“Moral monsters” in the perspectives of philosophy, psychology, and religion

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RUNNING HEAD: Moral monsters

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Abstract
Prominent philosopher of ethics Trudy Govier argued against the existence of moral monsters, people who had committed extreme crimes and could not be morally transformed. She asserted that one should hate the evil deeds but not the evil doer, because a human does not lose his/her humanity just because of what he/she did. She further argued that this approach conforms to the Christian tradition promoted by Bishop Tutu. This article examines Govier’s arguments in philosophical, religious, and psychological perspectives. It is suggested that separating the evil doer from the evil deeds is logically unacceptable. Moreover, the “compulsive lair argument” by Govier also does not free the agent from moral responsibilities. In addition, the notion of the non-existence of moral monsters is incompatible with traditional Biblical teaching. Although there is no conclusive evidence for supporting or denying the existence of moral monsters, the ideal of “moral saints” and the anti-ideal of “moral monsters” help us to work toward desirable moral goals and to repulse us away from the point of no return.
“Moral monsters” in the perspectives of philosophy, psychology, and religion

In the books entitled Forgiveness and revenge (2002a) and A delicate balance (2002b), prominent philosopher of ethics Trudy Govier analyzed philosophical issues relating to revenge and forgiveness. One of her main theses is the denial of “moral monsters.” Govier asserted that one should hate the evil deed but not the evil doer. Equating the person with his/her action is dehumanizing; a human does not lose his/her humanity just because of what he/she did. In other words, the offender should never be reduced to nothing else but his/her monstrous action. There are monstrous deeds, but there are no monstrous people. In short, the central thesis is that everyone is capable of moral transformation. At first glance this notion is very appealing to Christians, for the Christian religion emphasizes infinite love of God, sanctity of human, and hope for redemption no matter what the circumstance is. Nonetheless, every notion originated from good intention could potentially be misconstrued and misapplied, and thus it is worth to carefully examine this thesis in religious, philosophical and psychological perspectives.

What is evil?

While the preceding notion is controversial, some controversy is unnecessary if the concept is clearly defined. Unfortunately, different people use different terminology and definitions. While Govier used the terms “monstrous people” and “pure evil,” psychologist Walker (2002) employed the concept of “extraordinary evil” and philosopher Haybron (2002) used “moral monster” and “evil” instead. Their writings indicate that these terms refer to extreme criminals such as Nazis, the same example mentioned by all three writers. However, these writers may not agree upon the technical definitions of evil or moral monsters. In Govier’s perspective, a moral monster is one who is said to have no other choice but to commit evil deeds. This notion is plainly rejected by Govier for her doubt of dispositional factors of evils and her insistence upon the possibility of moral transformation. Walker defined evil as the deliberate harming of humans by other humans, which is a behavioral definition that focuses on how people act toward one another. In other words, an evil doer is defined by evil deeds. But Haybron rejected such a simplistic and behavioral account of evil. He discussed different options of defining evil such as the
harm-based accounts (the evil consequence), the motive-based accounts (the evil motive of the perpetrators), and the affect-based accounts (being disposed to enjoy the suffering of others). Haybron adopted a hybrid model, which is an affective-motivational account. To be evil, in his view, is “to be consistently vicious in the following sense: one is not aligned with the good to a morally significant extent.” (p.269)

This discussion may be fruitless if different definitions are vaguely mixed together. In this paper, “evil” and “extraordinary evil” will be used interchangeably. Also, I will use an example-based definition of “evil.” While different authors may emphasize different aspects of evil—psychological, consequential, theological, and even metaphysical—I observed a pattern that different authors used more or less the same examples in discussing evil, for instance, Stalin’s Russia, Nazi Germany, Pol Pot’s Cambodia, South Africa under Apartheid, the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, the Rwanda massacre, Serbia’s ethnic cleansing, etc. Taking this common thread into consideration, in this article a “moral monster” is defined as someone who has committed extreme crimes like the preceding examples, so that there is overwhelming reason to think that she/he has reached the point of no return—she/he cannot be morally regenerated.

This example-based approach to definition is borrowed from factor analysis in psychometrics. In psychology some latent constructs are extremely hard to define. As a remedy, statisticians employ multiple observable indicators to define a latent construct. One may argue that this example-oriented definition is not trouble-free. For example, Walker (2002) did not include Chinese’s Cultural Revolution and Japanese’s Nanking Massacre in their discussion on massive killings. Similarly, Chalk and Jonassohn (1990) also excluded the above two examples in their classic book entitled History and sociology of genocide. As Walker pointed out, for a number of reasons some killings such as eliminating political groups are not considered “genocide.” Nevertheless, we could find more commonalities among those authors on evil and genocide than dissimilarities. The aforementioned Nazi Germany and Khmer Rouge are two obvious and undeniable examples.
It is important to note that while I argue against the non-existence of human moral monsters in this article, I do not argue for their existence. On one hand, there are no compelling philosophical arguments or psychological evidence to deny the existence of human moral monsters. On the other hand, there is also no irrefutable proof that human moral monsters exist (I believe that spiritual moral monsters, such as Satan, do exist). Nevertheless, I maintain that the notion of a human moral monster is still a useful construct for both theoretical and practical implications. The extreme opposite of a moral monster is a moral saint. Some may argue that no human could be morally perfect, yet many cultures keep the notion of saints as a moral motivation. This point will be discussed in a later section. Next, I will examine Govier’s arguments one by one and explain why they fail to refute the notion of moral monster.

**Can evil deeds and evil doers be separated?**

Govier asserted that reducing a person to his/her deeds is dehumanizing; a better view is to separate the evil deeds from the evil doers. At first glance, equating good/bad deeds with a person is dehumanizing, but actually, separating a person from his/her deeds is also a form of dehumanization. What would happen if we replaced the attitude “hatred” with “love”? For example, after my wife has done a lot of kind things for me, how would she feel if I said to her, “I love what you did, but I don’t love you”? My attitude makes her just an instrument producing benefits to me, and thus it is dehumanizing. By the same token, if a war criminal or a terrorist is not considered a moral monster despite monstrous acts, does the same logic imply that St. Paul, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King are not saints in spite of what their moral accomplishments are?

Govier based her argument on the Christian tradition, in which some theologians believe that there is a distinction between the sinner and the sin, the doer and the deed. Govier cited Archbishop Desmond Tutu to elaborate on this line of thought:

There are people in South Africa who have committed the most unbelievable atrocities and I am willing for their deeds to be labeled with the harshest of the epithets: monstrous, diabolical, even devilish. However, monstrous deeds do not turn the perpetrators into monsters. A human person
does not ultimately lose his or her humanity, which is characterized by the divine image in which every individual is created (cited in 2002a, p.110).

It is a popular misconception that “hate the sin but love the sinner” is a Christian doctrine. In actuality, no verse like this can be found in the Bible at all. The following are the most often cited verses used as an indirect proof for the preceding notion:

For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not be perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved (John 3:16-17).

For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly…But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:6-8).

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I (Paul) am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life (I Timothy 1:15-16).

Taking the above Scripture into consideration, many evangelists have argued that God undoubtedly loved sinners so much as to save the world. Nonetheless, other verses in the Bible indicate that God hates sins. For example, “You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, your God, has appointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions” (Hebrews 1:9). To reconcile the tension between the love and wrath of God, evangelists came to the conclusion that God loves lawless people (sinners) but hates lawlessness (sin). However, when we read the preceding verse carefully, we can see that the distinction is not clear-cut. In the Book of Hebrews the author said that God “loved righteousness and hated lawlessness.” If lawlessness is referred to evil deeds that are hated by God, we should also accept that “righteousness” is referred to good deeds, but not righteous people. Does God love good deeds but not good people?
Contrary to the popular belief, integrating sins and sinners as well as associating sins with characters are widely accepted by certain Christian traditions. For example, the Zondervan’s Pictorial Bible dictionary (Tenney, 1967) interpreted “sin” in the following fashion:

Sin is not only violation of law, which is an expression of God’s will; more profoundly, it is the violation of God’s holy character. It is the corruption of the goodness which God originally imparted to His creatures; especially is the corruption of the godliness with which God originally endowed man when He created him in His own image. Sin may then be defined ultimately as anything in the creature which does not express, or which is contrary to, the Holy character of the Creator. Sin then is not merely what we do, but what we are (emphasis added by the author, p.796).

In fact, the distinction between sins and sinners in the American Christian community is fairly recent. In the 18th century the notion that God hates wicked and sends them to hell occupied a central position in American sermons. For example, in 1741 when Massachusetts Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards preached the sermon entitled Sinner in the hands of an angry God, his core message was that God does not hesitate in sending sinners to hell. In another sermon entitled Punishment of the wicked, Edwards started the sermon with these sentences: “When the saints in glory shall see the wrath of God executed on ungodly men, it will be no occasion of grief to them, but of rejoicing” (p.506). There is no evidence that early American preachers made a distinction between sinners who are loveable and sins that should be hated. Indeed, the notion of “hell” implies that some people are regarded as irredeemable by God and thus they are separated from God forever. Therefore, it may be problematic to associate Govier’s notion with the Christian tradition.

Is reduction dehumanizing?

Other arguments used by Govier to support the notion that a human is not reducible to sins and is capable of something better are also unconvincing. “Reduction” carries a negative connotation in various disciplines. However, reduction is necessary when the issue is examined within a particular context. Take psychometrics as an example. After subjects have been measured by different observable criteria, these
observed items of measurement go through a reductionistic process called factor analysis. At the end, the psychologist is concerned with a few latent constructs represented by statistical figures. In the research context, the subjects are reduced to a set of manageable numbers. However, the psychologist would never go so far as to say, “These people are nothing but numbers!” When evil doers are “reduced” to “moral monsters,” they are judged within a particular context and thus the assessment based on their crime is not unjustified.

Are a poet, a loving father, and a moral monster mutually exclusive?

Govier (2002a) urged us to obtain a holistic view of a person’s character in other contexts, but she failed to establish a logical link across different contexts. The following are her examples:

It will be deeply disturbing to find evidence that some of those ‘monsters’ are not only and not simply monsters. They use drugs, alcohol, or sex to kill their misery; they are kind to animals and children; love Yeats’ poetry, the music of Beethoven, or the moral philosophy of Kant. An indicted war criminal, such as Bosnian Serb leader Karadzic, might also have been a caring psychiatrist and poet of love; a concentration camp commander might be a skilled musician.

(p.115)

However, it is difficult to see why a terrorist or a war criminal who committed massacre is not a moral monster because they like Yeats’ poetry, Beethoven’s music, or Kant’s philosophy. How are poetry, music, and philosophy related to one’s moral character? If I read comic books and listen to rock music, but also bombed a shopping mall, could I defend my “humanity” by saying that I love comic books and rock music? Everyone has certain hobbies, but these hobbies, regardless of whether they belong to the elitist culture or the popular culture, cannot be taken into account in the context of judging a war criminal or a terrorist. Form the sake of argument, I grant that Yeats’ poetry, Beethoven’s music, and Kant’s philosophy could really make contributions to one’s moral character. However, if Govier maintains that one should distinguish the person from his or her deeds, then the same logic implies that reading poetry and philosophy could not be considered a part of one’s humanity.
Reading poetry and listening to music may be trivial. Could something more “noble” of the perpetrator indicate his/her humanity? Govier (2002a) cited the experience of a perpetrator during the Apartheid period of South Africa in an attempt to prove her point: Willie Nortje was a white murderer who had committed atrocities against blacks. But Nortje was very gentle when he was playing with his baby. A Danish observer who spent six weeks with Nortje said, “He’s an ordinary person. He’s a good person…I often think of Willie Nortje playing with his baby” (cited in Govier, 2002, p.114).

**Quantitative and qualitative changes**

A murderer could also be a loving father at the same time, but it still does not prove that someone who loves his baby could not be a moral monster. In the essay entitled *Moral monsters and saints*, philosopher Haybron (2002) stated that an evil person is to be the worst possible kind of person. But this kind of person comes in degrees. “One need not at every moment do, feel, and desire the worst possible things; it suffices for being evil that one come close enough to this.” Nonetheless, Haybron said that while there is a continuum of “evil,” it does matter where we draw the line because the distinction between bad and evil is not merely one of degree, but a qualitative difference.

Perhaps a medical metaphor could be helpful to illustrate Haybron’s point: the functionality of a kidney comes in degrees. A healthy kidney has 100% function; a sick person may have a 50% functioning kidney. However, if one’s kidney has only 5% function, a doctor would diagnose that the patient is suffering from “kidney failure.” The doctor doesn’t need to wait for a 100% failed kidney in order to declare that the kidney has ceased to be a kidney. When the degree of malfunction “crosses” a certain line, the quantitative change in a kidney’s function turns into a qualitative change. By the same token, a moral monster does not necessarily have to be 100% evil (i.e., he does not have to beat his baby and his wife in addition to his other actions) in order to qualify as evil; he may demonstrate many humane characteristics in everyday life. As Haybron said, an evil person need not at every moment do, feel, and desire the worst possible things.
Shadow, dissociation and doubling

Playing with one’s own baby could co-exist within the same person with committing extraordinary evils. In other words, being a loving father and being a moral monster are not mutually exclusive. This could be explained by a psychological theory called “doubling,” suggested by Lifton (1986). Lifton conducted extensive interviews with twenty-nine medical professionals involved at high levels in Nazi medicine, twelve former Nazi non-medical professionals, including lawyers, judges, and economists, and eighty former death camp prisoners who worked on medical blocks. Based on these interviews and other investigations, Lifton introduced the concept of “doubling” to explain why ordinary people, including loving fathers, could commit extraordinary evils.

The origin of the concept “doubling” could be traced back to Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. In the tradition of psychoanalysis, the self is never single-faceted; rather it is composed of several layers and a vast majority of the self is hidden under the conscious level. According to Freud, the superego plays the role of limiting the desire originated from the id while the ego acts as a mediator between the two. As a result, the self contains a “suppressed” component. In a similar vein, Jung (1953) also maintained that human personality is so complicated that a certain side may be virtually unknown to us. This hidden side is called the Shadow, which is the unconscious, repressed, undeveloped and denied side of the personality. The Shadow, as an archetype, is typical in everyone’s consciousness. Since childhood, the shadow is developed through socialization by parents, siblings, teachers and clergy. Through this process we suppress elements of ourselves that do not fit into the approved self-image. Following this line of argument, Lifton asserted that an evil doer has two selves—one could be an ordinary person, a law-abiding citizen, and a loving father, but the “double self” could be a merciless killer.

Another root of “doubling” is the concept of dissociation, which is the psychological phenomenon of dividing mental processes within the same person. To be specific, in dissociation, one mental process, say thinking of evil, could coexist with another mental process, say thinking of love, and these two processes could be totally disconnected from each other. Lifton stated that dissociation, which is the basis of doubling, was the most frequent psychological adaptation used by the Nazi doctors he
studied. Due to doubling, those Nazi doctors could easily avoid guilt by dissociating between killing babies in the morning and comforting their own children at night. Therefore, Govier’s notion does not seem to be a strong argument against the existence of moral monsters.

**Do people’s acts come from dispositional or situational influences?**

Interestingly enough, Govier also cited psychological findings in attempt to substantiate her argument. By seeking support from social psychology, Govier asserted that it is mistaken to view evil doers as people whose acts come from their disposition and character. Rather, she emphasized that situational factors play a crucial role in forming our actions. As Govier said, “Ordinary people may find themselves in extraordinary situations. Given a context of violent conflicts, ordinary people can act very badly indeed” (2002a, p.117). If the so-called “evil disposition” is just a myth, then the notion of “moral monster” could also be refuted.

On one hand, Walker (2002) agreed with Govier that most social psychologists do not think of evil actions as the product of evil dispositions or personalities. On the other hand, Walker asserted that a theory exclusively stressing either dispositional or situational factors is incomplete. Rather, emphasizing the interaction between the two factors could make a better psychological theory. In his view, the dispositions and personalities of perpetrators do matter because the perpetrators reinforce their dispositions by choosing courses of action and also by creating situations that are most conducive to the expression of their personalities. Thus, not only do situations influence the person, but also the person influences the situations. In this sense, we are both the products and the producers of our situations. What psychologists should pay attention to is the relative weight of dispositional and situational factors in explaining evil.

I would use terrorism as an example to illustrate Walker’s theory. Although all Northern Irish people faced a violent environment and were burdened with a history of English oppression, as a matter of fact, not all Northern Irish people responded to the situation by bombing English civilians. A few Irish Republican Armies deliberately chose to use terrorism as a means of rebellion, and thus they created a situation that trapped them in a vicious cycle of violence.
Indeed, while discussing the root causes of terrorism, Govier (2002b) accepted that situational factors alone are not a sufficient condition of terrorism. After September 11, many critics argued that it is a mistake to view terrorism as pure evil; instead, serious considerations must be given to the root causes of terrorism such as the Western imperialist agenda in the Middle East. In other words, there are situations that breed terrorism. Terrorists are not moral monsters who have dispositions to kill; rather, terrorist acts are responses to extraordinary situations such as facing a hopeless struggle. Nevertheless, Govier contended that the root causes of terrorism are just necessary conditions for terrorism to emerge in its present form, but they are not sufficient to explain the motivations and actions of individual agents. Individuals, as moral agents, have the free will to decide how to respond to different situations. The situational factors or the background causes cannot completely explain terrorism because they make no reference to the feelings, beliefs, goals, and decisions of individual terrorists.

In summary, as Walker said, dispositions do matter because the situations that perpetrators face might result from their personalities. Also, situational factors are not sufficient conditions and thus they could not be used to explain away individual responsibilities. Taking both points into account, the situational factor does not seem to be a compelling argument to deny the existence of moral monsters.

Could compulsive wrongdoings be free from moral responsibilities?

In order to further refute the notion that certain sinners are “moral monsters” due to their “evil characters,” Govier (2002a) argued that if a person is incapable of doing good deeds due to dispositional factors, this person should not be morally responsible for his/her behaviors and thus the term “moral monster” is mislabeled. Govier used a compulsive liar as an example: If a woman who always lies cannot change her behavioral pattern no matter how hard she tries, “her lying is pathological and thus beyond choice, responsibility, and blameworthiness…One is not responsible for compulsive behavior…A woman who cannot help stop herself from lying, even when she repeatedly resolves to do so, is in some way sick. She should be pitied and treated, not punished or castigated or ostracized” (pp. 124-125).

“One is not responsible for compulsive behavior” is really an overstatement. Is compulsive lying pathological? In other words, is it a disease? Actually, the same question has been asked regarding
chemical dependency and alcoholism. Typical drug addicts and alcoholics always defend themselves by saying that they simply cannot stop taking illegal drugs or drinking in spite of trying every rehabilitation. However, it seems that there is a huge logical gap between having a habit that is hard to give up and having something pathological that deserves sympathy. Could we say that other human weaknesses such as greediness, laziness and cowardice are also compulsive and obsessive in nature and therefore no moral issues are involved here? As a matter of fact, once a bank robber used the excuse that he is a compulsive robber who is obsessed with spending money.

Compulsive behaviors seem to be deterministic—one must act according to the disposition. In fact, patients who are diagnosed as suffering from compulsive-obsessive disorder show a large dispersion of attitudinal and behavioral patterns. Usually psychometricians employ either principal component analysis or factor analysis to find the common threads (factors) out of the variance of attitudinal and behavioral patterns. It was found that those factor solutions could explain about 35% to 42% of the total variance (Emmelkamp, Kraaijkamp, & van den Hout, 1999). Indeed, it is likely that a compulsive liar would not lie on all occasions. Instead, she may lie selectively in certain situations, in which lying is beneficial to her.

Even if compulsive lying is deterministic--she has no other choices but to lie, it still does not free her from moral responsibilities. Take the other extreme as an example: A moral saint is so compulsive as to love and care for the well-being of humankind. When Gandhi saw suffering in India, he had no choices but to fight for their freedom; when St Francis of Assisi saw the prevalence of sickness and poverty, he had to show people the love of God. Even though their own survival was threatened, they were willing to sacrifice themselves without hesitation. However, it is absurd to say that their acts are devoid of moral contents just because they are “compulsive saints.” Walker’s theory, as mentioned before, can be well-applied to both compulsive saints and compulsive sinners. In the first place people chose certain courses of action to create a situation that reinforces their dispositions. After many years of religious devotion, Gandhi and St Francis might make righteousness their inherent essence. By the same token, after a long
period of abuse, a compulsive liar, a drug addict, and an alcoholic might also make certain destructive behaviors being deep down in their characters.

In 2002 I visited Cambodia and talked to several survivors under the Red Khmer regime. One survivor said that Red Khmer soldiers were compulsive killers. In many political persecutions usually the torturers want to extract information and confessions from the prisoners. In contrast, many Red Khmer soldiers wanted nothing else from the prisoners except the joy of seeing suffering and deaths. The survivor said that some soldiers, like drug addicts and alcoholics, felt very bad when they spent a day without killing; they had to kill in order to release the psychological tension. Is this type of compulsive killing pathological and thus beyond choice, responsibility, and blameworthiness? If we accept the notion that one is not responsible for compulsive behaviors, can we say that those compulsive murderers should be pitied and treated, not punished or castigated or ostracized? The answer is “No.” They are still responsible for their behaviors and compulsive killers could still treated as moral monsters.

**Could “becoming evil” be “being evil”?

It is important to point out that Walker believed that ordinary people like you and me could actually commit extraordinary evil acts under certain conditions. Walker carefully chose the title for his book to be “Becoming evil” instead of “Being evil.” Walker elaborated the meaning of becoming evil by saying, “In reality, a purely evil person is just as much an artificial construct as a person who is purely good. Perpetrators of extraordinary evil are extraordinary only by what they have done, not by who they are” (p.18). If evil doers are just ordinary people, does this constitute evidence to deny the notion of moral monsters? My argument is that “becoming evil” can result in “being evil.” A moral monster, by definition, is an evil doer who is beyond the possibility of moral transformation. This definition is not concerned with the origin of evil. A rotten apple was once an ordinary apple. It becomes a rotten apple due to high temperature or some other reason. Having been a normal and delicious apple at one time does not mean that at the present time the apple is not rotten, or that the apple could be edible again after some miraculous transformation. As a matter of fact, every evil doer was once innocent. When Hitler was born, he was a lovely baby with charming smile on his face. He did not have “666” marked on his forehead or
start to kill Jews when he was three years old. The fact that perpetrators were ordinary people before does not imply that they are not moral monsters now, or that there is always a remote possibility that they could be ordinary again someday.

**Could logical possibility lead to practicality?**

Although it is logically possible that everyone is capable of moral transformation, a logical possibility does not lead to practicality. In other words, in principle anyone might be morally transformable, but it would be a kind of “miraculous transformation” in the case of some people. Thus, this idealistic principle should not be the premise for our practical judgements. As a matter of fact, Braithwaite (2002), an advocate of restorative justice, pointed out that the most serious crimes are committed by repeat offenders. At the time of this writing, there has not been sufficient empirical research on applying restorative justice programs to certain types of serious evil doers such as war criminals and terrorists.

No doubt the hope of moral transformation by anyone could help us to be more forgiving people as ordinary citizens. However, does this notion help law enforcement agencies and the judicial system in dealing with extraordinary evils? Let’s conduct some thought experiments. If the American military captured bin Laden, the suspect who is accused of many terrorist attacks against Americans such as assisting Somalis to kill eighteen US soldiers, bombing two US embassies in Africa, attacking the USS Cole in Yemen, and the cruelest one, leveling the World Trade Center and slaughtering three thousand civilians, and after a fair trial he were convicted of being guilty in one or several of the above charges, what would the US government do to him? Assuming we accept Govier’s idea that he is not a moral monster and is capable of moral transformation, would the US government send a psychotherapist to counsel him in the hope that he could repent and become a productive member of the human community someday? It is extremely unlikely that the government would take this course of action. One may say that based on Govier’s idea everyone has a chance to turn around from evils, the US government should not sentence bin Laden to the death penalty because capital punishment, as an ultimate condemnation, denies the opportunity for reform. Assuming that the US government sentenced bin Laden to life imprisonment
instead of the death penalty, and bin Laden showed his remorse after ten years in jail, would the US government grant him parole? It is likely that no matter how much remorse he showed or how good his behavior was in jail, the US government would not release him because the risk of releasing him would be too high to be justified. Practically speaking, in dealing with extraordinary evils, the legal system does not seem to operate under the premise that anyone could be morally transformed. In short, this logical possibility does not lead to practicality.

**Discussion**

Nevertheless, Govier deserves certain credit for introducing her notion. As her book’s title “A delicate balance” implies, we need to strike a balance when facing evils such as terrorist attacks. It is dangerous to label all terrorists as moral monsters and thus deny the possibility of their moral transformation; dehumanizing terrorists may justify us in employing brutal measures against them and eventually dehumanizing ourselves. On the other hand, denying the existence of moral monsters and separating evil deeds from evil doers may provide easy excuses for the offenders. Reading poetry, listening to classical music, and playing with children cannot make a perpetrator less terrible.

Haybron stated that evil exists when one is not aligned with the good to a morally significant extent; by crossing a certain line, the difference between just being bad and being evil becomes a qualitative difference. In my view, Haybron’s notion is very close to Biblical teaching of sin, in which sin is defined as a departure from the divine law. Nonetheless, one may argue that unlike a kidney, which has an objective criterion of failure, it is difficult to tell where the significant line is in determining evil. Could someone who murdered two million people like Pol Pot be considered a moral monster? How about killing one million? How about ten thousand, one thousand or one hundred? Who can judge whether one has crossed the line or not?

While challenging Govier’s arguments point by point, I did not give any argument for the existence of moral monsters. One may say that many perpetrators never repent, and as Braithwaite pointed out, many criminals are repeat offenders in spite of being given numerous opportunities to change. However, this does not constitute empirical evidence that there are moral monsters who are beyond
redemption. Take bin Laden as an example again. If he were captured, the most likely treatment of him would be sentencing him to either the death penalty or life imprisonment without parole. To study the issue in an empirical manner, social scientists should provide bin Laden and other terrorists with counseling services and early parole, and then follow up on the consequences. However, I am not aware of any large scale controlled experiments in which extraordinary evil doers are given opportunities for moral transformation.

Nevertheless, I suggest that we still keep the concept of “moral monster” in consideration. Haybron (2002) argued,

( Evil) provides us with a moral anchor, an anti-ideal. Even if no real person qualified as evil, the notion would still be useful for illuminating our moral ideals and defining the moral space within which we situate less fiendish individuals. It is useful to see which traits are most abhorrent, and which individuals best approximate the moral nadir of the evil person. Knowing what it is to be evil tells us who we most want not to be. (p.276)

Interestingly enough, the author of Hebrews might employ the argument based upon logical extreme to warn Christians not to fall away from the grace of Christ:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned (Hebrews, 6:4-8).

The scenario described by the author of Hebrews is exactly “a point of no return.” It may be terrifying to learn that there is a possibility for even a Christian to sin beyond repentance. Nevertheless, the author of Hebrews ended the discussion in a more comforting and encouraging tone:
Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompanying salvation. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help him (Hebrews, 6:9-10).

There has been a great debate over the spiritual condition of the objects of the preceding warning. Are they saved Christians or unsaved people who pretend to be Christians? If they are saved Christians, could true believers drop themselves down to a point wherein they could never reverse the consequence? Nevertheless, when the author of Hebrews illustrated the case of the point of no return, he presented it in an impersonal and objective fashion rather than in a direct appeal. Later his tone switched to personal and he admitted that the target audience had not yet succumbed to the irreversible situation (Gromacki, 1984). To the target audience who had not yet experienced the lost of salvation, the point of no return is a logical extreme that motivates them to leave immaturity and to progress towards the divinely appointed goals. Interestingly enough, in spite of the uncertainty of the interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-8, modern authors such as Swindoll (1982) also used the possibility of the point of no return as a positive motivator by saying, “Take a minute to examine where you stand…For who knows how far you can go before God refuses you the opportunity for a renewal that will lead to your repentance” (p.100).

As a matter of fact, we deal with logical extreme and idealization in almost every discipline. Economists postulate the notions of perfect competition and monopoly while studying market behaviors. Political scientists postulate perfect fairness and unfairness while exploring various alternatives of political equality and social justice. To some certain extent these notions may never be fully actualized in reality. Nevertheless, these ideals and anti-ideals help us to work toward desirable economic, political, and social goals, and to see where our current society is situated. As mentioned before, the notion of moral saints motivates us to work toward a higher moral standard. On the contrary, the concept of moral monsters warns us that we should never go too far, for there is a possibility that we could reach the point of no return.
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References


