"Human Responsibility": An Oxymoron?

Some Things To Consider...

What is the substance of evil? Does it have substance at all? Can it exist outside of the human act? Why don't we interpret evil in nature? What role does the human will play in evil? How is knowledge connected to the notion of evil? Why are people so fascinated with evil? If there is no God and all we have is a physical/material existence, what role would the word "evil" play in our lives? How is evil connected to human nature? Is there a human nature? If evil is a substance, is there a place for the notion of human responsibility? What is the modern notion of evil? Do you experience evil in the world, or do you experience an absence of good?

Highlights From The Last Meeting...

We don't interpret evil in nature. We look at natural objects and animals differently than we look at humans. Is this because we connect evil with choice and thought? Can evil exist outside of the human act? Can the act itself be evil? Is it possible to commit an evil act without knowing that you are doing so? Keirkegaard would say yes, that if there is some objective evil outside of us that the greatest evils can be committed without the knowledge of the person doing the act. But if you attribute evil to some outside force, then you are relieving humanity of taking responsibility for actions; rather than saying "I did something wrong," we can say "The devil made me do it."

If we say that evil is located in human action, we need to examine how it is that we are defining "action." Is a thought an action? If a person is committed to doing an evil act but is somehow prevented from doing so, is there evil in the thought or decision itself? Is there a such thing as evil thought? Some would say that there is a greater degree of evil in an action which is committed and for which we can measure in the consequences of the action. Others would say that evil is solely located in the motivation and thought of the individual and is distinct and separate from the consequences of the action itself. We can neither predict nor control consequences of action: we only have control over our own thoughts.

The modern notion of evil seems to be that it is a "sickness." Although this situates evil within us, like the Manichean notion that evil is some outside force, it takes away human responsibility for action. We think that if a human commits an evil act then something inside them needs to be "fixed." They are perhaps just responding to circumstances, such as being abused as a child, or they have a chemical problem which we can treat with chemicals. We don't want to accept a true evil that we are unable to control. We also commented on the irony of how a person deemed insane is put away for "treatment" and is kept there longer than a person convicted of a crime, who can be paroled and allowed back onto the street. What does this imply? In the case of "sickness" we have a degree of control over the evil, whereas if the criminal is in control of his or her actions we have no power over the evil. How do we distinguish between someone who is sick and someone who consciously does wrong—between someone who "needs help" and someone who is diabolical? Do we believe in the diabolical at all?

How is what we consider to be "evil" determined? Some would take the relativistic notion that it is designated by the society or culture in which one lives. But what about...
the stuff that the culture is not sure about. For example, cloning? On what do we, as individuals, base our decisions if there is no popularly accepted answer? In the case of cloning, our individual decisions would probably be predicated on our view of knowledge, progress, and technology. Who imposes the eventual designations of what is evil and what is not, and how do those notions change or evolve over time? Do we account for individuals with opinions that go against what the culture says by believing that they are influenced by some other outside source, or do we want to assert the existence of free will?

Why are we so fascinated with evil? Evil is more exciting, changeable, malleable, and dynamic. Good and virtue are always the same; they bore us. Especially at a time in which we focus on efficiency, speed, progress, and movement, the dynamics of evil are more appealing than the stagnation of good. Humanity loves wondrous variety.

This notion of variety is also connected to the hierarchy of information, knowledge, and wisdom. Information is dynamic, not being rooted in anything permanent. Information is limitless, whereas wisdom is limited. But although information is not even called knowledge, which would involve thinking and choices, we base education and learning on the acquisition of information. This reversed value scale places the highest worth on what requires the least of us, augmenting our quest to relieve human responsibility for action. It was interesting to see how important the role of knowledge was in our discussion of evil. This is because of the connection between knowledge and power. Why do we seek knowledge? The acquisition of knowledge is a manifestation of humanity’s desire to give free play to its desires. Nietzsche would call it evidence of the “will to power.” Is the lure of evil connected with a perpetual expansion of the human will? For Augustine, this expansion of the will in the material world represents the movement of the soul away from God, illustrating both evil and the corruptibility that makes us who we are. For Hobbes and Spinoza, this expansion of the will is human nature. But human nature is a natural concept. If we see evil as connected with human thought or action and if human nature tends toward evil, but we don’t impose the concept of evil on natural things, then evil is not evil. Aristotle would be extraordinarily perturbed by this illogical contradiction, but the Hegelians out there can readily account for it.

To call evil innate assumes the existence of a human nature. This is a Greek idea and assumes that our nature is determined—there is no free will. Christianity, however, does not posit a human nature. It asserts that something “went wrong” but original sin does not mean that we are completely determined and that we cannot escape the tendency to evil. Also, original sin comes after the creation of humanity, so it cannot be something that was in our nature from the start. Or was the Fall inevitably seeded in human nature? Yet the church would still want to assert a free will, otherwise there can be no change in the soul and it thus undermines itself.

If there is no spiritual realm and all we have is the physical/material existence, then the word “evil” is simply a convenient linguistic construct which serves to assist in the classification of degrees of good and bad in order to regulate the promotion of what is good and efficient for the human species. Since the time of the ancients, humanity’s ideas of what is manifestly good or evil has shifted; what we see today as good, the ancients would have recognized right away as evil. We see artificiality as progressive. For example, have you seen the pictures of the human ear that was grown on a mouse’s back? What is our response to this? How would Socrates, inquisitive son of Sophroniscus and Phraenaretus, have responded? What if we grew a mouse ear on a human baby? Logically, it would be the same thing, but we would say that “it serves no purpose” and that it is wrong, unethical, and/or evil to do such a thing to a human baby. But it is okay to use another living thing for our “benefit.” The realm of the human being we prefer to revere as natural; however, we will tolerate artificial alterations in a human being if we associate the specific change with progress or efficiency. It seems that our quest for power outweighs our desire and respect for life. We are willing to destroy or alter life, even our own, in order to augment human power.

This power seems to be the only thing in which we perceive value in the thing itself. In so far as a thing

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benefits humanity, we say that it is good. Even the environmentalist groups appeal to this; we want to save the Earth not because it has any value in itself or because it is our responsibility, but because we need it. Yet we go beyond anthropocentrism because of our willingness to sacrifice humanity and compromise its value for the pursuit of power.

Can we stop this pursuit of knowledge? Knowledge is governed by our own ends; it is a part of us, something within us. It is not something external over which we exert control. We don’t consider the possibility of stopping it, only attempting to regulate it once it is here. We would consider it a greater evil to stop the progression of knowledge (if we could) than to allow it to progress without regard for the consequences. Will we destroy ourselves in our quest for progress? Is there hope for a new start after this happens? Jonathan Schell, in his essay *The Fate of the Earth*, points out the uncontrollability of abstract knowledge. If some people escaped the destruction of the world, the same fate would inevitably be repeated because the knowledge would remain with those people. There is also a science fiction novel (among many, I am sure) which ponders and questions our hope that if we did destroy ourselves and the cycle began anew we could circumvent the same thing from occurring again. Would the same thing happen all over again?

We try to perceive of evil as something that is separate from us, but it is closer to us than we think. Perhaps one reason why evil is so popular in movies, TV, books, games, etc. is because this situates evil somewhere outside of us. If we look at the movie Schindler’s List, the man who was randomly shooting Jews was depicted as insane. But if we look at the journals of those men, we see normal people who were just performing their duties. They were just like us. We would rather avoid the terrifying notion that evil is a human capacity, that it is a problem within "us," not "them."

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**Fall Meeting Schedule**

*Meetings will be held in Gamble Hall Room 106 at 8:30 p.m.*

**Wednesday...**

**November 5 & 19**

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**Topic For Our Next Meeting...**

**The Death Penalty**

The American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division, passed the following resolution in the Spring of 1997 by a vote of 730 in favor and 359 opposed:

> *Whereas thirty-eight states and the federal government currently have laws permitting judicial execution (capital punishment or the death penalty) for certain categories of crimes.*

*And whereas numerous arguments including those from: arbitrariness, discriminatory application, lack of demonstrable deterrent value, irrevocability, risk of executing the innocent, brutalization, devaluation of life, violation of the right to life, comparative costliness, and cruelty combine to create a strong prima facie case for the abolition of the death penalty.*

Recognizing that serious public discussion and debate of the ethics of capital punishment has all but disappeared from the national conversation in recent years,

And further recognizing our social responsibility as educators and philosophers to foster and advance the careful, thorough, informed, and rational examination of significant contemporary ethical issues,

Therefore be it resolved that the American Philosophical Association (Eastern Division) will urge its members to use their resources to educate their students, colleagues, and their communities about the death penalty.

And be it further resolved that in furtherance of the goal of fostering public debate on the subject of capital punishment, the American Philosophical Association (Eastern Division) will write to the President of the United States urging that he
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establish a national commission on justice and prison reform which will examine a range of issues related to reform of the US justice system including but not limited to the abolition of the death penalty.

And be it further resolved that the American Philosophical Association (Eastern Division) go on record as opposing the use of the death penalty and calling for an immediate end to all executions in the federal and state prisons in the United States of America.

Are you for or against the death penalty? Why? Do you feel that all of the arguments given by the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division, are accurate? What are the arguments that support the capital punishment?

We are often concerned with the irrevocability of taking someone's life and the possibility of later finding out that they were innocent. But what about someone who has been in jail for 20 years and is then found innocent? He has lost 20 years of his life and the quality of his life afterwards will be severely damaged. But at least he is still alive. Why is quantity so much more important than quality?

Which is more inhuman, putting someone on death row for many years or putting them to death quickly? Do our definitions of, and attempts to be, "humane" often cause more suffering for the people to whom we are trying to be fair?

What is the purpose of putting someone in jail? If it is to reform them, what is the purpose of putting them to death? To deter others or reform others by example? Is the purpose of the justice system to reform or to punish? Does our society ignore the concept of punishment and concentrate on reform? If we say that the primary focus should be on the reform of the criminals, then we are saying that there is something wrong with them that we should "fix."

Guidelines:
* Essays must focus on a philosopher or some philosophical topic
* Essays must be a minimum of 1,000 words and include your name and phone number
* Awards will be given for First, Second, and Third place winners.

Submissions can be dropped off at any time in The Thought Box, located in The Writing Center, Gamble Hall, 109.

Judging will take place in Spring Quarter, 1998.

Competitors must be students of Armstrong Atlantic State University during the 97-98 academic year. As philosophical thought is applicable to all areas of study, this contest is open to all students. Talk to friends and professors about ideas!

Announcements!!!!

If you didn't get to see the October 29th special birthday edition of The Philosopher's Stone, contact us for your copy!!

It's Time To Begin Your Essays!
2nd Annual Philosophical Essay Contest

Why not look through some previous issues of The Philosopher's Stone to get some ideas?

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Student President: Tiffany L.C. Rogers, 1-888-964-9543

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