

11. See McVeigh's April 2001 Letter to Fox News (available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,17500,00.html>).
12. Larry Alexander, "Self-Defense and the Killing of Noncombatants: A Reply to Fullinwider," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1976), 411–412.
13. I do not mean to claim that the account is a straightforward form of consequentialism, but only that it shares significant elements with consequentialism that traditional moral theory would find objectionable.
14. It is at least plausible that terrorism can sometimes be objectively the only effective way of defending a people. See, e.g., Alan Dershowitz, *Why Terrorism Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2002), arguing that terrorism persists in the Middle East precisely because it has been an effective tool.

Evil, Ignorance, and the 9/11 Terrorists

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Abstract: In this paper I consider the excuse of ignorance as a justification for acting in a way that would otherwise be evil. My aim is to determine when ignorance precludes us from evildoing and when it does not. I use the 9/11 terrorist attack on America as a case study. In particular, I consider whether the 9/11 terrorists were precluded from evildoing because they thought they were doing right and thus were ignorant about the true nature of their actions. The paper begins with a discussion of the nature of evil. I argue that the 9/11 terrorists were not precluded from evildoing by their ignorance because they were largely responsible for being ignorant about the true nature of their actions. They were responsible for their ignorance because they evaded acknowledging information that should have revealed to them the evilness of their plans. They were "self-deceptive evildoers."

People accused of evildoing typically offer some sort of justification or excuse for their actions. If successful, their justification or excuse precludes them from evildoing, since they cannot be condemned for a justified or excusable act. In this paper I consider the excuse of ignorance as a justification for acting in a way that would otherwise be evil. My aim is to determine when ignorance precludes us from evildoing and when it does not. I use the 9/11 terrorist attack on America as a case study. In particular, I consider whether the 9/11 terrorists were precluded from evildoing because they thought they were doing right and thus were ignorant about the true nature of their actions. The paper begins with a discussion of the nature of evil.

I. The Nature of Evil

In recent years several theories of evil have been offered (see, e.g., the theories of Claudia Card, Eve Garrard, John Kekes, Hillel Steiner, Ernesto V. Garcia and Laurence Thomas).¹ In this paper I do not give a detailed exposition and criticism of these theories. Instead, I present and defend a theory of evil which I have developed largely in response to these other theories. I call my theory the Desire Account of Evil because it differs from these other theories by contending that desires play a

fundamental role in evil. According to the Desire Account two conditions must be met for an act to be evil: first, the act must involve someone else's significant harm, and second, the harm must follow from what I call an e-desire, i.e. from an effective desire for the harm for an unworthy goal such as one's own pleasure or entertainment value. By an *effective desire*, I mean a desire that is not outweighed by a stronger desire that our victim is spared the suffering, so that in the absence of inhibiting factors such as cowardice it would move us to act.² Together these conditions assert that we act evilly when we cause someone else significant harm from an effective desire for that harm for an unworthy goal.

Evil and Harm

The first condition for evil, that evil must involve significant harm, is accepted by most theorists writing about evil and is easy to defend. Evil acts must involve significant harm because much of the moral gravity of evil comes from the seriousness of the harm inflicted. So, for instance, while it would be evil to cause someone excruciating pain for one's own pleasure, the amount of harm normally inflicted by a light pinch on the arm could never be evil no matter how viciously it was inflicted.

Although most theorists agree that evil must involve significant harm, this condition is not entirely uncontroversial. In her paper "The Nature of Evil," Eve Garrard argues that evil acts need not involve much harm. As an example she cites the case of a tyrannical state that executes a young dissident by firing squad and then forces the grieving relatives to pay for the cost of the bullets. Garrard suggests that while the execution of the young dissident is wrong it is the charging for the bullets that strikes us as evil. Yet, Garrard contends, charging for the bullets involves very little harm especially as compared to the execution.³ I disagree. Charging for the bullets inflicts a significant harm on the family of the dissident. This significant harm consists in the psychological trauma of being forced, not only to accept the authority of an unjust state but to play a role in the state's unjust execution of a family member. I contend that the charging for the bullets would not have been evil if it hadn't been psychologically harmful to the family. No evil is done unless someone gets seriously hurt.

Evil and Desire

The second condition for evil, that the harm must follow from an e-desire, i.e. from an effective desire for the harm for an unworthy goal, is more complicated and controversial and will need more argument and analysis than the first condition.

To show that e-desires are fundamental to evil, I will discuss the failings of John Kekes's theory of evil which attempts to characterize evil without making reference to the desires of evildoers.⁴ According to Kekes, evil acts consist in causing serious, morally unjustified harm to other human beings.⁵ No mention is made of

the desires or motivation of the evildoer. By morally unjustified harm, Kekes means a harm that is avoidable, undeserved and not the best way of preventing a greater harm.⁶ The central problem with characterizing evil in this way rather than by reference to the desires of evildoers is that our doing evil becomes largely a matter of circumstances external to us and quite possibly beyond our control. Consider first Kekes's condition that the harm must be undeserved. Rather than being a requirement for evil this condition seems to be completely irrelevant to the evilness of an act. Imagine a case where a victim deserves serious harm, say for instance because he is a serial killer, but that the perpetrator of his harm is really not concerned that the serial killer gets his just reward. Rather, she simply desires to take pleasure in causing someone else serious harm. I think in cases like these causing serious harm is evil even though the victim might deserve the harm.

It is also possible to inflict serious avoidable harm on an undeserving person without doing evil. For example, a dutiful prison warden or an executioner may cause a person serious harm that she does not deserve because she has been wrongfully convicted. If the warden or executioner is ignorant of her victim's innocence we would not say that she acts evilly by causing undeserved harm, for she had no malicious intent or despicable desire.

These two cases show that what is important for evil is the sort of desire from which the act is done and not whether the victim deserves the harm. Causing serious harm to a serial killer for pleasure is evil because one's own pleasure is not a good reason to cause serious harm. Acting from a despicable desire of this sort is evil even if the victim deserves the harm. On the other hand, it isn't evil to cause serious harm to an innocent convict if the harm is done from a desire to fulfill one's duty to mete out just punishment, since in that case the harm does not follow from a despicable desire.

Kekes's requirement that evil acts are not the best way to prevent greater harm is also neither necessary nor sufficient for evil. For instance, we might have good reason to believe that greater harm is being prevented by our harming someone when it is not. In these cases, it would be too harsh to call our act evil, for we have no despicable desire or intent. We have just miscalculated the relative amounts of harm. In other cases, an agent might, in fact, prevent greater harm by harming another, yet cause the harm from a despicable desire for that harm and not because it is the lesser of two "evils." In these cases it seems clear that the act might still be evil even though greater harm has been averted. Once again Kekes's account of evil fails by ignoring the motivational component of evil.

So we can see from the failings of Kekes's theory of evil that, no matter how serious, undeserved or inexpedient an act of causing significant harm might be, to be evil it must follow from an e-desire, i.e. from an effective desire for someone else's significant harm for an unworthy goal. I will now give an analysis of e-desires.

Unworthy Goals and Moral Theory

Let us first consider what it is that makes a goal unworthy of harm. The answer to this question lies in the relative values of the harm and the goal for which it is desired. Causing someone else significant harm for pleasure is evil because significant harm is obviously disvaluable to a high degree while any pleasure we might get from this harm is of questionable value.⁷ Our own pleasure is not a worthy goal for which significant harm may be caused; the value (if any) which is derived from our pleasure in someone else's significant harm does not make things on balance more valuable. On the other hand, saving five from significant harm is a worthy goal for which to cause significant harm to one, since the disvalue of the significant harm is more than outweighed by the amount of disvalue that has been prevented. So a goal is worthy when the value of the goal combined with the disvalue of the harm is on balance more valuable than states of affairs where the harm does not occur. Of course in order to know whether a goal is worthy of a harm in any particular case we need the right theory of value plus other relevant information, e.g., what consequences will follow from the harm. I will not attempt to argue for any particular theory of value here, nor can I provide empirical information to determine the worthiness of a goal in each particular case.

I also want to be clear that I am not here assuming the truth of consequentialism. Nor is the Desire Account of Evil a consequentialist theory of evil. I am not assuming the truth of consequentialism because I am not making a claim about the rightness or wrongness of actions. For instance, it does not follow from what I have said about worthy and unworthy goals that it would be morally correct or justified to cause significant harm to one person to save five others from a similar harm. Instead, I only make the much weaker claim that to act from a desire to cause significant harm to one person to save five from a similar harm would not be evil. I believe this is a claim that even a deontologist could accept since it is a claim about the conditions for evil and not a claim about the conditions for right or wrong action.⁸ Thus a deontologist may insist that it is immoral to act on a desire to cause one person significant harm to save five others and yet concede that such an act would lack the despicableness required for evil.

The Desire Account of Evil is not a consequentialist theory because it does not judge the evilness of actions solely on the basis of the consequences (or the intended consequences) of the action. For instance, as I noted above while discussing the failings of John Kekes's theory of evil, while acting evilly we might rightly believe that we maximize the good by causing significant harm to one person, and thus, do what is right by consequentialist standards. However, we still act evilly if we desire to cause the harm for an unworthy goal such as our own pleasure and not to maximize overall goodness.

This is not to say that the Desire Account of Evil is in no way similar to consequentialism. There are at least two respect in which the Desire Account of Evil is

similar to consequentialism. First, just as wrongdoing requires bad consequences for the consequentialist, evildoing requires significant suffering according to the Desire Account of Evil. If we have an effective desire to cause significant harm but fail to bring about the suffering, we fail at our attempt to do evil. However, our failed attempt at evil may still be indicative of an evil of character since incompetence doesn't make our characters any better.⁹

Second, consequentialists determine the rightness or wrongness of an action by comparing the total value or disvalue of an action with the total value or disvalue of alternative courses of action. In the same way, the Desire Account determines the worthiness or unworthiness of goals by comparing the total value or disvalue that would be created by causing significant harm with the total value or disvalue that would obtain if the harm did not occur. But this does not make the Desire Account consequentialist since the determination of the worthiness or unworthiness of goals is only one part of how the Desire Account determines evilness of action. Non-consequentialist elements affect the evilness of our actions as well, such as the reasons we have for bringing about the harm. In fact, we have just as much reason to call the Desire Account of Evil deontological as we do to call it consequentialist, since it follows from this theory that some acts are evil regardless of the overall value of the consequences.

It shouldn't be any surprise that the Desire Account of Evil is neither fully consequentialist nor fully deontological since these categories typically apply to theories of right action and the Desire Account is not a theory of right action. I will now turn to a discussion of what it is about desires that make them fundamental to evil.

The Nature of Desire

To desire some object or state of affairs is to want (or to have a pro-attitude towards) what we know or take that object or state of affairs to be like, and not necessarily to want what that object or state of affairs is actually like. In other words, if we believe A is X when it is actually Y, desiring A entails wanting X and not Y even though A really is Y. So, if, for example, I believe that by beating my wife I cause significant harm for an unworthy goal and I desire to beat my wife, then I desire someone else's significant harm for an unworthy goal. If instead I believe that beating my wife is an insignificant harm to her or that it would be for the best overall, e.g. because it would put her in her place, then it wouldn't really be proper to say that I *desire* significant harm for an unworthy goal even if that is the true nature of what I desire. Instead, we should say that I *desire insignificant* harm for an unworthy goal or significant harm for a *worthy* goal, or whatever the case may be, but that I am mistaken about the nature of what I desire.

It is important to think about desires in this way in the context of our discussion about e-desires, for we would not think that desires were fundamental to evil

if we thought that the objects of our desires were actual objects or states of affairs rather than what we believe or take these objects or states of affairs to be like.¹⁰ To illustrate this point, imagine there are two buttons I can push, a red one and a green one. If I push the green button I cause a stranger a significant amount of suffering. If I push the red button I cause a stranger a significant amount of pleasure. Unfortunately, I believe that the green button causes pleasure and that the red button causes suffering. So now the question becomes, what if I desire to push the green button? Do I desire a stranger's pleasure or do I desire her suffering? If the objects of our desires are actual states of affairs and not what we take these states of affairs to be like, then we must say that I desire the stranger's suffering. But that doesn't fit with the ordinary notion of desire. According to the ordinary notion of desire, we would say that I desire the stranger's pleasure but mistakenly choose the wrong button. In order to blame people for their desires we must suppose that the objects of our desires are what we take the states of affairs desired to be like and not the states of affairs themselves, since, for the most part, we aren't blamed for getting the facts wrong but rather for knowingly choosing what is bad or wrong.¹¹ Thus, if desire is fundamental to evil it must consist in wanting what we take an object or state of affairs to be like and not in wanting what the object or state of affairs is actually like.

Before turning to the relationship between evil and ignorance, let us first sum up what we have learned about the nature of evil thus far. To act evilly we must cause someone else significant harm from an e-desire. E-desires consist in wanting what we believe is someone else's significant harm for a goal that does not make up for the disvalue of the harm desired. At least one further qualification to the notion of e-desires is needed. This qualification will arise out of my discussion of evil, ignorance and the 9/11 terrorists.

II. Evil and Ignorance

Having discussed the nature of evil, we are now in a position to discuss the relationship between evil, ignorance and excuse. I have argued above that desires are fundamental to evil only if by 'desire' we mean the ordinary notion of desire. According to the ordinary notion of desire, to desire x means to want what we take x to be like and not necessarily to want what x is actually like. Given this feature of desire, it follows that to have an e-desire we must believe or acknowledge that what we desire is someone else's significant harm for an unworthy goal. But then what if we believe that the harm we desire is insignificant when it is significant, or that the goal is worthy when it is not? Does ignorance get us off the hook in every case? And if not, when does ignorance preclude us from evil-doing and when does it not? These are important questions to answer, for most, if not all, evil-doers purport to believe either that they don't cause significant harm or that the goal for which they

cause the harm is a worthy one. These evil-doers go wrong in one of two ways: they either fail to get the natural facts right, for instance, by thinking that a significant harm will lead to a great benefit when it will not, or else they fail to evaluate the facts correctly, for instance, by judging that their own pleasure is valuable enough to outweigh someone else's significant harm.¹² Aristotle makes a similar distinction between those who are ignorant of universals in practical syllogisms and those who are ignorant of particulars.¹³ He argues that we are not pardoned for being ignorant of universal moral claims, such as that it is immoral to cause unjustified serious harm to another person. For Aristotle ignorance of this sort invites reproach. Being ignorant of particulars, on the other hand, such as that the consequences of a particular act would be someone else's serious harm, is reason to pardon wrongdoing unless the person is responsible for their ignorance.

I agree with Aristotle about the distinction between ignorance of moral universals and ignorance of particular natural facts. We are certainly not precluded from evil-doing by wrongly judging that some unworthy goal, such as our own pleasure, is valuable enough to outweigh someone else's significant harm. Psychopaths are perhaps paradigmatic examples of those who cause significant harm under this form of ignorance. They are ignorant in the sense that they are poor moral evaluators. I also think there are times when we should be excused for getting the natural facts wrong about whether someone has been significantly harmed or whether great benefit will result from the harm. In the remainder of this paper I want to discuss in more detail the conditions under which ignorance of particular facts provides a legitimate excuse for causing significant harm. I also want to propose that in a great many cases those who are responsible for their ignorance about the significance of the harm they cause or the worthiness of the goal for which they cause the harm are self-deceptive evil-doers. I argue that the 9/11 terrorists were more than likely evil-doers of this sort.

Defensible and Indefensible Ignorance

Imagine that a boy has been indoctrinated since birth about the evils of Westerners (i.e., people from Western society), especially Americans, by the worst sort of Islamic extremists, such as those who recruit terrorists for al-Qaeda. While growing up this boy is repeatedly told that Americans are the enemy of Allah, that they are destroying the world, that they have no morally redeemable features and that it is God's will that they be destroyed by the faithful. Imagine further that this boy is isolated from Westerners and moderate Muslims, spending his entire youth in extremist Islamic schools and at al-Qaeda training camps. Without ever being confronted with good contrary evidence we could not expect him to believe anything other than that Americans are inherently evil and that he would be doing right by sacrificing himself in a terrorist attack against them.

If this were the profile of a 9/11 terrorist it would be difficult to call his actions evil since his belief in the worthiness of taking part in a terrorist attack against Americans would be reasonable or defensible. His belief would be defensible since, given the information available to him, it would seem to anyone similarly situated that taking part in the attack was justified.

However, it is unlikely that any of the 9/11 terrorists were subjected to this kind of systematic indoctrination, or to indoctrination systematic enough to make their false beliefs in the value of killing Americans defensible. This is not to say that the leaders of al-Qaeda did not take every opportunity to indoctrinate the 9/11 terrorists into believing that their mission was justified.¹⁴ It is just that there was a lot of information readily available to the 9/11 terrorists that was contrary to the teachings of the al-Qaeda leadership. For example, we know that four of the nineteen hijackers had had extensive contact with Americans and Westerners.¹⁵ Three of them, Mohamed Atta, Marwan Al-Shehhi and Ziad Samir Jarrah, lived and attended University in Hamburg, Germany, where they had friends who were not very different from most Americans. Furthermore, the Hamburg students arrived in America 16–18 months prior to the attacks to make preparations. The fourth Hijacker who had had years of contact with Westerners was Hani Hanjour. Hanjour studied English and went to flying school in the US since 1996.

The takfiri creed enjoins al-Qaeda members who are on missions in non-Islamic countries “to mask their true purposes even if it mean[s] breaching strict Islamic rules.”¹⁶ Some al-Qaeda terrorists were better at this than others. The Hamburg terrorist Jarrah was particularly good at fitting in with Americans. Jarrah was everybody’s friend at the Florida Flight Training Center where he and the other two Hamburg students learned to fly. For example, he once brought a six pack of beer to his flight instructor after he had injured his knee, staying for hours to socialize. He also often cooked for his American roommates in Florida. There is a photograph of him enjoying Thanksgiving dinner with his American friends.¹⁷

Unlike Hanjour and the Hamburg students, twelve of the nineteen hijackers arrived in America from Saudi Arabia three or four months before the attack on tourist visas. Although these late comers didn’t spend as much time interacting with Americans and other Westerners as did the organizers of their mission, they were also encouraged to fit in and to hide their true purpose. Most of them spent a lot of time working out at local gyms and practicing martial arts.¹⁸

Given the amount of time the 9/11 terrorists spent with Americans and other Westerners it would have been difficult for them not to realize that Americans, like other Westerners, had morally redeemable qualities such as the capacity for love, compassion and good will towards others – in short, that Americans are not thoroughly evil. This is particularly true of the organizers who seem to have had full knowledge of the plan well in advance.¹⁹ Even if their friendly conduct towards

Americans was a deception, it would have been difficult for them to have had these cordial relationships while viewing all Americans as irrevocably evil.

In the face of their friendly contact with Americans and other Westerners, one thing that kept the 9/11 terrorists going and gave them the hardness to complete their mission was the idea, instilled in them by the al-Qaeda leadership, that they were carrying out the will of God and thus that they were acting for a worthy goal.²⁰ But how certain were they that they were carrying out the will of God and that the goal for which they intended to kill hundreds or thousands of Americans was a worthy one? Given their upbringing and the information available to them, was it reasonable for them to be certain that they were carrying out the will of God (Allah)? I say *certain* because the death and suffering of hundreds or thousands of innocents is so morally important that it would be reprehensible to take part in such an act without being certain of the worthiness of the goal for which they were taking part.

Each of the nineteen hijackers should have had doubts about the worthiness of the goal of their mission. Most, if not all, of them came from families that were opposed to extremist forms of Islam.²¹ So it is unlikely that any of them was indoctrinated into militant Islam since birth. In fact, most of them were introduced to militant Islam in university. Furthermore, since they were mostly middle class university students, most of them would have been exposed to a variety of information from various sources about world events and the dictates of Islam.²²

Ignorance and Self-Deception

Thus, I contend that the 9/11 terrorists could only have believed that they acted for a worthy goal by deceiving themselves about the strength of the evidence supporting this conclusion. However, there are at least three respects in which this contention needs further support. First, I must say more about what I mean by “self-deception.” Second, in order to argue that the 9/11 terrorists deceived themselves about the worthiness of the goal for which they desired to kill hundreds or thousands of Americans, I must show that they had a motive for their self-deception. And third, I must argue that it was self-deception, rather than carelessness or negligence, that led the 9/11 terrorists to believe in the worthiness of their goal. I will address each of these concerns in turn.

By “self-deception” I mean to evade acknowledging to ourselves some truth “or what [we] would view as truth if [we] were to confront [the] issue squarely.”²³ Self-deceivers are initially aware of moments where they shift their attention away from available evidence to something else, although they may not be aware of the overall project of their self-deception.²⁴

In his book, *Moral Responsibility in the Holocaust*, David Jones lists five common tactics used in self-deception: (1) we avoid thinking about p (that is the proposition we want to avoid acknowledging); (2) we distract ourselves from

thinking about *p* with rationalization, for instance by trying to insist that there is good evidence that not-*p* when there isn't; (3) we evade belief in *p* by systematically failing to make any inquiries about *p*, distracting our attention from *p* and ignoring available evidence of *p*; (4) we block appropriate emotional responses such as horror and assume an attitude of indifference towards *p*; and (5) we evade activities that would be appropriate for someone who believed *p*.²⁵

Now that we have a better understanding of the nature of self-deception, the next question to ask is what motive the 9/11 terrorists could have had for deceiving themselves about the worthiness of killing hundreds or thousands of Americans. An answer to this question begins with the observation that, although many of the 9/11 terrorists were university educated, most of the hijackers lacked purpose and a sense of belonging.²⁶ Some, such as Mohamed Atta, who attended university in the West, felt alienated in his new surroundings. Al-Qaeda specialist Paul Williams writes that "Typical recruits for al-Qaeda are unmarried males between the ages of 17 and 25 ... Scouts usually choose youths who have been injured by ethnic conflict ... those who have been victims of beatings, or who have lost a father or brother in a demonstration, or who are without much hope of escaping a life of grinding poverty."²⁷ Of the late comers from Saudi Arabia, many were disaffected youths caught in the kingdom's recent economic downturn having graduated with degrees that didn't qualify them to do anything but religious studies.²⁸ Al-Qaeda gave them a sense of belonging, a brotherhood and a purpose. To maintain this sense of purpose and belonging, al-Qaeda members needed to turn away from evidence that opposed Osama Bin Laden's interpretation of the Koran and his view of Americans. They used self-deception to convince themselves of the worthiness of the goal of their mission.

But why should we believe that the 9/11 terrorists were self-deceptive rather than careless or negligent? My response is that killing hundreds or thousands of human beings is so morally important that the 9/11 terrorists could only have failed to consider, or appreciate the force of, evidence against the terrorist attack by being self-deceptive or monstrously indifferent to the suffering of others. That is, being careless or negligent about the justification for killing hundreds or thousands of human beings amounts to psychopathy. I think we make better sense of the 9/11 terrorists if we characterize them as self-deceptive rather than as psychopathic.

Ignorance and E-Desires

It is now time to revise my notion of *e*-desires in light of our discussion of evil, ignorance and self-deception. I have argued that, even though we do not truly *desire* significant harm for an unworthy goal in cases of self-deception, since we falsely believe that the harm is insignificant or that the goal for which we cause the harm is a worthy one, our ignorance is largely a matter of our own doing and thus is indefensible and does not preclude us from evildoing.

Our ignorance would be defensible if, *given the information readily available to us, it would seem to any unbiased person who had similar cognitive and deliberative powers that our false beliefs were true.*²⁹ The central idea of defensible ignorance is easy enough to understand: we cannot be expected to have information that does not exist or that is unavailable to us. However, more must be said about the role played by the cognitive and deliberative powers of unbiased people in defensible ignorance and about what I mean by "information readily available to us."

Since by my understanding of defensible ignorance we are judged relative to people with similar cognitive and deliberative powers, those of us whose cognitive and deliberative powers are highly developed are held to a higher standard than are those of us whose cognitive and deliberative powers are less developed. For instance, we should expect a supreme court judge to be better able to assess information relevant to the worthiness of a goal for which she desires to cause serious harm than a seventeen year-old high school drop-out. However, as a bare minimum, to do evil we must have the cognitive and deliberative powers required for moral agency. To be a moral agent we must be able to obtain correct information from the world through our senses (to the extent to which normal human beings can obtain correct information through their senses) and to draw basic inferences from this information.³⁰ People suffering from cognitive and deliberative deficiencies, such as those associated with schizophrenia, cannot obtain accurate information from the world and/or draw basic inferences; thus, they are not moral agents and are defensibly ignorant.

The notion of defensible ignorance, as expressed above, assumes that, given the same information and the same cognitive and deliberative powers, unbiased people will draw the same conclusions. If people with the same cognitive and deliberative powers draw significantly different conclusions from the same information this is the result of a bias. A bias is a preference for one conclusion over another based solely on self-interest or a desire that cannot be supported by reasons acceptable to nonbelievers. According to my notion of defensible ignorance, biases should have no weight in moral deliberation.

By "information readily available to us," I mean information that we could be expected to acquire given our abilities and our current environment. Just how much effort we can be expected to put into acquiring the relevant information depends upon the sort of action we intend to perform. Two factors that are particularly relevant are the moral significance of the proposed act and the amount of expertise required to make an informed decision about whether the goal for which we intend to cause harm is a worthy one. For instance, if we intend to kill hundreds or thousands of human beings because they are irrevocably evil and it is the will of God that they be killed, then we should make a considerable effort to find out whether these human beings are in fact irrevocably evil and whether it is the will of God that they be killed since deciding whether to kill hundreds or thousands of human beings is so morally important. Thus, if we have the opportunity to interact

with our potential victims, we should consider very carefully whether their overall behavior is indicative of evilness. We should also seek out the advice of experts from disparate positions to determine which view makes most sense of the evidence. If after assessing the available evidence it is still unclear whether the group in question is irrevocably evil and whether it is the will of God that they be killed, we should refrain from killing since we must be quite certain before acting on such a morally significant decision. Our ignorance about the value of killing hundreds or thousands of human beings would certainly be indefensible if we turned away from, or made little effort to acquire, evidence that was opposed to the killing.

If we are considering whether to make a judgment about the worthiness of a goal which requires training or expertise that we do not have, we should either acquire the requisite training or expertise or else not make the judgment. For instance, I should not make a judgment about whether dumping some bio-hazardous material into a river will cause significant harm since I am not an expert in environmental science. If I do make such a judgment and I am wrong, my ignorance is indefensible even if I seek out relevant information to the best of my ability. To be justified in making this judgment I would need to first acquire the requisite training and then seek out the relevant information. This is not to say that to avoid being indefensibly ignorant we must become an expert in every field, but rather that we are required to refrain from making judgments when it should be obvious that we are incapable of making an informed judgment.

In sum, our ignorance is defensible only if it follows from a reasonable assessment of available information relative to our own cognitive and deliberative powers. Self-deceptive ignorance is indefensible and does not preclude us from evildoing because it does not follow from a reasonable assessment of available information, but rather, from a desire to avoid the truth about morally important facts. Thus, according to the revised Desire Account of Evil, we act evilly when we have an effective desire for someone else's significant harm (or for what cannot defensibly be believed is not significant harm) for what cannot defensibly be believed to be a worthy goal.

III. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that ignorance is only a legitimate excuse for alleged evildoing in cases where the alleged evildoer is ignorant of particulars in practical syllogisms for defensible reasons. It is defensible to be ignorant of particulars when any unbiased person with similar cognitive and deliberative powers would be ignorant of these particulars given the information readily available. I have argued that ignorance of particulars is not a legitimate excuse for alleged evildoing if the ignorance has resulted from self-deception. I contend that the ignorance of the 9/11 terrorists was more than likely of the self-deceptive variety. Thus the 9/11 terrorists

caused significant harm from an effective desire for that harm for what could not defensibly be believed to be a worthy goal. That is, they acted evilly.

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Notes

1. Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ernesto V. Garcia, "A Kantian Theory of Evil" *The Monist: An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry* 85 (2002): 194–209; Eve Garrard, "The Nature of Evil," *Philosophical Explorations: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action* 1 (1998): 43–60; John Kekes, *Facing Evil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); John Kekes, "The Reflexivity of Evil," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15 (1998): 217–232; Hillel Steiner, "Calibrating Evil" *The Monist: An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry* 85 (2002): 183–193; Laurence Thomas, *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).
2. I get the term 'effective desire' from Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Reason," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5–21.
3. Eve Garrard, "The Nature of Evil," 44–46.
4. I make this criticism of Kekes for a different purpose in a footnote in my paper, "The Apparent Banality of Evil," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 34 (2003): 364–376.
5. Kekes, "The Reflexivity of Evil," 17. See also, Kekes, *Facing Evil*, 45–64.
6. Kekes, "The Reflexivity of Evil," 17.
7. According to Aristotle pleasure has no intrinsic value on its own. Pleasure in a good activity is good and pleasure in a bad activity is bad. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald, (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999), Book X, Section 5, 1175a22–1175b35, 282–284. Others such as Thomas Hurka argue that even pleasure in a bad state of affairs has some value as pleasure. See his *Virtue, Vice and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 149–150. My sense is that pleasure in itself is always valuable but that when combined with other states of affairs it can make for the worst sorts of wholes. However, I will not argue for this position here.
8. I do not have the space here to argue that the moral concept of evil is distinct from the concept of wrongness. Roughly the idea is that even very wrong acts (according to whatever theory of wrongness you choose) may not be evil because they lack either the despicable motivation or the significant harm required for evil.
9. For more about the Desire Account of Evil Character see my "The Apparent Banality of Evil."
10. I thank David Copp and Charles Mills for pointing this out to me during the question period at the presentation of my paper "The Apparent Banality of Evil," *Eighteenth International Social Philosophy Conference*, University of Eastern Michigan, Ypsilanti, Michigan (July 26–28, 2001).

11. This is not entirely true. Very shortly I will consider circumstances where we are blamed for mistaking the facts.
12. I want to distinguish this sort of evildoer from the sort who judges that someone else's significant harm is very disvaluable and that his own pleasure is comparatively trivial, yet desires the harm for his own pleasure anyway. By contrast, the person I have in mind here thinks he is acting for the greater good but is mistaken because he evaluates poorly.
13. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Section 1, 1110b27–1111a20, 55–57; Section 5, 1113b30–1114a30, 65–67.
14. Jane Corbin, *Al-Qaeda: In Search of the Terror Network that Threatens the World* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002), 208; Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (London: Hurst & Company, 2002), 88–89; Paul L. Williams, *Al Qaeda: Brotherhood of Terror* (New York: Alpha, 2002), 8–11, 151–161.
15. Corbin, *Al-Qaeda*, pp. 111–205.
16. *Ibid.*, 154.
17. *Ibid.*, 154–155.
18. *Ibid.*, 205–214
19. *Ibid.*, 178–190, 207.
20. Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda*, 229–230
21. Corbin, *Al-Qaeda*, 208–210.
22. *Ibid.*, 111–210.
23. Mike W. Martin, *Self-Deception and Morality* (University Press of Kansas, 1986), 13. Michelle Moody-Adams refers to ignorance of this sort as “affected ignorance.” See her “Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance,” *Ethics* 104 (1994): 291–309.
24. David Jones, *Moral Responsibility and the Holocaust* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 81–84.
25. *Ibid.*, 82.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Williams, *Al Qaeda*, 10.
28. Corbin, *Al Qaeda*, 208.
29. My account of the reasonableness or defensibility of beliefs is inspired by Laurence Thomas's discussion of what makes a person's moral views defensible in his *Living Morally* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 9–10. I have also borrowed the terms ‘cognitive powers’ and ‘deliberating capacities’ from David Jones in his *Moral Responsibility in the Holocaust*, 28–29. I thank anonymous reviewers for *Social Philosophy Today* for their critical comments on my notion of defensible ignorance.
30. I give a similar characterization of moral agency in “Toward a Theory of Evil Acts: A Critique of Laurence Thomas's Theory of Evil Acts,” in *Earth's Abominations: Philosophical Studies of Evil*, ed. Daniel M. Haybron, Value Inquiry Book Series (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 58. By basic inferences I mean for example modus ponens and universal instantiation.

Beyond Retribution: Reasonable Responses to Terrorism

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Abstract: The very nature of terrorism and the context in which it typically occurs make responding to it much more complicated, morally speaking, than responding to conventional military attacks. Two points are particularly important here: (1) terrorism often arises in the midst of conflicts that can only be resolved at the negotiating table; (2) responses to terrorist acts almost always present significant risks to the lives and well-being of noncombatants. The history of the Israel-Palestinian conflict suggests that its resolution will only come through negotiation. However, Israel has an obligation to secure the safety of its citizens. In this context, responses to terrorism must be judged, morally speaking, by how well they balance the following competing aims: (1) protecting the lives of potential victims of terror; (2) protecting the lives of noncombatants living among the terrorists; and (3) preserving the possibility for negotiating the end of the conflict. My aim in this paper is to show that responses against terrorists need not be retributive in aim, and can therefore satisfy these competing demands.

I. Introduction

In a conventional war, a morally justifiable and useful strike at the enemy might be an attack on supply lines, armaments depots, or, in many cases, an attack against clearly identifiable combatants. But the very nature of terrorism and the context in which it typically occurs make responding to it much more complicated, morally speaking, than responding to conventional military attacks. Two points are particularly important here. First, terrorism often arises as a response to, and in the midst of, conflicts that can only be resolved at the negotiating table. Second, responses to terrorist acts almost always present significant risks to the lives and well-being of noncombatants. The current Palestinian-Israeli conflict is an example of a case in which both of these points are relevant: terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad—that clearly pose a threat to innocent civilians—knowingly and willingly set up a base of operations inside densely populated urban areas, making