consists in the inability to affectively imagine, or conatively understand or comprehend *having* that desire. The conceptual devastation then exists in the inability to understand what having the desire would feel like, what it would be to have such desires.

The same conceptual imaginative inability exists with regard to the driving motivation behind the Holocaust. The reasoning and motivation can be *described*: believers in the reasoning behind the Holocaust desired that certain things be done to Jews, and they wanted to do these things to them which will hurt them, harm them and kill them. And it was not just that the Nazi's want to kill them but they viewed the Jews as "vermin" that should and need to be exterminated, and the Nazi's want to do so as the "Master race" "cleaning up Europe". This could be said to be the desire of the Nazi's, or at least one Nazi. However, to say that the Nazi desire can be described is different from saying that we can make intelligible sense of the desire or of the pride some apparently felt in acting on the desire and perhaps this is why, as hinted above, we feel dissatisfied with our descriptions of these desires. To even attempt to do this and make sense of it is (for "normal" people) to attempt to perform impossible feats of cognitive, affective and conative imagination that are not only emotionally upsetting but conceptionally upsetting — we do not know how to articulate what it would be like to have the desires. While "normal" people might understand how and why the acts were done, they cannot understand the desire to *want* to do this or that people could want to do this, or the conceptual framework these people must have had. It is a complex lack in imagination that leads people to feeling that while the desire of some Nazis to

exterminate other human beings, or the desire to have sex and kill young boys can be described, and while the description can be understood, that does not cover the reality of the situation. The actual possession of such desires, motivations and reasons are what is incomprehensible and unintelligible and is what I will include in my theory of evil as what distinguishes evil desires and acts from merely morally wrong desires and acts. Through looking at Neiman's idea of conceptual devastation and through creating a parallel with Nagel's account of perversion a very powerful suggestion emerges of what separates evil desires and acts from merely morally wrong desires and acts.

I hope it is clear now why and how I think that bringing Nagel's ideas on the perversion can be viewed as helping to make more sense of Neiman's suggestion that essential to any account of what evil consists in is something about conceptual devastation: my suggestion is that something is evil as opposed to being merely wrong because the desire to do the act and the act itself is in some crucial sense incomprehensible — the conceptual devastation comes, perhaps, from the realization that there are desires and acts which our fellow human beings have and which we in some very deep and fundamental way simply cannot make sense of. We learn something important about the nature of evil from Neiman when we notice that evil is different and more than a wrong, horrible, terrible, appalling, and horrific act and that is that evil is an incomprehensible act. This said, I now want to suggest that, while this interpretation of Neiman's reasoning perhaps makes her view more understandable, and while the notion of conceptual devastation as it exists in a third party observer is interesting, Neiman's view that the resulting conceptual devastation is what is evil still will not do. Even with this more in-depth understanding of what conceptual

devastation is and consists in, I want now to argue that it is not that conceptual devastation exists that is what makes something evil, and that is what Neiman is in the end claiming.

Firstly, if it was the fact that a certain act created conceptual devastation in “normal” observers of the act that was the source or ground of the evil in the act, then presumably the amount of evil in the act would vary with the amount of conceptual devastation: for example, if something could conceptually devastate us less then it would be less evil than something that conceptually devastated us more. This, of course, seems an odd suggestion as I think I may make clearer if I return to my earlier Guantanamo Bay argument. The existence of Auschwitz and all it involved was and still is inarguably conceptually devastating. Imagine again a hypothetical 21st century replica of Auschwitz at Guantanamo Bay. As I pointed out in chapter 3, such a situation would of course be conceptually devastating in some sense or other, though presumably, on Neiman’s account of the nature of evil, the conceptual devastation resulting from Guantanamo would be different since humanity had already experienced Auschwitz. As I argued earlier it would be conceptually devastating in that humanity would be asking “How could this happen again?” So if it is the presence of conceptual devastation which is the source or the ground of what is evil then presumably Guantanamo Bay is ‘less’ evil than Auschwitz, because the conceptual devastation would not exist to the same degree because the “newness” of the horror that Auschwitz presented is removed in the Guantanamo Bay example. But if, as the example ensures, Guantanamo Bay is a *replica* of Auschwitz and everything that happened at Auschwitz happens at Guantanamo Bay, then the fact that Guantanamo Bay occurs in the 21st century should not make it any less evil, which would be a result if conceptual devastation is what is evil.

Secondly, and I have made this point earlier, surely conceptual devastation is always caused by something, that is, people are conceptually devastated in relation to something that causes them to be so. Assuming this is so, surely it is more appropriate and accurate to identify as that by virtue of which the act is evil *that which causes* the conceptual devastation rather than the conceptual devastation itself. By claiming that the acts done and the atrocities committed are what is evil, both Guantanamo Bay and Auschwitz are evil, and it may be examined in what ways they are differently evil, but both are evil none-the-less. Auschwitz was and is evil- that point is not in contention. So if we place our focus of what is evil to be the acts committed then any acts identical to Auschwitz should and would be equally recognized as evil. This is why we should say that it is the *acts* that are to be considered evil, rather than saying, as Neiman suggests, that it is the conceptual devastation that is by virtue of which the acts are evil.

The upshot of my arguments in the last paragraph would seem to be, as in effect I argued in the last chapter, it cannot be that what makes an act evil is that the act or the evil cause conceptual devastation. This said, I think I should embrace the idea that the fact that both Auschwitz and Guantanamo Bay would cause conceptual devastation in humanity is still important for an explication of the concept of evil, but not because what makes the act evil is that it causes conceptual devastation: instead it is important because causing conceptual devastation is what marks evil acts from merely wrong act — that is, conceptual devastation is what separates evil acts from merely morally wrong ones. Auschwitz and Guantanamo Bay would conceptually devastate humanity differently, Auschwitz in the sense that people were and are asking “how could this happen?”, and Guantanamo Bay in the sense that people would be asking “how could this happen again?”: but *both* are conceptually

devastating because of the nature of the acts done and it is because of the nature of the acts done that the acts are both evil. It is my suggestion that it is acts that should be classed as evil, and these acts are evil and not merely morally wrong because evil acts cause conceptual devastation.

My theory of evil has benefited greatly from my examination of Neiman's account. I now want to leave Neiman's account and present an account of the nature of evil which focuses on acts which are I will argue, and have been arguing, are what should be properly called evil.

Chapter V

In Chapter One I introduced the idea that a theory of moral evil should be and is probably best spelt out in the first instance in terms of morally evil *acts*, and that morally *evil* acts should be viewed as being distinctively different from merely morally *wrong* acts the analysis of what is involved in being, for example, evil *people*, *motivations*, and so on would then be explicated in a way predicated on the analysis of evil acts as described. I also suggested that a morally evil act is an act that is an *intentional* act done by an agent which produces an effect where the effect consists in the occurrence of great harm: evil acts then are acts which produce *very* harmful effects of certain kinds I also suggested that the harmful effects of evil acts are effects produced in, as a first approximation, a “wanton” or perhaps “uncalled for” or perhaps “incomprehensible” way. As has now become clear, I think that underlying these ideas of being *wanton*, being *uncalled for*, being *incomprehensible*, can be spelled out in terms of the *unintelligibility* for “normal” people of the *desire* to do the acts in question. I will very shortly present a theory of what I want to suggest is a possible account of what evil should properly be thought of as consisting in but first I want to briefly sum up the issues discussed in this dissertation because it was through my explorations of these issues that I was able to formulate what I think an account of evil should be.

As I have said, Susan Neiman, in her attempt to explicate a secular account of the nature of evil, introduced the very attractive and useful notion of conceptual devastation. In my attempt to spell out that notion, I suggested explicating it in terms of the notion of unintelligibility, a notion which I have in effect argued turns out to be a very complicated notion. While, I think, it clearly emerged from my discussion that Neiman was wrong in suggesting that what *makes* something evil is the fact that it causes conceptual devastation I

nevertheless think that with appropriate modification at least some of her ideas can and should be incorporated in some way or other in any theory of evil, and that is what I have tried to do in my proposed theory of evil: I have extracted from her the idea that somehow evil is incomprehensible but, while Neiman suggested conceptual devastation formed the essence of evil, *I* have wanted to suggest that it should properly be considered a *consequence* of our awareness of acts which are evil, but a very significant consequence and one which accordingly I have explicitly included it in my theory of the nature of evil.

In an attempt to fully understand the idea of conceptual devastation and the unintelligibility which I see at its core, I examined Nagel's theory of perversion. Though Nagel was presenting a theory of perversion rather than of evil (they may be related but they are, I think, different), his theory of what makes a perversion perverted provides an interestingly parallel in some ways to one possible way of understanding of what makes something evil: the parallel, I suggested, is between the way in which "we" are unable to relate to, and in particular to understand, the *desire* or the *inclination* to do the perverted act and the way in which we are unable to relate, and in particular to understand, the desire to do the evil act. On *one* interpretation of Nagel's idea, what makes the desire to do the perverted act unintelligible is that in various ways the desire and the inclinations of which the desire forms a part have in certain ways deviated from the norm: more specifically, it is not that these inclinations are inclinations to produce harm which makes them "odd" rather what is incomprehensible is that the person in question would have the inclinations she or he has — the inclinations are incomprehensible to us because we cannot see how they relate to the object desired or to one another and we cannot see this because when confronted by perverted desires, he suggests, we are confronted by desires which are in some way *truncated*

or *distorted*. The ideas of incomprehensibility and of unintelligibility were hinted at in the theory of evil I briefly introduced in Chapter One and I now want to return to the task of spelling out in a bit more detail what that theory of evil now should, I think, be viewed as coming to.

So in this chapter I want to present in more detail what such a theory of evil should look like — that is, in this theory (i) we focus on evil *acts*, (ii) the idea of an evil act should be interpreted as an act which produces great harm, (iii) what is evil is different than what is morally wrong, (iv) there is no *essential* connection between being evil and any states of any God or Gods, and finally, (v) evil is analyzed naturalistically.

Here, then, is such a theory. The theory says that *an agent A's act x is evil if* three conditions are satisfied:

1) A's desire to do x is part of some motivation set of A and A's desire to do x is AT LEAST one of the following:

(i) a desire which the agent knows or ought to know will cause significant harm — either to a person or to many people *or*

(ii) a desire the acting on which A foresees or ought to foresee will be inconsistent with someone being spared significant harm;

and

2) the result/consequence/effect of doing the act x entails that the act x has sufficient “moral gravity” as to warrant a response of horror;

and

3) the motivation set which includes the desire to do x is a set which forms a combination of desires the fulfillment of which cannot intelligibly be counted compatible with the avoidance of unnecessary human harm.

Each of these three conditions is necessary for an act being classifiable as morally evil.

This then is the suggestion. Clearly, a full discussion of the suggestion would require extensive discussion not only of the notion of *harm* and of what can or cannot be viewed as *intelligibly* compatible with what, but also of the notion of *warrant* used in the final clause. Here, of course, my comments must be very brief, though, I hope, useful.

I think it is fairly obvious that a theory of evil needs to begin with a theory of evil *acts* if only because it is hard to see how we could begin anywhere else. Consider, for example, Neiman's account. She assigns a *central* role to the fact that evil acts produce conceptual devastation. But, as we saw, though the production of conceptual devastation is important, it is what produced the devastation that has to be viewed as central. We seem forced to assign a central role to the act. Evil is not itself conceptual devastation: rather what causes the devastation — the act — is the important thing, and the conceptual devastation is a consequence of an evil act being done. It is not the *desire* to produce some harm that is the important thing, even though it is the fact that the desire to produce that harm is unintelligible which marks evil off from mere moral wrong: the desire to produce the harm may be an evil desire, but it is so because the act of producing the harm is. Crucially, if the *act* were not as it was, there would be nothing to judge as evil. The same argument applies to idea that we could first explicate what is involved in being evil people, evil intentions, evil attitudes, evil beliefs, etc.

So with this suggestion that evil might be properly understood through a theory of evil acts, I want to discuss each condition of my proposed theory of evil in more detail starting with the first condition.

I suggested that an act x of an agent A is evil if three conditions were satisfied. The first condition was the requirement that:

A 's desire to do x is part of some motivation set of A and A 's desire to do x is AT

LEAST one of the following: (i) a desire which the agent knows or ought to know will cause significant harm — either to a person or to many people *or* (ii) a desire the acting on which A foresees or ought to foresee will be inconsistent with someone being spared significant harm.

It is central to my account, as it was to Neiman's, that evil is something produced by *agents*. As I pointed out in my first Chapter, in discussions of the so-called Problem of Evil there was much discussion of the difference between *natural* evil and *moral* evil. I have assumed throughout this dissertation that it is plausible to hold that evil only exists as something done by an *agent*, whether divine or human: for evil to be done it has to be done by an agent, not by a tornado, or a volcano. This condition is meant to capture that idea, that evil is something done by a person, or agent.

This condition also talks of embedding the desire to do the act to be classed as evil in a set of inclinations. The desire may either be to produce some significant harm or a desire acting on which would in effect ignore that significant harm will be produced. Example of items in the motivation set might include sadistic pleasure or cases where the agent has goals which override in his estimation considerations like pity.

The second disjunct in the first condition is meant to cover situations where the agent may not directly desire the significant harm but either lacks the desire that someone be spared significant harm (for example, the agent is completely uncaring about the fact that if he does the act significant harm will be produced, or is indifferent to whether someone is spared significant harm, or his desire to spare someone significant harm is “so inappropriately weak.” An example already discussed is Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann’s actions may be viewed as satisfying this first condition because even if his immediate desire was simply to make the trains run on time it was a desire for some object or state of affairs which was inconsistent with someone being spared significant harm, and he could foresee that acting on his desire to do x was a desire for something which was inconsistent with someone being spared significant harm.

The second clause of my account of evil action, in effect, was the requirement that:

- 2) the result/consequence/effect of doing the act x entails that the act x has sufficient “moral gravity” as to warrant a response of horror.

The function of this clause is, in part, to catch the point which I mentioned in my first Chapter, the point that to call something “evil” is to use an especially strong and distinctive phrase, and is importantly different than simply calling something moral wrong. The idea of ‘moral gravity’ is an idea for which I will not provide explication, but the kind of thing I have in mind can be gathered from a list of which seem paradigm examples. The kinds of acts I have in mind as producing effects/results/consequences which have “moral gravity” include the acts of starving, beating, torturing, demeaning, murdering people in an attempted genocide, or flying planes into towers killing many innocent people, or retaliating to mere provocations by bombing cities and killing many innocent people. It is something like the

idea which Laurence Thomas expressed by saying “the right moral gravity of an evil act is characterized by either inherent hideousness (brutal rape) or quantitative hideousness (the killing and brutal rape of a large number of noncombatant women in wartime)” (cited by Sterba, 433).¹ In effect, then the second clause of my account of evil act serves to provide *part* of the explanation of what marks evil from moral wrong. The other part of that explanation will come from the next clause of my account.

The third clause of my account of evil action consisted of the requirement that:

- 3) the motivation set which includes the desire to do x is a set which forms a combination of desires the fulfillment of which cannot intelligibly be counted compatible with the avoidance of unnecessary human harm.

As my discussion in earlier chapters makes clear I owe the idea that the talk of unintelligibility is important to Neiman and in part to Nagel. As I noted in the last paragraph the condition serves, with condition 2) to explain the way in which morally evil acts are different from acts which are merely morally wrong. As I attempted to spell out in Chapter 4, our response to acts which are evil and not merely morally wrong includes the view that inclinations which include the desire to do the evil act are “unintelligible” — we find them “incomprehensible”. There are, of course, very difficult problems here, as is clear if one asks who ‘we’ are. What makes an act evil as apposed to merely morally wrong is that, with evil acts, the motivation, reason or desire to produce the evil act is something which “we” cannot understand or make sense of. We cannot map such desires onto ‘our’ own experience as ‘we’ can with morally wrong acts, something which we can do to some extent even we condemn or do not agree with the reason to do the morally wrong act. When it comes to *evil*

¹ James P. Sterba in “Understanding Evil: American Slavery, the Holocaust, and the Conquest of the American Indians,” which is a review of Laurence Mordekhai Thomas’s “Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust.” Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992, xvii-211.

acts 'we' find the desire, inclinations, motivations, and reasons unintelligible, and there is a conceptual-imaginative gap in any attempt we might make to completely comprehend the possession of that desire. The conceptual framework behind having the desire is incomprehensible. The motivation set which includes the desire to do the act being classed as evil is a set which forms an incomprehensible combination of desires and inclinations. The incomprehension 'we' feel when we become aware of the inclination set and 'our' inability to 'understand' it is more than an inability to find words to describe the content of the desire and the set of inclinations of which it is a part: we often can find such words. The inability to understand consists in the inability to affectively imagine, or to conatively understand, or generally to comprehend *having* that desire and the set of inclinations of which it is a part. The incomprehension exists as an inability to understand what having the desire and the set of inclinations of which it is a part would feel like, what it would be to have such desires and inclinations. An evil act is different and more than a wrong, horrible, terrible, appalling, and horrific act: the evil act is an incomprehensible act. We choose the word 'evil' for the things we cannot make intelligible to ourselves in attempting to understand the desire to do the act.

This purposed theory of evil is similar in nature to Neiman's theory of evil in that it provides conditions under which we call something evil, and exposes why calling some acts morally wrong will not suffice and why we want the use of the stronger word 'evil'.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored some ideas about how to develop a secular, naturalistic account of the concept of moral evil. The account of evil I have offered provides a secular naturalistic conception of moral evil in the domain of human action, it explains why the best approach to understanding moral evil is through evil acts, it differentiates and distinguishes between morally wrong acts and evil acts, and it examines what makes what we want to call evil actually and distinctively evil, and this theory accomplishes this without reverting back to any reference to any God. There are many questions that can still and should be raised about the concept of evil especially in light of all that has been said but these cannot be addressed due to the length and nature of this dissertation. I would like to close this discussion by adding some comments whose import will be that this purposed theory of evil allows for the possibility of a cross culturally applicable account of evil, through the notion of harm. My comments here are not, of course, intended to constitute a full discussion of this issue: they are merely designed to hint at a possible approach, the *possibility* of this approach being, for me, a major attraction of the theory I have set out.

The idea that the account of moral evil which I have suggested could serve as a cross culturally applicable account of evil stems from the fact that central to my account is the notion of harm and from the fact that I do think that there could very possibly be a cross culturally applicable theory of harm. Since this theory of evil consists the production of significant harm, if there can be a cross culturally applicable notion of harm then there could be a cross culturally applicable theory of evil. The suggestion of a culturally independent theory of harm has been made in philosophic literature. Without wanting to argue or discuss this idea in much detail I want to present some suggestions which start from the classic work

of Joel Feinberg who has presented a possible cross cultural theory of harm in *Harm to Others*. The idea very briefly is that the concept of harm, according to Feinberg, can be construed as “the thwarting, setting back, or defeating of an interest” (33). Feinberg suggests that the thwarting of welfare interests could, be viewed as a cross culturally constant harm.

Welfare Interests, according to Feinberg are

“interests of a kind shared by nearly all his fellows, in the necessary means to his more ultimate goals. These are interests in the continuance for a foreseeable interval of one’s life, and the interests in ones own physical health and vigor, the integrity and normal functioning of one’s body, the absence of absorbing pain and suffering or grotesque disfigurement, minimal intellectual acuity, emotional stability, the absence of groundless anxieties and resentments, capacity to engage in enjoy sexual relationships and maintain friendships, at least minimal income and financial security, a tolerable social and physical environment, and a certain amount of freedom from interference and coercion” (33)

These are he claims “Basic requisites for man’s well-being.... When they are blocked or damaged a person is very seriously harmed indeed, for in that case his more ultimate aspirations are defeated too. Invasion of a welfare interest is the most serious, but not the only kind of harm a person can sustain.” (37) Feinberg also states that “in respect at least to welfare interest we are inclined to say that what promotes them is good for a person *in any case*, whatever his beliefs and wants might be” (42). So there then exists the possibility, on Feinberg’s account, of making a harm something that invades a person’s welfare interests, and this, again on Feinberg’s account, then could be a cross culturally applicable theory of harm.

I find the above suggestions by Feinberg very attractive, though here I do not have the space to provide anything like an assessment of his suggestions or of his reasons for making the suggestions. However, it is worth noticing that Feinberg is not alone in suggesting an account of harm which could be viewed as making the notion of harm cross culturally usable. What these suggestions have in common is that they begin by defining what a basic need is and they then suggest that *denying* this basic need is what can be viewed as constituting a candidate for a cross cultural harm. Here space limitations prevent me from doing more than listing some such accounts.

Gillian Brock in *Necessary Goods: Our Responsibility to Meet Others' Needs* suggests that a significant harm could include the infringement/violation/ elimination of a basic need. So, if there is a universal right (a negative right) not to have one's basic needs frustrated, then an act could be a cross cultural harm if it violates a universal right not to have one's basic needs infringed, and so harm could be construed as consisting in a failure to fulfill basic needs.

There are many other theories that follow this basic type of an approach to developing a cross culturally applicable notion of harm. David Copp argues that there is a (positive) right to be enabled to meet ones needs and basic human needs are "roughly requirements of rational autonomy," which are "the things that, at some time in the course of life, are indispensable in some form and quantity to a rational and autonomous life for a human given the 'laws of nature, unalterable and invariable environmental facts, or facts about human constitution'" (125). The frustration then of a basic need on Copp's theory is also a candidate of being a harm that could be cross culturally applicable.

Martha Nussbaum, David Braybrooke, and Len Doyal all stress that morally relevant needs are those that are important in being able to function minimally: if the needs are not met, harm that derives from the constraints of human functioning occurs. And again each of these views could be utilized to further a conception of a cross cultural notion of harm.

Finally, it is perhaps worth noticing that even Immanuel Kant's theories about how to reason morally might, with some work, be used to adumbrate another possible way of arguing for a cross-culturally applicable notion of harm. According to Kant we should refrain from acting in ways that are not universalizable. It is surely plausible to say that, whatever Kant meant by his universalizability test (and this has been much discussed in the literature), he and we would certainly want to say that the maxim that we should frustrate or ignore basic needs would not be a universalizable maxim! So we should refrain from violating people's basic needs. The argument then could be made that the right not to be significantly harmed is *universal*.

I present these suggestions not to argue or discuss them but to show that the resources for a cross culturally applicable theory of *harm* are available in the literature. If then it is possible to develop a cross culturally applicable theory of *harm*, the theory of *evil* I have presented can incorporate such a theory of harm in the first condition; A's desire to do x is part of some motivation set of A and A's desire to do x is *at least* one of the following: (i) a desire which the agent knows or ought to know will cause significant harm — either to a person or to many people *or* (ii) a desire the acting on which A foresees or ought to foresee will be inconsistent with someone being spared significant harm. This is at least a step in the right direction at developing a culture independent theory of evil, which is something to

strive for because it would seem that if something is truly something that is evil, it should be evil universally.

Of course, my account of evil does not consist only of the first condition and I must acknowledge that it would be a much more challenging task to develop culturally independent interpretations of the other two conditions. I myself think it would be possible in the end to provide culture independent accounts of *warrant* and of *intelligibility*, the two operative notions in those two clauses. But that must be a task for another day.

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