

# “Evil Does Not Exist”: On the Distinction Between Moral Evil and Natural Evil

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(Hamaguchi, 2023)

Here is a brief plot summary of Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s brilliant 2023 film, *Evil Does Not Exist*:

Extensive winter forest scenery opens the film. Widower Takumi lives with his eight-year-old daughter Hana in the peaceful Japanese mountain village of Mizubiki. He chops wood, smokes a cigarette, collects jugs of water from the forest stream, and occasionally hears gunshots, presumably from deer hunters.

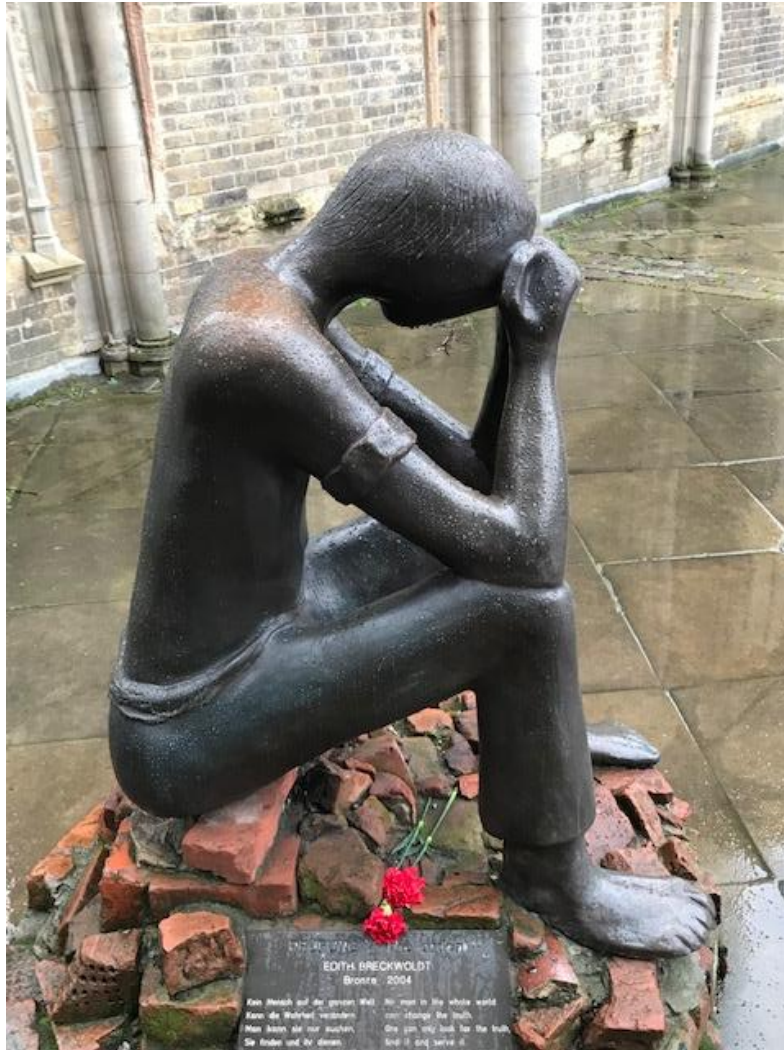
In a community meeting, residents are confronted with a proposal to develop a glamping site. Takahashi and Mayuzumi, two developer representatives, introduce the project. However, the townsfolk unanimously voice their serious concerns about the consequences the site will have on their delicate water systems and scoff at the representatives’ public relations tactics. Takumi and others tell them that the septic tank capacity is not large enough for the planned development, and that sewage will leak into the groundwater they tap from wells. The company is accused of only caring about profits and wanting to move recklessly fast in order to take advantage of limited-time pandemic subsidies.

Takahashi and Mayuzumi change their attitudes as they listen, but after reporting the outcome of the meeting to their boss, they are rebuffed and told to not change the septic system, but instead seduce Takumi with gifts and hire him as a caretaker for the camp. The pair drive back to the village as they chat about their online dating experiences and their disillusionment with their jobs. They chop wood and have lunch with Takumi. Takahashi decides to stay in the village to live there and learn all he can from Takumi. On a drive, Takumi mentions that while wild deer are normally not aggressive, a gut-shot deer or its parent may attack if it is unable to run away. Another gunshot is heard in the distance.

Takumi's daughter Hana goes missing and the village community searches into the night for her. Takumi and Takahashi venture into the forest looking for her and eventually emerge into an open field. Hana is shown in the field approaching a deer and her calf, the latter of which has been gut-shot. Before Takahashi can run over, Takumi tackles him to the ground and chokes him unconscious. Hana is seen lying motionless in the field with a bloody nose before Takumi picks her up and runs off into the forest. Takahashi comes to, struggles to get up only to fall down again. The sound of footsteps and labored breathing are heard faintly over a visual of the forest as it fades to darkness. (Wikipedia, 2024)

The enigmatic final sequence of the movie is open to different and even incompatible interpretations. My own preferred interpretation is that the protagonist, Takumi, is a man who, tragically, has come to blur the distinction between moral evil and natural evil. And in so doing, by the end of the movie, he's culpably reduced himself to the level of a frightened, gut-shot deer. Let me explain.

Evil is a categorical intensification of badness, which is disvalue or wrongness relative to some general scheme of normative minimality and maximality, lower and higher ideals, or lower or higher values. Moral evil, exemplified by self-conscious, freely chosen wrongdoing or sin, is when rational human agents, or persons, not only act badly but also in such a way as to violate fundamental moral principles, and especially the universal *dignitarian* principle which says that we ought always to treat everyone with sufficient respect for their human dignity (Hanna, 2023a, 2023b). Natural evil, exemplified by natural disasters, disease, and accidents, is when non-rational agents or forces produce extremely unfortunate and even catastrophic harmful consequences for either persons or non-person animals. It's a self-evident fact that moral evil exists in this thoroughly nonideal, actual natural and social world, almost everywhere you look. Edith Breckwoldt's stunning sculpture *Prüfung*, or in English, *Test*, in the bombed-out ruins of St Nicholas Church in Hamburg, is a moving artistic expression of this self-evident fact:



“Prüfung/Test,” by Edith Breckwoldt (Hamburg DE, 2004) (Author’s photograph, 2019)

Appropriately, the inscription below the sculpture is a quotation from the work of the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, murdered by the Nazis at age 39. It’s equally self-evident that natural evil exists—earthquakes, floods, the 1918-1919 flu pandemic and 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic, and Hurricane Helene, for example. Moral evil is blameworthy, and rational human agents are morally responsible for it. By sharp contrast, no one is morally responsible for natural evil, but instead parts of the natural universe (including non-rational animals) are only *causally* responsible for it. Therefore, in the natural world per se, moral evil does not exist.

In *Evil Does Not Exist*, by living as a naturalist and largely apart from other people, Takumi has come to be confused about the distinction between moral evil and natural evil, and in so doing, tragically, acting like a frightened, gut-shot deer, he allows his daughter to wander unaccompanied through the forest and suffer possibly fatal injury,

and also attacks another person, possibly fatally. In turn, this personal tragedy is played out against the backdrop of the larger moral problem of how humankind ought to treat the natural universe, in view of what I've called its *proto-dignity* (Hanna, 2018: section 3.14).

Now, what about the distinction between moral badness and moral evil? There are two fundamentally different kinds of moral disvalue or wrongness: (1) *moral evil*, which is choice or action involving the intentional violation of people's dignity, that is, considering or treating them like things, like mere instruments, or, even worse, like garbage or offal, and (2) *non-evil moral badness*, which is the non-evil *privation*, or falling-short-of, ideal or high-bar good, for example, in choices or acts involving benevolence or kindness to others, or sensitivity to their needs, and the related thought that "we can never do enough to help others." According to this normative scheme, moral evil and moral badness are inherently *lexically ordered* in relation to moral disvalue or wrongness. Clearly, moral disvalue or wrongness, just like moral value or rightness, always comes in degrees: morally wrong choices and acts are always more or less so, just as morally right choices and acts are. Other things being equal, it is much worse literally to stab someone with the intention of murdering her, than it is merely to say "cutting" things to her with the intention of hurting her feelings. But according to this lexical ordering between moral evil and non-evil moral badness, even the least case of real moral evil is fundamentally worse than even the greatest case of real non-evil moral badness. The person who rejoices in the suffering of another, or who acts specifically in order to make someone else suffer, is fundamentally worse than even the biggest con artist, embezzler, or thief that you can think of, although obviously the utilitarian bad consequences of the latter's choices and acts can massively outweigh those of the former.

Again, it is one morally disvalued thing to fall short of the best you can be, for example, as regards benevolence and kindness to others, and sensitivity to their needs (moral badness), but radically another to violate people's dignity (moral evil). Non-evil morally bad choices and acts are all about human imperfection and weakness, that is, being "human, all too human," whereas evil choices or acts strike at the heart of human personhood itself. It is also very important to note that, corresponding to the overarching normative distinction between moral evil and non-evil moral badness, under the same rubric of moral evil, there are in fact two sharply different further sub-kinds of moral evil: (1i) *near-Satanic evil*, that is, evil chosen or done for its own sake, whatever the consequences, as the result of *titanic egoism*—for example, Hitler, and (1ii) *banal evil*, that is, evil chosen or done for merely self-interested reasons (aka "banal egoism"), for hedonistic reasons, or for consequentialist reasons—for example, the choices and acts of Adolf Eichmann, aka "the man in the glass booth," as per Hannah Arendt's famous moral

analysis of the Eichmann trial in 1961.<sup>1</sup> Arendt's basic (and, I think, ultimately Kantian) point, with which I also completely agree, is that on the assumption that we hold the stunning general fact of the moral horror of Nazism temporarily fixed for the purposes of some further moral reflection, there is *still* an intrinsic moral difference between Hitler's kind of evil and (Arendt's) Eichmann's kind of evil.

Now, some morally wrong choices or actions are just that: nothing but a privation of maximally, ideally, or perfectly good and right action. Such choices or actions also occurs under what Joseph Raz aptly calls "the Guise of the Good" (Raz, 2016), which is to say that they conform to the classical Socratic idea that morally wrong choice or action is an erroneous, ignorant, or otherwise rationally misguided attempt to choose or do the good. That is *non-evil morally bad* choice or action. In turn, however, *evil* choices or actions comprise a special sub-class of morally wrong choice or actions that involve the intention to undermine or violate the dignity of real persons. When an evil choice or action *also* occurs under the Guise of the Good, and as it were Socratically, then it is *banal evil*. But when a morally wrong choice or action is taken together with an online and intact rational human innate capacity for morally good or right action, then—as against Socrates, who thought this was impossible—the rational human animal or real human person simply chooses the wrong thing *for its own sake*, or non-instrumentally. This is what Raz also aptly calls choice or action under "the Guise of the Bad" (Raz, 2016).

According to my view of the real possibility of morally disvalued or wrong choice or action, morally disvalued or wrong choice or action has three individually necessary and jointly sufficient features, and two distinct sub-kinds (namely, moral evil and non-evil moral badness), one of which (namely, moral evil) itself has two further distinct sub-kinds. Or, fully explicitly now, a practical agent *A* chooses or acts in a morally disvalued or wrong way if and only if (i) *A* satisfies the minimal, nonideal, or "low bar" standards of rational normativity, thereby guaranteeing moral responsibility, and also (ii) *A* falls short of the maximal, ideal, "high bar" standards of moral rational normativity, namely, the Categorical Imperative or moral law (= morally bad action as the "privation" of ideally or perfectly good and right action), and also (iii) *A* freely chooses or does the morally disvalued or wrong thing *insofar as this choice or action is perverted by human egoism in any of its forms*, thereby flowing from "the perversity of the will" or "the perversity of the heart," which, in turn, can be EITHER (iii.1) *moral evil*, that is, choice or action involving the intentional violation of people's dignity, which is the same as treating them like mere instruments, or what is worse, like mere things, or, what is even worse, like

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<sup>1</sup> See (Arendt, 1963/1977). Historical evidence uncovered since the mid-1960s indicates that the actual Eichmann was, in fact, near-Satanically evil himself, so I'm using *Arendt's Eichmann* as my example, not the *actual Eichmann*.

mere garbage or offal, which, in turn, can be either (iii.1i) *near-Satanic evil*, that is, evil chosen or done for its own sake and under the Guise of the Bad, whatever the consequences, as the result of *titanic egoism*—for example, Hitler, or (iii.1ii) *banal evil*, that is, evil chosen or done for merely self-interested reasons (aka “banal egoism”), for hedonistic reasons, or for consequentialist reasons, and under the Guise of the Good — for example, (Arendt’s) Eichmann, OR (iii.2) *non-evil moral badness*, which is the non-evil privation of high-bar good, for example, not doing enough to help others.

According to this scheme of distinctions and my interpretation of *Evil Does Not Exist*, then, in the final sequence of the movie, Takumi is indeed acting in a morally evil way, but not in a near-Satanically evil way.

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