



The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil

Claudia Card

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What distinguishes evils from ordinary wrongs? Is hatred a necessarily evil? Are some evils unforgivable? Are there evils we should tolerate? What can make evils hard to recognize? Are evils inevitable? How can we best respond to and live with evils?

Claudia Card offers a secular theory of evil that responds to these questions and more. Evils, according to her theory, have two fundamental components. One component is reasonably foreseeable intolerable harm -- harm that makes a life indecent and impossible or that makes a death indecent. The other component is culpable wrongdoing. Atrocities, such as genocides, slavery, war rape, torture, and severe child abuse, are Card's paradigms because in them these key elements are writ large. Atrocities deserve more attention than secular philosophers have so far paid them. They are distinguished from ordinary wrongs not by the psychological states of evildoers but by the seriousness of the harm that is done. Evildoers need not be sadistic; they may simply be negligent or unscrupulous in pursuing their goals.

Card's theory represents a compromise between classic utilitarian and stoic alternatives (including Kant's theory of radical evil). Utilitarians tend to reduce evils to their harms; Stoics tend to reduce evils to the wickedness of perpetrators: Card accepts neither reduction. She also responds to Nietzsche's challenges about the worth of the concept of evil, and she uses her theory to argue that evils are more important than merely unjust inequalities. She applies the theory in explorations of war rape and violence against intimates. She also takes up what Primo Levi called "the gray zone", where victims become complicit in perpetrating on others evils that threaten to engulf themselves. While most past accounts of evil have focused on perpetrators, Card begins instead from the position of the victims, but then considers more generally how to respond to -- and live with -- evils, as victims, as perpetrators, and as those who have become both.

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