Introduction

The existence and use of 'evil' in international politics

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Abstract There is an extensive literature on acts, events and people in international politics that may be described as 'evil', but much less work specifically focusing on how this idea operates and is used in an international context. This has begun to change recently, however, as a result of leading international figures – most notably George W. Bush – using the term prominently. This special issue seeks to further advance scholarship on these issues by moving beyond purely philosophical accounts on the nature of evil, and considering: how it has been used to frame the identities of actors in international relations (IR); whether it works to enable or preclude specific kinds of behaviour; and what role it plays as part of our moral and political vocabulary. This introduction provides a brief survey of the literature on evil in IR, and gives an overview of the contributions to the special issue.
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> What would your good do if evil didn't exist, and what would the earth look like if all the shadows disappeared?
>
> Bulgakov (2006, p. 281).

Peering into the shadows has been one of the most constant preoccupations of theologians and philosophers over the centuries. Theodicy, the question

of how the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and benign God can be reconciled with all the evil in the world, has been at the heart of much of these considerations (Bernstein, 2002, pp. 3–4). Regardless of its strong religious connections, the 'problem of evil' also remains a fundamental issue for secularized thought (Haddock *et al*, 2011), levelling the challenge of trying to 'make otherwise meaningless suffering meaningful' (Jeffery, 2008a, pp. 158–159). In contrast, the discipline of International Relations (IR) may spend much of its time looking into the shadows, but it has actually reflected on the basic notion of 'evil' in a remarkably limited fashion. There is an extensive literature on acts, events and people in international politics that may be described as 'evil', but much less work specifically focusing on how this idea operates and is used in an international context. This has begun to change recently, however, as a result of leading international figures – most notably George W. Bush – using the term prominently.[1] This special issue seeks to further advance scholarship on these issues by moving beyond purely philosophical accounts on the nature of evil, and considering: how it has been used to frame the identities of actors in IR; whether it works to enable or preclude specific kinds of behaviour; and what role it plays as part of our moral and political vocabulary.

'Evil' is a term that one might expect to be shunned within the context of international politics: too impolitic for politicians and diplomats, too normatively loaded for jurists. Yet it has appeared regularly throughout international history, notably being used in the hot and cold wars that defined the twentieth century. More recently, unsurprisingly 'evil' was widely used to describe the genocide in Rwanda, war crimes in Yugoslavia and other cases in the 1990s of extreme violence and suffering that prompted international attention, and in some cases, external intervention. Most notably, George W. Bush turned to the notion of 'evil' to comprehend and frame the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Bush (2002) famously joined Iraq, Iran and North Korea together under the banner of the 'axis of evil'. This was only the tip of the iceberg: Jeffery (2008a, p. 145) estimated that he made reference to 'evil' in more than 800 speeches, more than double the amount of any other American president. Tony Blair responded in a similar fashion to '9/11' and to the London bombings on 7 July 2005. This reflects that even if Bush has been the most prominent figure to recently use the term, he is not the great exception he is sometimes portrayed to be. A wide range of actors have been drawing on the language of 'evil' to describe others and their actions. Furthermore, this is hardly a phenomenon unique to Western liberal democracies. Does this trend towards using the term 'evil' reflect a greater amount of really existing evil present in the contemporary world? Or simply that the term is being used with more frequency? If it is the latter, what are the consequences of 'evil' becoming more commonplace? This special issue seeks to explore such questions.

Three strands of 'evil' in IR

The IR scholarship that has specifically dealt with the idea of evil has generally fallen into three categories, which are not mutually exclusive.[2] The first adopts a conceptual perspective, considering how the idea has developed historically and philosophically. This often focuses on the strongly religious roots of the idea, even if it still has relevance for secular thinkers. The second strand, which often builds directly on the first, considers one secularized version of the concept: Hannah Arendt's seminal notion of the 'banality of evil'. This raises the question of intentionality, and whether evil can be done not just by especially malevolent individuals, but also by thoughtless people in rather mundane ways. Reflecting on the trial of Adolph Eichmann, Arendt (1994, p. 276) observed that 'it would have been very comforting indeed to believe that Eichmann was a monster', but this was not the case. Rather, 'except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all … He merely … never realized what he was doing' (Arendt, 1994, p. 287). The third line of work – perhaps most obvious in recent years – has been concerned with the rhetorical uses of the term. This has tended to focus on the way 'evil' was employed by Bush, Blair and other political leaders during the so-called 'War on Terror'. The various contributions to this special issue further develop and expand each of these strands of scholarship in important ways.

In acknowledging the religious roots of the concept, an interesting question is how it operates in the seemingly secular sphere of international politics. Building on the insights of recent scholarship on the role of religion in IR (Hurd, 2007; Sheikh, 2012), by reflecting on the notion of evil, the clear boundary between the religious and secular quickly begins to be blurred. In this regard, Piki Ish-Shalom proposes in his contribution that it may not be possible to completely free ourselves of the religious roots of the concept, and that the use of 'evil' by certain actors – in this case Iran and Israel – may betray the limits of secularism, and the extent to which the religious and secular realms are intertwined. Harmonie Toros and Luca Mavelli also reflect on this complicated relationship in their article. The authors argue that an Orientalist theodicy has contributed to the Taliban being identified as 'children of a lesser god': their 'evil' actions are seen as devoid of reason and their agency as political actors denied. Toros and Mavelli suggest that this works to depoliticize the Taliban resistance to the US-led political project of restructuring Afghanistan. In different ways both these papers demonstrate how the concept of 'evil' can work as a prism for understanding the relationship between secularism and religion in international politics.

A number of contributions to the special issue deal with questions of intentionality and responsibility. Arendt challenged the longstanding tendency of seeing evil as something done by inhuman monsters, and instead argued that it could come about in very normal ways by very normal people. This is something the first two papers in this collection consider, reflecting on how issues of causation and intention

influence how we understand evil. Patrick Hayden does so through focusing on the issue of global poverty. He argues that the dominance of a juridical understanding of evil, in which clear lines of causality and responsibility can be identified, results in certain forms of harms being seen and others ignored. In particular, structural violence, which entails a more diffuse and complicated form of responsibility, is largely obscured from our view, but still – according to the author – should be understood as something evil. Hayden argues that a forward-looking conception of responsibility is needed to deal with global poverty, one that recognizes our shared role in contributing to this situation. An alternate perspective is provided by David Chandler, who proposes that the structural transformation of politics and society by globalization has made it much more difficult to identify clear lines of causality and responsibility for evil actions and phenomena. As a result, evil has effectively become diffused and 'democratized', which means the individual has become less morally (individually) responsible for his or her (evil) actions. These papers reach radically different conclusions about the value of evil in this globalized world: Hayden argues that it remains important and the way we understand it should be expanded to account for evil created through globalization, whereas Chandler is much more pessimistic about the role it can play.

A number of contributions fall into the third strand of scholarship on 'evil', exploring how political actors use the idea – most obviously in the field of security politics – and whether this can actually lead to the creation of new evils. Describing someone or something as 'evil' – what a number of the contributors call 'evilization' (see the contributions by Müller, Sheikh and Ish-Shalom) – is a securitizing speech act, designed to move an issue beyond the 'normal' realm of politics, or a rhetorical attempt to depoliticize highly political issues (see the contributions by Hobson; Toros and Mavelli).

A common theme in these articles is the damaging and dangerous consequences that arise from using 'evil' rhetorically. The invocation of 'evil' can entail an escalation of conflict, limit deliberation and prevent compromise. It is also a powerful manifestation of identity politics, as many of the contributors allude to. Speakers who talk of 'evil' usually are referring to others and the acts they may have committed, while failing to recognize the possible evil that they may themselves be responsible for. Adversaries are stigmatized, condemned and excluded from domestic or international society; civilian or diplomatic solutions are ruled out with actors who are labelled as 'evil'. This dichotomous understanding also legitimates an approach in which any means necessary to deal with these 'evil' others is deemed appropriate (see the contribution by Geis and Wunderlich). Piki Ish-Shalom talks of a situation of 'mutual assured evilness' between Israel and Iran, with the two countries labelling of the other as 'evil' working to cement a dangerous relationship of fear and hatred. In this regard, Mona Kanwal Sheikh reminds us that in understanding these rhetorical moves it is necessary to pay close attention to the intended audiences, and whether these attempts to label certain actors or actions as 'evil'

are successful. Unfortunately both Iran and Israel have generally found receptive audiences for their claims.

Almost like the human rights discourse, 'evil' can act as a 'trump card' in IR, only in a profoundly negative way. Identifying others as 'evil' can create adversarial relationships, legitimate violence and close the space for politics and compromise. These are issues explored by Christopher Hobson in his contribution, which considers the consequences of framing drugs as 'evil' within treaty law. Given these kinds of problems, it might be asked whether it would be better to dispense with the term altogether. 'Which is more dangerous: to speak of evil or not to?' asks Grant (2006, p. 1). Although the idea can be a potent and damaging rhetorical weapon, it is also closely connected to moral and political judgement, as Patrick Hayden makes clear, and we risk forfeiting something important by abandoning it. As Grant (2006, p. 2) observes, 'we cannot recognize evil if we cannot speak of it. How do we come to the judgment that some actions are evil?'. This is an observation echoed by Harald Müller in his contribution, who offers the important reminder that while evil actors are rare, they *do* appear in international politics, and in such situations we need to know how to recognize and deal with them.

Focusing on the dangers that arise from the rhetorical use of 'evil' should not blind us from the important role the concept plays in describing and reflecting on empirical realities. In this regard, Susan Neiman also argues that speaking of 'evil' instead of 'atrocities' or 'crimes against humanity' is significant, as it indicates our trust in the world has been shattered. Talking of crimes implies that we have procedures and categories to deal with such actions and to fit them – somehow – into our experiences, whereas speaking of 'evil' indicates the limits of such ordering processes (Neiman, 2004, pp. 8–9). Indeed, if we did not have a term like 'evil', we would need to invent something similar to stand in its place, something to try to describe the indescribable. The concept also plays an important role in rethinking individual and collective responsibility within a globalizing world, as Chandler and Hayden examine, and pushes us to consider what part we may play in creating or perpetuating evil. And even though the term may have been used during the 'War on Terror' to stifle thinking (Bernstein, 2005), it can also be a route to critical self-reflection and introspection, as Geis and Wunderlich explore in their contribution.

A common theme uniting this special issue is that evil operates in IR in a much more complex and varied set of ways than a simple focus on the usage of this term by George W. Bush would suggest (see Singer, 2004). It is easy to decry the use of this loaded term, but far more difficult – yet ultimately more productive – to engage with it in a serious fashion. Not only can we understand more about a significant, albeit understudied, idea in IR, we can also gain insight into a range of other important issues, such as religion and secularism, identity politics, securitization and how concepts help shape the political world. Indeed, on a more basic level, what many contributors point towards is the role that 'evil' plays in defining the political

sphere: which actors and claims are counted as legitimate, and which are considered beyond the pale. Examining 'evil' more thoroughly potentially offers a way to a more critical and self-reflexive worldview, one better equipped to understand and respond to really existing evil, if and when we are confronted by it.

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Notes

1 Some recent works that consider evil in relation to global politics are: Lu, 2004; Singer, 2004; Bernstein, 2005; Chan, 2005; Hayden, 2008; Jeffery, 2008a; Klusmeyer, 2009.
2 Jeffery's *Evil and International Relations* is an example of a text that combines all three.

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