

8

Imagining and Managing Organizational Evil

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In this chapter, we argue—less paradoxically than it might at first appear—that organizational evil (OE) is, at the same time, a fundamentally nonsensical idea and a concern of real importance for those studying or leading organizations. Nonsensical, we believe, because the senses in which the expression “organizational evil” is typically used—to describe a property or characteristic of organizations generally or a form of conduct perpetrated by particular organizations—do not correspond in any meaningful way to actual social or natural phenomena. Genuinely important, however, because the use of the language is subjectively meaningful, and therefore consequential and actionable for a wide range of actors in (and concerned with) organizations. The uniquely strong reactive attitudes (Strawson, 1962; Wallace, 1994) that give rise to the use of the language of organizational evil (or simply “evil” in any context), and the often equally strong behavioral responses by a variety of stakeholders to such attitudes, are undeniably real and may have consequences ranging from scholarly confusion (see Dubnick, 2000) to destructive social and organizational convulsions, including moral panics, witch hunts, and the like (cf. Alford, 1997b).

Thus, the often nonsensical language of organizational evil motivates organizational stakeholders in ways that may have very significant consequences, for good (such as preventing or correcting wrong and destructive behavior) or ill (such as substituting a new wrong for the original one). By understanding how the meaning of organizational evil is constructed and acted upon, organizational scholars and leaders may be able to manage (or, at the least, anticipate and cope with) that construction and respond in more consistently beneficial ways. Accordingly, we attempt here to explain our reasoning and its significance and to identify its implications for organizational researchers and leaders.

The chapter is organized into three major sections. First, we make the case that, because organizations and evil are both quintessentially *social facts* (see Searle, 1995) with no existence independent of their social context, the common ways of speaking about organizational evil as a thing in-and-of-itself (i.e., existing independently of the volition and actions of individuals) are largely nonsensical. Yet organizational evil understood as a contextually contingent, functional social construct is, in fact, a socially meaningful concept. Next, we explore how that understanding helps us to make sense of the very real ways in which scholars, managers, and laypeople respond to acts and actors that seem so egregiously bad as to be morally incomprehensible. Developing a typology of

expressive as well as instrumental reactions to perceived evil acts and actors associated with organizations allows us to categorize some familiar historical cases and to see how certain types of reactions can have either destructive or constructive consequences.

Finally, we conclude by noting paradoxically that so-called organizational evil, if properly understood, may (if also properly managed or accommodated) be functionally beneficial, serving to promote constructive moral vigilance and correction among an organization's members and other stakeholders. We offer as both tentative prescription and research hypothesis the central claim that the ordinary practical ethical reasoning employed by nonsociopaths in their daily life provides a firm underlying basis for the prevention, detection, and correction of actions that would be regarded as organizational evil. This can fruitfully be nurtured by organizations' leaders, with any tradeoffs of individual ethical empowerment against efficiency and obedience adapted to the circumstances of specific organizations and tasks. Moreover, because ethical reasoning is a learned skill, it can also be further developed in specific organizational environments and task contexts and for specific members of organizations, in appropriate degrees.

IMPORTANT NONSENSE

For students of philosophy, the problem of evil has long been regarded as theological: if God is a beneficent, omnipresent, and omniscient force in the universe, how does one explain the presence and power of evil in the world (Kremer and Latzer, 2001)? In contrast, the central problem faced by students of organizational evil is ontological, focused directly on the issue of whether organizational evil is metaphysically real (that is, exists outside our mental construction of it) or whether it is a product of our individual and collective cognition of our world.

In this chapter, we assume the latter position, viewing organizational evil as an important social construct that serves a functionally significant role in the way that organizations deal with extreme threats or forms of deviance from their norms and practices. But before offering our limited insights into the functionality of OE as a social construct, we need to address the basic ontological issue. Our goal in this section is to provide a preemptive defense to anticipated charges that our analysis avoids the central issues related to OE by defining out of existence the "evil-is-real" views held by many of our colleagues. Our response is "guilty as charged," but with the qualifier that our position is not merely defensible but necessary if we are to advance the work of the organizational sciences. Just as modern philosophy flourished when Enlightenment thinkers abandoned the obsessive preoccupation with theodicy (the study of the classic "problem of evil"),¹ so the administrative sciences have made (and will continue to make) substantial progress by "naturalizing" the supernatural concept of OE and bringing it into the arena of empirically grounded social theory.

Putting our perspective in context ontologically requires revisiting one of the most fundamental questions in philosophy: What is reality? More specifically, is reality mind-independent, or is its existence contingent on the workings of the human mind and experience? This seemingly esoteric concern (after all, few of us ever stop in the middle of our

busy days to consider whether our interactions with the world are truly real or merely figments of our imagination) does have a significant impact on how we approach questions related to OE. They are questions that predate the foundational philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, but their respective responses have effectively established the alternatives that define the debate. For Plato and Platonists (typically noted as the “idealists” in this debate), reality is metaphysical, and although we are capable of capturing the particular manifestation of that reality in our thoughts and actions, its essence is beyond our mental or physical reach. In contrast, Aristotle’s realism is “naturalist” and grounded in the belief that people and things are of this world and can indeed be captured intellectually as well as materially. Transformed, extended, and reconstructed in many ways over the centuries, the distinction endures. And although no particular labels can capture the complexity of the resulting debate generated by that philosophical division, for present purposes we settle on two: metaphysical realism and pragmatic realism.

“Metaphysical realism” is the label we apply to the perspective that assumes the existence of a mind-independent world with an objective existence. Although we can develop various strategies for conceptualizing and dealing with that objective reality, its existence does not rely on our mental gymnastics or imagination. “Pragmatic realism,”² in contrast, assumes an agnostic stance when addressing the issue of an objective reality. Rather, it is through our practical experience and intellectual engagement with the world that reality becomes manifest, therefore rendering reality contingent on situations and surroundings.

How does this distinction relate to the study of OE? For students of modern organizations, the nature of “truth” remains an open and divisive question. This is especially true for those engaged in the examination of organizational evil, in which the phrase itself begs for clarification at the outset. Are we dealing with a compound noun, or is “organizational” indicative of a particular form of evil? Assuming the latter (as we do in this chapter), are we to focus on the evil *of* organizations? The evil done *by* organizations? Or the evil that takes place *within* organizations? All can be posited as legitimate focal points for analysis.

But responses to those conceptual and analytic choices pale in importance before how we approach the ontological standing of organizational evil. Are we dealing with a metaphysical reality that is not mind-dependent, or is it a pragmatic mental or social construct created in response to some condition or change in our surroundings? Or is it a variation of the two extremes—a phenomenon that takes on the characteristics of a meaningful condition that must be addressed as an objective reality in order to deal with it?

The significance of these somewhat abstract options is plotted in Figure 8.1, where we have transposed the alternative perspectives for the two keywords in our subject: organizations and evil. At the two extremes (A/D) are studies that approach the subject in completely opposite ways. Cell “A” posits the existence of organizations as distinct (albeit typically collective)³ social actors that can be treated as if they possess a malevolent will (mission) and operate under an explicitly destructive logic. Finding credible organizational studies scholarship of this sort is difficult, for it requires an initial effort to establish a warrantable connection between organizational evil and its empirical referent in the world of

Figure 8.1 **Alternative “Realities” of Organizational Evil**

The “reality” of evil:	The “reality” of organizations:	
	Metaphysical	Pragmatic
Metaphysical	A. Pure organizational evil	C. Organizations as instruments used by evil persons
Pragmatic	B. Organizations create evil acts/actors	D. Perceived (constructed) organizational evil

organizations. There are perhaps no more obvious candidates for such a study than those organized efforts identified with the structure and operations of the Holocaust, especially the network that made the *Shoah*—a term applied to the explicit and systematic policy to exterminate Jews conducted by the Nazi regime—possible. Even more likely candidates are studies that zero in on the structure and operations of the five Nazi extermination camps (Arad, 1987; see also Sofsky, 1996; Todorov, 1996)⁴—Auschwitz-Birkenau, Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. All five⁵ were part of “Operation Reinhard,” established in 1941 with the express purpose of carrying out the Final Solution to the Jewish “problem” in Poland, although they also served as destinations for others from throughout Nazi-ruled Europe. As horrific as these studies are, any claim to be the study of organizational evil per se effectively begs the core question as to the metaphysical existence of OE and thus undermines the value of such analytic efforts.⁶

At the same time, the more coldly analytic studies that fall under the pure pragmatic reality category (organizational evil as a social construct) may be regarded as detracting from the very special nature of the functions and productions—the horrific destructiveness—of such organized efforts as the extermination camps. In its most extreme form, the social constructionist perspective seems best suited for “deniers” who believe that the evidence of the horror is merely a faulty interpretation of the historical facts imposed by those with a political agenda (see Hacking, 1999, 3–5). Moreover, such a perspective can be regarded as nurturing a nonjudgmental, amoral position that can create an ethical indifference among students of organizations: In place of “never again,” social constructivism promoted the view that “stuff happens.”

Our schema points to two alternative perspectives to the “pure” types, and each has had major impacts on the study of so-called organizational evil. The metaphysical view of organizations gives “life” to such entities as unique collectivities that must be treated as if they had a distinct form of agency in our social milieu. Whatever our view about the fantastical nature of this assumption about organizations, it is one ensconced in laws (and legal systems as a whole) that treat corporations as “persons” with the rights and privileges of all other persons under law. Under type B of Figure 8.1 are studies that take such a view of organizations seriously in teleological terms. Most often associated with the Weberian view of modern bureaucracies, organizations are potentially all-encompassing (totalizing) contexts that pursue the rationalization of collective behavior by subtly (but intentionally) imposing a logic of technical rationality on those who are either engaged in or affected by it. This technical rationality is central to the *evil created*

by modern organizations (Adams and Balfour, 2004; Hummel, 2008). While not denying the objective reality of evil, studies of “administrative evil” stress that it is the product of a dehumanization process that creates thoughtless and inhumane actors out of otherwise “ordinary people” (e.g., Bauman, 1989; Browning, 1992; Hilberg, 1985, 1992).⁷ Here, in short, it is the evil *of* (perpetrated by) organizations that is most crucial, and individuals within the organizations are portrayed as nearly helpless dupes or pawns of some flatly inhuman entity—the organization itself.

This approach to organizational proves problematic in a number of respects, not the least being the credibility of its foundational premise regarding the inherent evilness of organizations (Dubnick, 2000) and its all too simple (and dangerously careless) attribution of evildoing to those who may lack evil intentions (cf. Singer, 2004).⁸

In contrast to type B, C-type studies emphasize the objective reality of evil and regard organizations as mere venues or vehicles for carrying out evil agendas. Here we find the historical and fictional narratives of evil persons creating of assuming control of the organizational apparatus required to fulfill malevolent goals. Finding exemplars of evil persons in the sense offered by Marcus Singer is, sadly, not difficult.

The term “evil” is the worst term of opprobrium that can be applied to a human being. . . . Evil deeds must flow from evil motives, the volition to do something evil, by which I mean something horrendously bad. One cannot do something evil by accident or through thoughtlessness. Through accident or misadventure one can do something wrong or bad, even terrible, but not something evil. So when we say that someone did something evil, we are saying something about that person, that person’s motives and consequently about that person’s character. (Singer, 2004, 190)

But finding examples of evil persons who make use of organizations with the explicit intention of carrying out their evil schemes proves more difficult. The one obvious example that comes to mind is Adolf Hitler, but, as Ron Rosenbaum has argued, he may in fact be a unique and unprecedented case (Rosenbaum, 1998)—a point that Hannah Arendt stresses about the more general existence of evil in her writings on what took place in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s (see Baehr, 2002). Ian Kershaw, in making the case against treating Hitler and Stalin as similar, argued that it is more fruitful to view Hitler as a charismatic force that overwhelmed and subjected the German state to his will. “What occurred in the Third Reich was not the supplanting of bureaucratic domination by ‘charismatic authority,’ but rather the superimposition of the latter on the former” (Kershaw, 1993, 112).

The choice we make from among these four OE perspectives as students of organizations can prove significant not merely in terms of how we carry out our analyses but also how the results are to be perceived and evaluated. Explicating the rationale behind that choice is therefore important in at least two respects: First, it offers the reader/consumer of such studies (including other researchers) an explicit standard by which to judge the work, and, second, it offers the researcher an opportunity to

reflect upon what intentions and biases are influencing the effort (cf. Bunge, 2006; Tsoukas, 2000).

As already noted, our choice among the four viewpoints is to consider both dimensions of OE as social constructs (Type D). Moreover, we take the position that this perspective is the only credible option if the intention is (as it is in our case) to advance the study of organizations as an empirically grounded phenomenon that pervades our lives at all levels. The central question for us at the outset was whether this particular aspect of modern organizations—that is, the widespread presence of a belief in the existence of OE—can be explained and, if so, whether the belief in OE can be framed in a way that further enhances our knowledge about social life within and among organizations.

MAKING SENSE OF ORGANIZATIONAL EVIL

To reiterate our focus in this chapter, we are considering how and why so-called evil emerges within organizations as well as various scenarios for dealing with it when it does emerge. We begin with the (Type D) assumption that both organizations and the concept of evil are functional social constructs, constituted in specific situations and cultural milieus. They are, for all intents and purposes, historically and culturally contingent *social facts* (Searle, 1995).

Regarding organizations, we assume the constructivist position that they are ongoing social enactments, the dynamic product of the intersubjective institutionalization of social norms and practices (see Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1996; Weick, 1979; cf. Fleetwood, 2005). Thus, even to talk about an organization as a distinct entity that behaves or takes meaningful action is, at best, a convenient form of reification that, while pragmatically and rhetorically useful, can prove dysfunctional in both practical and analytical terms.

Relying on this dereified perspective, organizations can be viewed analytically in a number of ways, ranging from a relatively neutral setting for individual or social interaction (e.g., a stage upon which the human drama of “organizing” is played out) to a cognitive factor that helps constitute and mediate purposeful social activity. In that sense, the organization cannot be regarded as either agent or actor, yet in so-called organizational evil it is treated as a contingency or (at best) causal factor.

Similarly, evil is also treated as a social construct with specific functionality and characteristics. Functionally, evil is used in social situations as an attribution of either an act or actor under a variety of circumstances. A distinction can be made between attributions that are made with intention and purpose (instrumental) and those that reflect a strong subjective response to act or action that is perceived as threatening, deviant in the extreme—that is, outside the attributor’s moral frame of reference—unconscionable or otherwise socially unfathomable (expressive).

Sociologists would regard the act of attribution—whether instrumental or expressive—as a form of “labeling” that, whatever its intent, stigmatizes the targeted act/actor while giving some degree of affective satisfaction to those who apply or accept it.⁹ Figure 8.2 provides some perspective on the types of responses reflected in attributions. An expressive attribution that focuses on the deviant actor will be judgmental, asserting that the individual

Figure 8.2 **Types of Attribution Responses**

Focus on:	Attribution is:	
	Expressive	Instrumental
Actor	Judgmental	Stigmatizing
Act	Indignation	Condemnation

acted in an unacceptable way (bad, wrong, inappropriately) (see Kaplan, 1942). When applied with intent, the attribution can be extended to characterizing—stigmatizing—the actor (Goffman, 1963; Link and Phelan, 2001). When applied expressively to a particular act, the response usually rises to the level of indignation and resentment (reflecting what P.F. Strawson called a “reactive attitude” in the attributor) (Russell, 1992; Strawson, 1962). In more strategic hands, the attribution of the act amounts to condemnation and calls for sanctions and other forms of punishment (see Piven, 1981).

When it comes to the label “evil,” these characteristics of attributions are more extreme. All attributions of acts and actors are likely to generate responses in the form of changes and adjustments in the perceptions and actions at all levels of the organization (e.g., individual, group), but those that tend to warrant the designation as evil seem to create an imperative for a response, especially if motivated by intent (instrumental).

Those responses can take various forms in society, ultimately leading to the “neutralization” or “destigmatization” of the labeled actor or act (Sykes and Matza, 1957; Warren, 1980). In some instances, the evil attribution can result in the demonization of labeled populations and result in “moral panics” (see below; Cohen, 2002; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). This, in turn, can lead to the expansion of moral regulations designed to preclude and preempt future evils (Citcher, 2009; Hier, 2002). At other times, an attribution can be modified, using processes that sociologists call “delabeling” or “relabeling.” Many of these studies focus on the changing of labels from implying deviance (e.g., alcoholic) to designating some form of malady (e.g., alcoholism) (Preston et al., 1998; Trice and Roman, 1970). In the same way, they imply a process in which acts and actors initially attributed as evil might be regarded as merely deviant or suffering from an illness that caused the depraved behavior.

We believe these same dynamics apply when dealing with so-called organizational evil. When, through either expressive or instrumental attribution, organizational acts/actors are stained with the label of evil, a number of processes take place that can either aggravate or ameliorate the situation established by the attribution. In the following analysis we consider three such processes: (1) demonization, (2) relabeling, and (3) recasting.

The basis for our analysis is the framework in Figure 8.3, which distinguishes between how acts and actors are perceived in the context of a problematic situation in which they are the focus of attention. In the most extreme situation (Cell D), both the act and actor are regarded as evil, creating a state that is most appropriately termed “wickedness.” This is the focus of our examination of demonization and moral panics. Cells B and C are central to our analysis of relabeling, because both involve reconsideration of the motivations and circumstances under which terrible acts occur. In Cell B, the evil sup-

Figure 8.3 **Forms of Socially Constructed Organizational Evil**

Act perceived as:	Actor is perceived as:	
	Transgressor	Evil
Transgression	(A) Accountability	(B) Agentic state
Evil	(C) Grey Zone	(D) Wickedness

Source: Based on Dubnick and Justice, 2006.

posedly resides in the actor who is thoughtlessly “just following orders” or doing what is expected without reflecting on the contribution of his or her minor transgressions to the unspeakable outcomes. This situation was famously described by Hannah Arendt as the banality of evil, and it was Stanley Milgram who described such individuals as being in an “agentic state” of mind. In Cell C, by contrast, are actors who operate in what Primo Levi (1989) called the moral “gray zone,” in which their awareness of the horrible acts they are committing is offset by the need to survive (or succeed) within their social milieu. Finally, in Cell A we find examples of both delabeling and the neutralization of evil attributions through accountability and other means.

Demonization: Wickedness and Moral Panics

As a social construction, perceived wickedness in organizations can take a variety of forms. The act-actor tie is almost an identity. In the evident cases found in the literature, the connection was strong and perhaps inseparable: bullying-bully (Rhodes et al., 2010; Vickers, 2001, 2010), racism-racist (Brief et al., 2000; Cortina, 2008; Griffith et al., 2007; Mistry and Latoo, 2009), and child abuse-child abuser (deYoung, 1996, 2008; Hier, 2008; Murray, 2001; Richardson, Reichert, and Lykes, 2009). In such extreme cases, the reaction both inside and outside an organization is to extend the process of labeling through “demonization,” a basis for the development of moral panics.

Here we focus on the case of racism as a “moral evil.” Given the long and troubled history in the United States concerning issues of race, the racism-racist tie has become (rightfully so) a rich target for demonization. In recent years, overt discrimination on the basis of color has often resulted in strong and severe rebukes for those accused. This is especially true of those who can be described as possessing a “racist heart,” an individual committed to and completely unrepentant about racist acts (Garcia, 1996, 1997; cf. Shelby, 2002).

In its central and most vicious form, it is a hatred, ill-will, directed against a person or persons on account of their assigned race. In a derivative form, one is a racist when one either does not care at all or does not care enough (i.e., as much as morality requires) or does not care in the right ways about people assigned to a certain racial group, where this disregard is based on racial classification. Racism, then, is something that essentially involves not our beliefs and their rationality or irrational-

ity, but our wants, intentions, likes, and dislikes and their distance from the moral virtues. . . . Such a view helps explain racism's conceptual ties to various forms of *hatred* and contempt. (Garcia, 1996, 6–7)

Garcia's view (he terms it "volitional racism"), ironically, frees the moral evil of racism from its racial moorings. White on nonwhite racism might have been the initial focus of antidiscrimination efforts and policies, but minorities in positions of power have increasingly been called to account for their actions concerning discrimination toward people outside their own racial/ethnic group.

For instance, shortly after the election of Barack Obama in 2008, several conservative media personalities suggested that the country's first black president would exact revenge on the white population as a means of payback for years of historical discrimination. Media outlets argued that the Justice Department's refusal to charge the fringe activist group the New Black Panther Party with voter intimidation, and an incident in which a young white student was beat up on a school bus by a group of blacks provided evidence of what the future would look like in "Obama's America."

In July 2010, Big Government, a Web site owned by new media entrepreneur Andrew Breitbart, posted a video of a speech given by Shirley Sherrod, an official with U.S. Department of Agriculture, at an awards dinner for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In the video, Sherrod, an African-American woman, was telling a story about how, earlier in her career, she had discriminated against a white farmer who went to her for help. Soon afterward, other media outlets began showing the video, claiming it as evidence that an Obama administration official had engaged in racial discrimination. Within days, the fury surrounding Sherrod's speech had become so intense that she was forced to resign, with Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack pointing to the administration's "zero tolerance" on discrimination as the reason for her separation.

Sociologists would describe this incident as a "moral panic," a term first used by Stanley Cohen in his classic study of English youth gangs (Cohen, 2002). There he describes an exaggerated reaction to phenomena or events that are perceived as threatening or upsetting traditional norms. At the center of a moral panic is the folk devil: a group, entity, or object that emerges as the target of disdain. Described as "the personification of evil" (Hier, 2002), folk devils serve as "visible reminders of what we should not be" (Cohen, 2002, 2). In this respect, folk devils are, in Goffman's terms, stigmatized: discredited individuals or groups that bear the markers of their stigmatism as a part of their social identity (Goffman, 1963). What makes the folk devil different is that it has been demonized and, as a consequence, it has been marked as evil—a burden much greater than that carried by most discredited groups. While "normals" may shun those they have stigmatized, they are still allowed to coexist. But how does one coexist with evil? One cannot, thus the demonized folk devil must be defeated or purged.

As soon as the video went viral on the Internet, Sherrod was transformed into the face of wickedness. Here was a relatively high-placed black public official who seemed to relish telling the story of how she had once discriminated against the white farmer, and for many the image presented of "Obama's America" became strikingly real. In an agency that

had recently been accused of perpetuating discriminatory policies with regard to African-American farmers, the emergence of Sherrod as a folk devil in the media was too much to bear. A moral panic gripped the Department of Agriculture's decision makers and only seemed to subside after evil was exorcised by the organization's zero-tolerance policy.

Yet the rush to judgment that frequently surrounds moral panics has an inherent danger. Because these events can erupt and subside quite rapidly, one could be demonized and purged before all the facts have come to light. In case of Sherrod, days after her firing, another video version of her speech emerged, revealing that Sherrod's comments had been edited and were clearly presented out of context. In a full, unedited version, Sherrod tells a story of racial reconciliation, about how she fought to overcome her initial prejudice toward the white farmer. Instead of a tale of a public official who abused her position by engaging in racial discrimination, the video captured the story of how she went above and beyond to help this particular farmer save his family's farm.

The feeding frenzy surrounding the Sherrod case and its very quick unfolding in the media offers a public example of what likely occurs on a less-visible level in organizations in which the social construction of wickedness is perhaps more common than many would admit. Despite the existence of potential pathways out of the demonization trap, however, the attribution of moral evil is a powerful force that is just as likely to degenerate into dysfunctional and destructive moral panics.

Relabeling I: Constructing the Evil Agent

Demonization and moral panics are not the only options after the perception of evil takes hold in an organizational setting. When socially constructed evil becomes dysfunctional—that is, when its emergence in response to an unspeakable act or actor itself becomes a threat to the very existence of the organized effort—a variety of psychological and strategic mechanisms can come into play that can make the perception itself more “manageable” in the sense of allowing both organization members and external observers to “make sense” of what was initially unfathomable. Many of these sense-making mechanisms (see Weick, 1979, 1995) involve altering the meaning of the attribution—a process termed “relabeling” by those who study the sociology of deviance (e.g., Preston et al., 1998; Trice and Roman, 1970).

The relabeling path out of the wickedness zone takes two forms, each an attempt to provide a meaningful explanation or excuse for the perceived evil act or actor without necessarily rendering it forgivable or legally actionable. One path involves viewing the so-called evil-doers as submissive agents who are oblivious or indifferent to the horrific implications of the organized endeavor in which they are engaged. This is the view reflected in Arendt's “banality of evil” (1976), and it represents the evil-doers as thoughtless and unreflective, yet willing, participants operating as cogs in a destructive machine. From this perspective, the core evilness lies primarily in the thoughtless actor who, rather than being regarded as some hapless dolt, bears moral responsibility for assuming an “agentic state” and not asserting the inherent human capacity to “choose to do otherwise.” The alternative path, discussed below, builds on Primo Levi's observations regarding the moral “gray zone” that formed the setting of consciously complicit evil-doers.

To understand the agentic state form of evil, we turn to Stanley Milgram's famous (and infamous) study of obedience (Milgram, 1963, 1974), an explicit test of this model of evil. In those well-known experiments, he placed his subjects in a setting that required and fostered the legitimate expectation for obedient behavior. On a strictly objective level, the organizational setting for the experiments could hardly have been more benign: a lab on a university campus overseen by an authoritative-looking figure (the "scientist" in a white lab jacket) and an explanation that gave the impression that this was a justifiable experiment related to the improvement of learning. In the waiting area, each subject met and chatted informally with the other "participant" in the experiment, and both were evidently being compensated for their time. In short, everything was done to drive the primary subject of the real experiment into what Milgram terms an agentic state in which there are clear expectations of carrying the operations to a successful completion.

Putting aside the ethical issues raised by the design and conduct of the Milgram experiment, its results provide support for a view that ordinary people, placed in objectively benign settings, can carry out significant acts of torture without a "second thought" about the moral consequences of their behavior. For Arendt and others who adhere to a Kantian notion of "radical evil," the agentic state assumed by individuals is an inherent aspect (and danger) of modern organizational life that can be overcome by making moral choices not to participate (as did some subjects in Milgram's study). Those who do not do so—those who render themselves "superfluous"—are condemnable as thoughtless evil-doers.

Shifting the socially constructed perception of OE from the demonization of wickedness to the thoughtlessness of agentic evil does not, at first, seem like an "improvement" in the situation. But the Arendtian formulation carries the implied sense that those operating under the pressures of an inherent "radical evil" could choose not to do so, if only they exercised the moral will to reflect on what they are doing or being asked to do. As social constructs, demons are hopeless; agents are salvageable.

Relabeling II: Entering the Gray Zone

The alternative relabeling path to dealing with the perceived OE is to render the act or actor's behavior as understandable (but not excusable) "under the circumstances." To comprehend this perspective, we turn to the concept of "gray zone" morality associated with the work of Primo Levi. A Holocaust survivor, he used the phrase to situate those individuals—the *kapos*, *Sonderkommandos* (the "Special Squads" of inmates who ran the crematoriums), and others who directly implemented the evil of the Holocaust—whose transgressions pose a true dilemma for those trying to make sense of them. The acts that they commit in the process of operating the deadly machinery of their Nazi Lager are wicked by definition, and yet those who commit the acts can be regarded as no less victims than the other inmates of the camps. "Conceiving and organizing the[se special] squads was National Socialism's most demonic crime," declares Levi—not only for the obvious reason that hundreds of thousands perished as a result but also for the moral depravity forced upon those who literally implemented those plans (1989, 37). The organizational

setting did not merely “induce” horrendous actions; it often demanded open complicity in the effort (cf. Berger, 1995).

Unlike those who enter the psychological agentic state fostered by Milgram’s experimental setting, occupants of the gray zone were not oblivious or indifferent to the reprehensible nature of their acts. If anything, they surrendered to their circumstances and (in too many instances) developed a sense of enthusiasm and accomplishment in a job well done. In contrast to Arendtian expectations, a reflective and thoughtful actor does not necessarily become less evil but may, in fact, become even more deserving of the attribution. But there is an added factor at play: empathy for the perceived evil-doer and a palpable inability to pass judgment (*impotentia judicandi*) (Levi, 1989, 60). In Levi’s gray zone, traditional categories of morality collapse, and the problem emerges of having to deal with evil acts undertaken by actors who cannot be judged under any of the extant ethical categories or standards (see Agamben, 2000).

For support of this view, we turn to another set of experiments associated with the study of the human capacity for so-called evil. The Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo, 1972) is often viewed as a confirmation of the Milgram study, but it points to something quite different: the power of organizational roles in the fostering of malevolent behavior. The setting and the orientations of participants to their “jobs” in the short-lived experiment are well documented in film footage and postevent interviews as well as writing, and what the evidence indicates is that ordinary individuals can transform themselves into enthusiastic accomplices in shocking behavior. In recent years, Zimbardo and his colleagues have extended the lessons drawn from his experiment to a more extended analysis that addressed events such as Abu Ghraib, making the case for what he terms the “Lucifer effect” in organizational settings (Zimbardo, 2007).

What the gray zone perspective shares with the agentic state construction of evil is the implication that something can be done to alter the Lucifer effect of organizational settings. In reflecting on the Stanford experiments twenty-five years later, Craig Haney and Zimbardo made a plea for actions to deal with (alter or eliminate) those settings (Haney and Zimbardo, 1998) in the real world of prisons. But they also note that while malformed prison settings can transform ordinary (“normal”) individuals into abusive role takers, those settings can also magnify pathological tendencies to escalate the evil-doing (Haney and Zimbardo, 1998, 719–720). Still, moving so-called evil into the gray zone provides a greater opening to actionable changes than that offered by the demonizing alternative.

Recasting: Transformation of Evil Construct

Thus far we have considered three ways of dealing with constructed OE, involving demonization and two forms of “relabeling.” What these approaches share is a commitment to retaining the concept of evil as a way to make sense of the unconscionable act and the unfathomable actor. There is, however, a wide range of options for dealing the evil label itself, which we bring together under the idea of “recasting.”

Some of these involve “delabeling” tactics by which it is demonstrated that the attribution itself was inappropriate from the outset or is not relevant under present

conditions. The case of Shirley Sherrod, discussed above, is exemplary, although rarely is the process so visible as was this widely covered incident. Delabeling of that sort is extremely difficult if the process of demonization has already created a moral panic that seems to permanently stigmatize the individuals involved even when the accusations eventually prove to have been completely without merit.¹⁰ Other forms of delabeling noted in the deviance literature involve efforts to have attributions expunged from the “record.” In the case of OE in which personnel files or similar institutional (e.g., school) records might be a consideration, there might be methods for eliminating or modifying one’s past involvement in flagrant bullying or horrendous acts committed as a juvenile (Mahoney, 1974).

Another type of recasting involves efforts to neutralize the impact of the evil attribution. In a classic article addressing tactics used by juvenile delinquents to offset accusations and their stigma, Sykes and Matza highlight five approaches that can be related to the neutralization of OE attributions: (1) denying responsibility for the act, (2) denying that an injury occurred, (3) denying the existence of a real victim, (4) challenging the motives or veracity of the accusers, or (5) appealing to some other (“higher”) loyalty (Sykes and Matza, 1957). Haines (1979) associates neutralization with steps taken to “depoliticize” a deviant behavior by a process he calls “enclosure,” which effectively removes the act or actor from the political arena in which demonization and moral panic are likely to hold sway. In an approach similar to relabeling, groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous have long been known for their efforts to have their focal behaviors and actors treated as illnesses (i.e., “medicalization”) (Preston et al., 1998; Trice and Roman, 1970) or otherwise regarded as genetically predisposition (i.e., “scientization”) (see Wasserman, 2004). In their initial efforts to neutralize the impact of child abuse committed by clergy, some leaders of the Catholic Church relied on claims of demonic possession and effectively formed an enclosure by implying that this was an internal matter that could best be handled by other members of the Church hierarchy (Benyei, 1998; Scheper-Hughes and Devine, 2003). Impression and reputation management techniques can also be relied on as a means of neutralizing OE attributions (Bromley, 1993; Frink and Ferris, 1998; Leary and Kowalski, 1990).¹¹

In contrast to recasting aimed at neutralizing the OE attribution, criminalization (or its organization equivalent) is an effective way of rendering OE acts or actors legally actionable. By criminalization, we mean the formal designation of some act (or actor committing the act) as sanctionable, through either the criminal justice system outside the organization and/or the disciplinary system within an organization.

That “and/or” phrase is an important one to keep in mind. Although some behaviors within an organization might not rise to the level of criminality as defined by the external legal system, they can be regarded as sanctionable within the organization. Bullying, for example, may be perceived as an evil act within an organization and made subject to personnel sanctions (Vickers, 2001), but it is not necessarily subject to actual criminal prosecution until it rises to the level of physical threats and violence (Rhodes et al., 2010). Pernicious behavior such as sexual harassment might be

prohibited as part of agency policy and employment contracts, but the standards for making a juridical claim outside the organization are typically much more elaborate and involved. Nevertheless, the sense of “sanctionability” can be reproduced to some extent within organizations.

Although many acts that may come to be regarded as evil are already subject to legal action because they fall under traditional definitions of criminal activity (e.g., physical attacks can be prosecuted as assaults), their status as a form of evil often generates the creation of laws or regulations that deal directly with the perceived “evil nature” of the behavior. The most obvious contemporary examples involve the prosecution of some assaults as “hate crimes,” a recasting that serves the demand that such misbehavior be prosecuted and judged for what motivated the act, not just the physical harm caused (Iganski, 2001; Jenness and Grattet, 1996). Iganski’s study found support for such recasting-through-criminalization as a reflection of the sense that hate-motivated crimes “hurt more,” but one cannot overestimate the value of transforming evil behavior into a criminal act that can be prosecuted. The criminalization process has also been applied to many other acts, such as drug use (Nadelmann, 1989), driving while intoxicated (Gusfield, 1981; Reinerman, 1988), and actors deemed so behaviorally deviant (i.e., evil) as to warrant severe formal sanctioning in law or its equivalent within organizations (e.g., the mentally ill; see Quanbeck, Frye, and Altshuler, 2003; Teplin, 1983).

One significant characteristic of this form of recasting is that the focal act or actor is rendered subject to account, and here we see the connection between accountability and its role in preventing and dealing with perceived OE. Many of the organizational mechanisms put in place to monitor or prevent misfeasance or malfeasance (e.g., reporting, auditing) can be rationalized on grounds that there needs to be some way of blunting the potential for OE (Lubit, 2004; Whicker, 1996). Similarly, making explicit the organization’s commitment and willingness to take action against (i.e., hold accountable) those who might engage in bullying, racism, sexual harassment, and other widely condemned behaviors can be regarded as part of the general effort to preclude and preempt behavior that might take on OE qualities.

These various recasting processes, and the tactics associated with them,¹² have a paradoxical relationship with attributions of OE that go to the core of our view that OE is a social construct and, therefore, is subject to reconstruction in order for the organization and its members to make sense of and deal with perceived evil. The paradox of evil is that efforts to deal with it must effectively transform it into something other than evil. Delabeling, neutralization, and criminalization accomplish this by undermining the unfathomableness of OE by different means. Delabeling seeks to eliminate the attribution, while naturalization attempts to reduce or offset the impact of demonization. Criminalization transforms evil into an actionable phenomenon by rendering it illegal and sanctionable—undermining its power as a supernatural factor in our lives. Using accountability mechanisms and policies to preclude or preempt the emergence of behaviors that might spark concerns about OE should also be part of the response in organizations that are sensitive to the threats posed by the attribution.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL EVIL

Organizational evil is not real in the sense of existing as a coherent thing-in-itself independent of the contextually contingent and moral community-specific beliefs of specific stakeholders. To view it as such, we contend, is of little practical or empirical value. Rather, OE is a highly useful concept if we acknowledge it as a functional social construct that identifies morally incomprehensible behavior. Because responses to (inter)subjectively observed or experienced organizational evil can vary along a continuum ranging from horrifically bad to enormously beneficial, it is important to understand how those responses are generated and, in particular, how the more potentially beneficial types of response can be reliably produced instead of the more harmful or unproductive ones. Our exploratory, case-based analysis recounted in the preceding section leads us to a tentative prescription for organizational practice, which also serves as a hypothesis that we believe merits systematic testing in organizational research.¹³

In a nutshell, we believe that in order to increase the likelihood of successfully preventing or remediating horrifically bad (evil) acts in organizational settings, all members of organizations, but especially those with more than trivial amounts of discretion, can be encouraged to develop and use their skills in practical ethical reasoning. This, admittedly, may come at the cost of diminished employee obedience (and, perhaps, losses in bureaucratic efficiency) to the extent that organizational members are encouraged or take it upon themselves to question the moral authority and instructions of their hierarchical superiors. However, as in other matters of organizational routines and cultures, the precise balance of the tradeoff can be adjusted by adept leadership to suit the requirements of specific organizations, missions, contexts, and contingencies. This requires that a form of ethical risk analysis be performed, involving assessment of the probability that inept reactions to perceived evil (or unthinking obedience to instructions or impulses that might yield actions that would qualify as evil in the first place) pose a threat to individuals or to the organization's mission.

Although another sometimes recommended prophylactic is to determine and promulgate a central set of values for public servants generally or members of specific public service organizations, we have argued elsewhere that such an approach can create more problems than it solves (see Dubnick and Justice, 2006). The examples of appalling, systematized brutality by organizations and grossly inappropriate behavior by individuals that have provided the impetus for prescribing thoroughgoing ethical stipulation and surveillance appeared to us in fact to be illustrations precisely of the dangers of that prescription. While we certainly hope that public servants will obey ethically and instrumentally correct instructions from the leaders of public organizations, we also believe that they must be willing and able to recognize when basic obedience to instructions is insufficient or even contrary to the fulfillment of their public and ethical duties. This requires that ordinary stakeholders as well as leaders possess both ethical competence and a willingness to act accordingly.

Developing such ethical competence throughout an organization is unquestionably a nontrivial task, and it is likely that the balance struck in practice between obedience and

independent judgment may not always be exactly right for every organization at every point in its life cycle. Nonetheless, it seems more constructive to work toward developing ethical competence at all levels of an organization than to presume the inevitability of incompetence and attempt to compensate for that by indoctrinating an organization's members in lieu of developing their skills. In fact, ethical development as opposed to stipulation seems likely to be a requisite for the kind of distributed leadership advocated by some contemporary experts in organizational leadership as a way to enhance organizational efficiency. We would expect effective independent practical ethical reasoning to lead individual stakeholders to work to advance what they believe to be the legitimate (in both the instrumental and ethical senses) work of the organization. To the extent an organization's leaders can convince ethically competent stakeholders that their instructions are reasonably designed to advance ethically and instrumentally legitimate purposes, the conclusions drawn from independent reasoning should reinforce those instructions and actually promote obedience.

When independent reasoning and obedience are at odds, it is possible that there has been a failure of leadership, stakeholder ethical reasoning, or both. Where leaders' instructions are not well suited to advancing the organization's legitimate mission, ethical independence provides a check against large-scale error. Where appropriate instructions are resisted, due to poor communications by leaders or errors in judgment by other members of the organization, inefficiency and error may well result. But it seems reasonable to hypothesize that organizations whose members have been adequately prepared and empowered to practice ethical judgment will find this risk (as measured by the combination of likelihood and severity of undesirable behavior) to be smaller over time than the risks associated with 'organizational evil' or other consequences of thoughtless obedience.

Finally, we note that this is not a pie-in-the-sky impossibility and might be barely more difficult than simply indoctrinating employees simply to obey instructions or a single overriding set of organizational or societal norms. Practical wisdom, to use Aristotle's term, is a skill that can be developed through practice aided by deft instruction and encouragement. Examples of potentially appropriate instructional approaches for various settings include those embodied in books targeting public administration trainees (e.g., Lewis and Gilman, 2005; Svava, 2007) and the general public (see Schwartz and Sharpe, 2010).¹⁴ Any of these approaches could conceivably be adapted for use within organizations as well as in standard academic settings. In sum, while the bad news is that treating organizational evil as a thing-in-itself is a counterproductive approach, the good news is that a more pragmatic understanding of "organizational evil" implies some possible directions for the development of a practical and practicable approach to organizational ethics that can decrease the likelihood of so-called organizational evil without unacceptably degrading organizations' ability to perform their legitimate missions effectively and efficiently. Just as organizations have proven capable of contending with the limits of human attention and cognitive abilities (e.g., bounded rationality) and the imperfections of markets and other institutions, so it can develop that means for dealing with those unfathomable events and behaviors that all too often fall under the label of organizational evil.

NOTES

1. The problem of evil debate remains active, but more as an argument in logic than in philosophy (see Cooper, 1983).

2. The concept of “pragmatic realism” is attributable to Charles Peirce but is today most often associated with the writings of Hilary Putnam in the 1990s (he has since modified his views on realism). See Putnam, 1981, 1982.

3. We will not tackle here the issues raised by the inclination of those who espouse Type A perspectives to focus on the collective (as opposed to the individualistic) nature of society, other than to acknowledge that bias and to highlight the fact that there are alternative, more individualist perspectives that can be applied. For classic expositions on this issue as it relates to methodological individualism, see Arrow, 1994; Elster, 1982. Even more relevant to the examination of OE is the ongoing debate over collective and shared responsibility, e.g., Feinberg, 1968; May, 1992.

4. On the decision making behind Operation Reinhard, including the fact that the organizational technology for carrying out the extermination process was already in place before the policy was formalized, see Musial, 2000.

5. Auschwitz-Birkenau was also classified as a “concentration camp” that engaged in extended imprisonment. Arad’s study highlights Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka as the three major death camps.

6. See Putnam, 1981, 1982; cf. Bunge, 2006; Devitt, 1991.

7. It is tempting to put Goldhagen (1996) among this list of relevant Type B studies, but a close reading indicates that Goldhagen might be more relevant for A or C types; see Alford, 1997a.

8. The position assumed by advocates of Type B views is almost ideological in nature given its commitment to the Weberian view of modern organizations. Such a commitment is in part based on a misreading (mistranslation) of that Weberian view (e.g., Baehr, 2001; Kent, 1983) or a myopic indifference to perspectives drawn from alternative (e.g., Hegelian) traditions (see Sebastiaan and Patrick, 2008; Shaw, 1992).

9. For a classic overview and reflection on labeling, see Becker, 1973.

10. See deYoung, 2007. DeYoung, a sociologist who closely followed the infamous McMartin Preschool case involving charges of ritual child abuse (e.g., deYoung, 1994) conducted a follow-up assessment of what happened to those charged or convicted twenty-five years after the associated moral panic began.

11. Berbrier takes note of a particular form of impression management—intellectualization—used by white supremacist groups to offset the taint of racism that places them squarely among the demonized in American society (Berbrier, 1999).

12. For an excellent overview of relabeling and recasting from the perspective of tactics, see Rogers and Buffalo, 1974. They offer a framework that generates “nine modes” of adaptive responses to deviance, and most are relevant to the present analysis.

13. This is not an unusual situation for scholars of organizations. Some other examples of theories of motivation that were adopted as managerial prescriptions on the basis of hypothetical formulations in advance of rigorous empirical testing include Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, Herzberg’s identification of “hygiene factors” and “motivators,” and arguments in favor of Douglas McGregor’s managerial “Theory Y” over “Theory X.”

14. The Schwartz and Sharpe (2010) book is based on an elaborate and ingenious course designed by the authors for advanced undergraduates at Swarthmore College.

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