

Vigilance and Virtue

In search of practical wisdom

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HANNAH ARENDT FAMOUSLY CLAIMED that what made Adolf Eichmann's evil so surprising was the utter banality of his person. He was "not Iago and not Macbeth," and nothing, Arendt reports in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, "would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III 'to prove a villain.' Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all... He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*." Eichmann's failure, then, was one of self-awareness—he lacked the imaginative capacity to grasp the import of his actions for other human beings. By blindly following orders, he executed the Final Solution with an odd mixture of cold precision and fragmented sentimentality, neither of which allowed him to appreciate the human significance of his deeds.

The example of Eichmann illustrates, in an extreme form, perhaps the most common way we fall into our own more mundane moral failings. Like Eichmann's, our own goals can imprison our understanding, thereby blinding us to just *what* it is we are doing, as seen from the perspective of the

other. And as Arendt notes, "such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together." Evil is not always fueled by hot hatred. It can also arise when we fail to see the meanings of our

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actions. In what follows, I want to briefly explore two related questions: First, what trends in our common ethical discourse contribute to this destructive inattention? And second, how might we resist such trends and cultivate moral attentiveness?

RESPONSES TO EVIL

French philosopher Chantal Delsol, in her penetrating book *Icarus Fallen*, points to two opposed trends in our responses to evil: unexamined indignation and *a priori* absolutism. The first is evident in the popular responses to events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks or the Rwanda genocide: we voice our

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outrage and disorientation in quick and sometimes indiscriminate blame, accompanied in the media by replaying images of the events over and over again. The repetition is necessary, for we quickly reach the limits of our ability to articulately express our moral intuitions and judgments. The second trend generally emerges in response to more everyday situations, though it sometimes follows blind indignation in our processing of horrific events. In this mode, we excuse wrongdoing by denying the responsibility of the perpetrators. We identify some deterministic factor—upbringing, genes, neurochemistry—as the real culprit behind the transgression. And so we transform vices into pathologies for which people cannot be answerable.

This *a priori* absolutism has a flip side. Just as vices are not blameworthy, so virtues are not commendable. Those who bravely risk their lives to save others, for instance, are not entitled to feel ennobled by their deeds—their neurochemistry determined their actions. And the rest of us need not feel guilty for our (likely) lack of action in similar circumstances. The “heroes” simply have better genes than we do. Or perhaps, from a different and truly disturbing perspective, they have worse ones. For they show themselves, in this view, to be deficiently rational for being so careless of their own self-preservation. Here we see the ideology, which sociologist Amitai Etzioni labels “individualism,” that undergirds both sides of the absolutism equation. Currently in vogue in psychology, philosophy, and evolutionary biology and traceable through Hobbes back to the ancient hedonists, this individualism maintains that our sole motivation, consciously or unconsciously, and even in our most seemingly selfless acts, is our own pleasure or satisfaction. Interestingly, if this is an accurate picture of human motivation, then Eichmann correctly identified his own key failing: his ineptitude at achieving his goals of self-advancement.

Both of these responses to evil are ultimately detrimental to our ability to remain attuned to the moral contours of our actions and lives. Blind indignation, by relying on gut reac-

tions, does not force us to understand the nature of what we morally oppose, and absolutism does not encourage us to strive for virtue. If we are reduced to equality before the gods of determinism, we undermine the grounds for moral judgment. We therefore have little reason to carefully attend to our lives as wholes for which we are responsible.

RETURNING TO VIRTUE

In order to combat the thoughtless evil we find evidenced acutely in Eichmann and more subtly in our own anemic moral responses, we need to resist both of these trends and find ways to re-train and fortify our ethical reasoning. An important and potentially effective place to begin is with the recovery of traditional virtue, as it speaks directly to what we need. In classical Aristotelian ethical theory the central virtue—the cause and measure of all other virtues—is the *intellectual* virtue of *phronesis*, translated most often as “practical wisdom” or “prudence.” Practical wisdom is the success of the imagination—the full appreciation of the salient moral features of the particular situations we confront. Our awareness of these features enables us to respond properly to them.

Like all virtues on the Aristotelian scheme, we can only acquire practical wisdom through habituation, through practice. We must repeatedly and purposefully take time to pay attention to the world around us, especially the parts of it which bear moral weight. Other virtues help us to identify these parts, as they direct us towards different morally salient aspects of reality. To understand this process, think of learning a new word: it strikes you in a passage and you look it up. Being newly aware of the word, you find that it now appears with surprising and pleasing frequency in other things you read, though in reality it was there all along. And each time you see the word it delights you and becomes further entrenched in your repertoire. Think also of the experience of falling in love. When we fall in love with someone we *notice* things about our beloved. How she plays with her pen. How he retreats into himself when he’s in pain. And if we are lucky enough to maintain a long and



Good and Evil: the Devil Tempting a Young Woman, 1832 (detail) by Andre-Jacques Victor Orsel (1795-1850).
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loving relationship with this person, we will learn to see him ever more clearly and deeply and respond to him well. We practice paying attention to him, and so we become better at it. The person of practical wisdom, Aristotle's *phronimos*, tries to universally cultivate this keen attentiveness. In the words of Josef Pieper, in *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, he exercises "reason perfected in the cognition of truth" that will "inwardly shape and imprint his volition and action."

Practical wisdom is vigilant—it keeps watch over the world. By doing so, it allows us to sound out the depths of our situations and imaginatively connect to the effects of our actions on

others. As Delsol claims, practical wisdom allows us "to steer a difficult course through the tortuous world of action. It is an alchemy that combines keen perception, experience in dealing with people, common sense, judgment based on memory, intuition of the unspoken, moral conscience, and knowledge of events." Such a perspective on the world cannot be captured, though perhaps it can be guarded, by concrete moral rules. It is too subtle to be summarized, as it encompasses an entire stance toward reality that opens us to it and allows us to perceive it aright. It is this stance that indignation oversimplifies and "individualism" denies. It is this stance of which Eichmann was incapable. ■