



Conceiving Evil: A Phenomenology of Perpetration

Wendy C. Hamblet

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This book argues that the epistemological framework that permits us to see others as 'evil' also resituates our own moral compass and reframes our moral world such that we can justify performing violent deeds, which we would readily demonize in others, as the heroics of eradicating evil.

When conflict is understood positively as the confrontation of differences, an unavoidable and indeed desirable consequence of the rich tapestry of earthly life, then a discussion can open as to how to navigate the countless confrontations of difference in the most skillful way. Through this lens, violence comes into view as the least skillful means of responding to, and working with, difference, since violence tends to 'rebound' and leaves both victims and perpetrators worse off—shameful and vengeful.

Philosopher Wendy C. Hamblet argues that the radically polarized and oversimplified worldview that sorts the phenomena of the world into 'good guys' and 'evil others' is a framework as old as human community itself, and one that undermines people's own moral infrastructure, permitting them to take up the very acts that they would readily demonize as 'evil' in others. One's own violent responses to the human condition come to be reframed from unskillful and undesirable actions to valiant heroic reactions. In short, those who see 'evil' in others are far more likely to do 'evil,' resorting to the least skillful means for navigating difference—violence.

In theory, violence is demonized as 'evil' in popular and criminological discourse and calls forth 'rebounding' like responses in the form of acts of vengeance in individuals and punitive responses in state institutions. However, punishment is itself defined as an 'evil' inflicted by a legitimate authority upon a wrongdoer in compensation for a wrong done. This leads to the conundrum that the state, as much as the vigilante, must necessarily undermine its own legitimacy.

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