

PRÉCIS OF *EVIL ONLINE*

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Evil Online begins with the story of the ship *Batavia* that was wrecked off the coast of Western Australia early in the seventeenth century.¹ About 150 people survived the wreck to reach a deserted island. However, over the next few months, Jeronimus Cornelisz, imbued with ideas about being beyond good and evil and harboring mutinous motives from the start, led others on a reign of terror. They murdered most of the survivors, including many women and children. According to some of the few who lived to tell the tale, the murders often seemed to be done just for the fun of it.


Many evils online have emerged in similar ways. Attitudes and conduct are set in new, unfamiliar worlds where the voices of moral authorities and the constraints of existing social institutions are often too weak to be heard, and isolation from the reactions of others is ubiquitous. Unsurprisingly, those already guided by antisocial and immoral attitudes have been able to run amok online. However, many who were not already so inclined have also gone astray. Worries about the flourishing of evil online are not confined to violations of values or to the enabling of our darker sides—they are also about the undermining of our ‘better angels’ and about losing sight of our values altogether. Establishing that there are these more fundamental dangers and trying to better understand this territory of evildoing—not fully explained by the rule of preexisting antisocial attitudes—are the main aims of the book.

1. Dean Cocking and Jeroen van den Hoven, *Evil Online* (New York: Wiley, 2018).

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The most influential contemporary description of the evildoing of people not already of antisocial minds has been Hannah Arendt's account of the 'banality of evil'. On this account, or a common reading of it, people can become evildoers because they are fundamentally unthinking and uncritical about their conduct. Their attitudes and pursuits may have ordinary, widely shared, seemingly morally neutral descriptions, such as 'doing one's job well' since they possess, Arendt says, 'an inability to think, namely to think from the standpoint of someone else'.²

Much of the rise of evil online may be seen as providing spectacular, new, and widespread ways in which evil is banal and can flourish. Certainly, evil seems commonly committed without the perpetrators(s) recognizing the evilness of their conduct (much less their being motivated by, or aiming at, the evil they commit). But such failures of people to recognize the evil in what they do is typically not *simply* banal. Invariably, much more needs to be said in order to explain the apparent banality of evil and how 'unthinkingness' can enable evil (and sometimes the evil is not really banal at all). In order to provide this further and additional explanation, *Evil Online* argues that such failures of moral understanding about the realities of one's conduct, and how these failures enable evildoing, is better understood in terms of agency being undertaken in a 'moral fog'.

The moral fog of our online social worlds results from the coalescence of a cluster of features that shape self-expression and communication, such as the algorithms; the business models of online platforms; their design for personalization³ and addiction, to be engaged in relentless self/other comparisons, to have 'weak ties' with one another, and to be isolated from the reactions of others and from broader and conflicting views; the collapsing of the public and private realms on social media platforms; the virtual reality of the medium; and the seeming anonymity.

In addition, the new digital technology comes with significant 'interpretative flexibility'. Revolutionary technology typically creates very new environments where attitudes and norms are yet to be settled. As a result, moral uncertainty and confusion can reign until some closure has been reached about the nature and purpose of the technology. The Internet is a striking example of technology bringing interpretative flexibility, and plainly much uncertainty and confusion remains. These various features (and others) of online environments and how they shape self-expression and communication are described

2. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (London: Penguin, 1964), p. 49.

3. Personalization (e.g., through the targeting of information and advertisements on the basis of our revealed interests and preferences).

in chapter 2. In particular, many of the features of online environments that are identified are used to help explain the creation of moral fog online and how it enables evil.

Chapter 1 introduces (some of) the many faces of evil online, such as radicalization, cyber bullying, glorification of anorexia, digital self-harm, misogyny, racism, revenge porn, shaming, catfishing, and sick prankster vloggers. Across many of these cases, beyond long-standing crimes such as theft, blackmail, and fraud, preexisting antisocial attitudes (e.g., of self-gain or due to mental illness) do not provide much of an explanation. Instead, very banal drivers and attitudes are commonplace, such as getting lost in and being unthinking about one's particular online environment, going to more extreme behaviors so as to be included or stand out in one's scene, or because 'It was fun' or 'I could' or 'everyone else was doing it'.

Chapter 3 provides an account of negative impacts the online social revolution has effected broadly across some of our basic values—in particular, autonomy, intimacy, privacy, civility, and trust. The losses and distortions of these values are described and accounted for as resulting from a notable 'demolition job' the online social revolution has effected upon our traditional abilities to cohabit the generally quite separate, very different, and often contrasting worlds of public and private life. The discussion illustrates how the territory of our traditional lives across these fronts has enabled key aspects of our basic values and how, with the loss and distortion of our plural worlds of public and private life online, so too there has been a loss and distortion of these values.

Chapter 3 also describes how a common driver for users online is the idea that one can seemingly pursue life far more on 'one's own terms' (i.e., relatively unhindered by the influence of others and the conventions, laws, and settings of one's traditional world). Various design features of online social worlds, such as personalization and isolation, especially enable users to think they are 'masters of their domain' in such ways. While this outlook has long been a very seductive driver in our *offline* worlds, and it is well exploited across online social platforms, the discussion describes how it is also fundamentally antisocial and corrupts individual moral character.

Evil Online develops the idea of moral fog to provide an explanatory umbrella across a broad range of evils, both online and in our traditional worlds. Chapters 4 and 5 develop the account of the moral fog of evil and also the accounts of moral character and the prosocial life to which the discussion has led. Chapter 4 describes varieties of moral fog in our traditional lives. The account of moral fog is developed here in relation to Arendt's banality thesis and the social science experiments of Stanley Milgram, Philip Zimbardo, and others and the various associated lessons and analyses taken from these experiments.

The discussion in chapter 4 also highlights how the shared life, usually discussed in terms of providing the well-springs of the good life, just as well can create moral fog that enables a variety of long-standing evils. So, for instance, while our needs for intimacy and our learning and developmental dependence upon others provides the impetus for some key goods of the shared life, they also provide notable sources of moral obfuscation and corruption.

Evil Online draws attention to various ways in which individual moral character is crucially socially constructed and dependent, in particular, upon the territory of self-expression and communication we have been navigating for millennia. Chapter 5 develops this approach to moral character and the prosocial life in counterpoint to some common views about moral character, its relations to self-interest, and the oft-imagined independence of moral character from reliance upon others and conditions of the external world.

The book concludes with a focus on the fate of moral character in an age where so much of the complexity and nuance of the social territory upon which the moral life has long been developed has been distorted and replaced by social media platforms—platforms that support the illusion of pursuing life on one's own terms and enable the construction of individual character and the shared life to be increasingly defined by 'just me and the Internet'.