

worse that is exceptional; that *all or most* evil would be eliminated by the improvement of bad political conditions; and that *all or most* evil is the result of corrupting external influences. The following reasons against this view are intended to show that these claims are not generally true without denying that they may be sometimes true.

9.5 Reasons against Explaining Evil as Corruption

Since the external-active explanation is naturalistic, it must begin with the observable facts of past and present human actions. The relevant fact is that there is a multitude of good and evil human actions. There are many general explanations compatible with this fact. One is that human beings are naturally good and they do evil only when externally corrupted. Another is that human beings are naturally evil and they do good only when improved by external influences. Yet another is that human beings are naturally ambivalent and they do good or evil depending on external influences. A further one is that human beings are naturally good, or evil, or ambivalent and they do good or evil depending primarily on the respective internal strengths of their propensities, external influences having only a secondary effect on their actions. The external-active explanation assumes that the first of these general explanations is true and the others are false. But for this assumption no reason is given. It is the assumption with which defenders of this Enlightenment view start. The minimum required to make this assumption reasonable is to give reasons for preferring it and reasons against rejecting its rivals. This, however, has not been done. The assumption is taken for granted, and its rivals are ignored.

It makes matters much worse that not only is there no good reason for accepting the external-active explanation, but there are good reasons for rejecting it. The first of these reason is that if evil actions were caused by political conditions that corrupted those subject to them, then evil actions should vary with political conditions. But there is no such variation. The political conditions of Stalin's Soviet Union, Hitler's Germany, Mao's China, Ataturk's Turkey, Pol Pot's Cambodia, Khomeni's Iran, Saddam's Iraq, Milosevic's Yugoslavia, and so on were evil but very different. But the evil actions were the same: the arrest, torture, and execution of masses of people who were often innocent of any wrongdoing and when guilty their offense was reluctance to lend full support to a vicious regime. The dictators did evil because they wanted power, and their henchmen did it out of a mixture of fanaticism, ambition, and fear. Evil thus remains the same even though external influences differ, and this is

contrary to what the poisoned-mind explanation leads one to expect. It seems that much of human motivation does not alter as conditions alter. If this were not so, we would find the actions of historical figures and literary characters in contexts very different from our own incomprehensible.

2. The second reason for rejecting the external-active explanation is that according to it human beings are corrupted by external influences that poison their minds and cause them to do evil. It has to be granted, of course, that all human beings are subject to external influences and their actions reflect these influences. But the external-active explanation is committed to the much stronger claim that external influences are the primary causes of evil actions. It must claim that if the external influences were not present, evil actions normally would not be taken; and if the external influences were present, evil actions would normally follow. If it did not accept this stronger claim, it would not constitute even an attempted explanation of evil. If external influences were merely one of the antecedents of evil actions, they would no more account for evil actions than such other antecedents as the presence of oxygen or the availability of food. But the stronger claim to which the external-active explanation must be committed is obviously false because different people subject to the same external influences routinely perform different actions, some of which are evil, some good, and some morally neutral. Injustice may embitter some and lead to evil actions, or it may turn others into impassioned defenders of justice, or it may prompt the morally neutral action of leaving the unjust society and seeking a better life elsewhere.

Consider as an illustration of this criticism some of the previously discussed concrete cases. It cannot be that Manson's brutalized childhood by itself was sufficient to turn him into a mass murderer because many people with equally brutalized childhoods did not become mass murderers. It cannot be that the semi-fascist ethos of the military was enough by itself to turn the Argentinean dirty warriors into torturers and murderers because there were numerous officers imbued with the same ethos who resigned rather than torture and murder. Nor can Catholicism alone explain the Albigensian Crusade because there were priests who sympathized with the Cathars and tried to save them from the horror that befell them. Of course, external influences had something to do with these evil actions, but the first can explain the second only in conjunction with the internal psychological conditions of those who, influenced by the same conditions, did evil and those who did not. The external-active explanation attributes evil to corrupting external influences, but it fails to explain why some minds are and some are not poisoned by the same external influences.

3. The third reason for rejecting the external-active explanation is its failure to ask the obvious question of what causes the external influences

that corrupt people by poisoning their minds. Let us suppose, as defenders of this secular optimism typically do, that the corrupting external influences are evil political conditions: murder, torture, persecution, and so forth. But what are the causes of these evil political conditions? Political conditions are created and maintained by people. If there is murder, torture, or persecution, it is because there are murderers, torturers, and persecutors. It may be said that people cause these evils because they have also been corrupted by evil political conditions. But what are the causes of *those* evil political conditions? Sooner or later it must be acknowledged that political conditions are created and maintained by people through their actions. If the conditions are evil, it is because the people who create and maintain them are evil. People come first, and the conditions they create and maintain come only after them. Ultimately, therefore, it is political conditions that must be explained with reference to the people who create and maintain them, rather than the other way around. Nevertheless, it is the other way around that the external-active explanation proceeds. For the sentimentality of its defenders about human goodness and perfectibility can be sustained only by shifting responsibility for evil actions from the internal propensities of evildoers to external influences that are falsely supposed to explain the internal propensities and the evil actions they cause. This consideration, especially when combined with the preceding two, provides, I think, decisive reasons against the external-active explanation.

Seeing that, however, is compatible with recognizing that this explanation contributes to an adequate explanation of evil in two ways. It rightly assumes that evil is not supernatural, but something human beings cause, and, presumably, human beings can, if not eliminate, at least ameliorate. And it is right also in recognizing that what goes on within evildoers is crucial to explaining the evil they do. The external-active explanation goes wrong in supposing that in order to explain what goes on within evildoers, we have to look to causes outside them. Internal explanations do not go wrong in this way.

CHAPTER 10

A Biological Explanation

We play fast and loose with the words *human* and *inhuman*, flattering ourselves by making *human* mean only the good things in our makeup or simply what we approve. The historian cannot subscribe to this policy, knowing as he does that cruelty, murder, and massacre are among the most characteristic human acts.

—JACQUES BARZUN, *From Dawn to Decadence*

10.1 Natural Goodness and Defect

This chapter is a critical examination of Philippa Foot's attempt to explain evil in natural terms.¹ It is partly an external and partly an internal explanation. According to it, evil is a natural defect that leads evildoers to act contrary to the human good. What is good is determined by the facts of human nature, and from the good follow the requirements of reason. Evil actions are contrary to nature and reason. The natural facts this explanation regards as crucial are biological. It thus attempts to explain good and evil in biological terms.

Foot's book supplies perhaps the most important argument that can be used to defend the Enlightenment view of human beings as basically good. Foot recognizes, even if not explicitly, that evil presents a problem for this view. She has written a humane and tough-minded work affirming that good and evil do not just depend on what attitudes people happen to have and yet refusing to seek a supernatural explanation of them. It deserves a chapter on its own merits, even though her argument will be found wanting. A further reason for discussing it at length is that its failings point toward considerations that a satisfactory natural explanation of evil must take into account.