



# Praxiology of evil: Thinking about threats and their effectiveness

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## RÉSUMÉ

Comment rationnellement peut-on imaginer les stratégies de menace, si l'on veut influencer les actions d'autrui? Dans cette conférence l'auteur essaie de montrer que les menaces de coercition ne fonctionnent pas dans des situations duelles sans contexte social. Il montre qu'elles fonctionnent seulement si on ajoute des éléments sociaux comme les institutions. En d'autres termes, les menaces efficaces entre sujets rationnels fonctionnent seulement si elles sont confortées par les institutions. C'est une sorte d'argument Hobbésien qui montre que dans l'état de nature le pouvoir social n'existe pas. Le pouvoir social est une construction sociale

*Mots-clés* : menace, coercition, méchanceté, cruauté, institution sociale

## ABSTRACT

How can one rationally imagine the strategies of threat if one wishes to influence the actions of others? In this paper, the author attempts to show that threats of coercion do not function in dual situations without a social context. He shows that they only function if one adds social elements such as institutions. In other words, the effective threats between rational subjects function only if they are reinforced by institutions. It is a type of Hobbesian argument which shows that social power does not exist in the natural state. Social power is a social construction.

*Keywords* : threat, coercion, evil, wickedness, social institution

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## **I. INVISIBLE EVIL IN PHILOSOPHY**

Evil has its own charm, its peculiar emotional and affective atmosphere, which can be motivating and stimulating. But it is difficult to find a place for evil in any normal social and cognitive scene; it is as if it did not exist. This is a philosophical scandal, an unmentionable truth. Of course we could, in principle, conceive of evil as a form of irrationality and anti-normativeness, and this may be accurate. But at the same time we should not forget that evil has its own logic. Its ultimate irrationality does not become visible in any limited context defined by its users. If this is forgotten, we become entangled in curious problems about the possibility of a rational agent committing evil. There is no contradiction in a finitely rational agent's committing evil while making full use of his rationality, if his focus of interest is defined by the evil perspective which puts the relevant facts and considerations into perspective. This is what I try to show by focusing on coercive threats and their rationality in a praxiological view, that is, considering their effectiveness and efficiency.

We may start the exploration of this scandalous topic by mentioning certain categories of evil that we must neglect in this short paper (Midgley, 1984, Airaksinen 1999, p. 7-20). In fact many types of evil exist, for instance, negligence, normative error and misconception, self-deception, lack of personal integrity and weakness of the will (with and without guilt and regret), and wickedness of the will proper, or what is sometimes called moral perversity (op.cité). All such distortions of virtue can be called vice. Let us, however, start from the concept of evil. What is the nature of the negative value, or evil? - that which does not fit any Rawlsian rational plan of life? (Rawls, 1971, p. 407- 416). Or that which does not fit certain more specific plans? We will see that evil may fit in certain rational plans of life.

To clarify the point about the rational nature of evil, I will first contrast it with pure error. When we look closely at errors, trying to explain their emergence not only verifying some occasional lapses of, say, concentration we run the risk of explaining one's error in terms of more serious failures. But when a person errs he is not necessarily negligent or guilty of self-deception. The person may not fully understand what is right and good. In such cases we may still be tempted to explain the failure to act according to this moral knowledge as being due to the weakness of the will, which then leads to error in action, if not in planning and deliberation. But errors, at least random errors, do not raise questions concerning guilt, self-condemnation and remorse; this is because error is not wickedness. No guilt is necessarily involved in actions involving random errors, and even if the consequences are lamentable, the agent need not worry about them in any personal sense. Pure error is just bad luck. Some unpredictable causal circumstances interfere with the situation so that the agent's original intentions become inefficient. Thus errors seem to exist quite independently of self-deception, akrasia, and negligence, even though all these intrinsically problematic phenomena also entail a practical error somewhere in their structure. But it is also true that much evil exist independently of any error. Such evil may or may not be a result of a logical confusion. The case of successful coercion indicates the latter case. A coercer needs

knowledge when he plans his actions in a logical manner. Negligence, self-deception, and the weakness of the will are examples of the former case, in which error and illogicality reign.

When explaining evil phenomena we might want to refer to purely accidental errors to diminish the role of moral failure. On the other hand, if we explain moral failures as something impossible or incomprehensible, their apparent wickedness must exemplify mere error, which would mean that no real wickedness or evil exists. This is false, however, as our moral intuitions demonstrate. We need to make room for planned and logical wickedness. Yet the fact that errors are possible without some of the more serious moral failures further reinforces one's feeling of the problematic nature of wickedness.

Simple error has no inherent interest for ethics. If we assumed that all persons who actually fail in the moral sense are just stupid, misinformed, careless, drunk, or otherwise confused, the proper style of moral criticism would be disgust and ridicule. Certainly moral philosophers have been inclined to focus on cases exemplifying real and serious guilt rather than on such negative stylistic attitudes as disgust or ridicule. We should keep in mind that many instances of error and apparent evil are just results of random imperfections without any deeper meaning. It may happen that if such lapses of attention have catastrophic consequences, because of bad luck, then the agent is in trouble.

Let us offer a tentative explanation: we think that wickedness exists, which explains our anxiety and fear; but at the level of moral theory we aim at the good and the right. This is due to the fact that human beings aim at their own personal good and cooperative goals, both because it is natural for them to think of their actions in positive terms, and also because they have learned how to handle their own social problems. Potential calamities emerge only if people do not work together and adopt common goals, norms and values. Therefore, for protective rhetorical reasons, our normative conceptual system is preoccupied with positive notions and even tends to define negative notions as entailing a mere exclusion of the positive elements. Negative notions have only a limited use so that the knowledge of evil is mainly presented in the form of myths, religion, and art. This means that the structure of evil is based on narratives. But the structure of the good is often said to be analytic and open to systematic inquiry from this point of view.

All this may sound speculative, but it helps us to understand the persistent efforts at showing the main types of evil to be logically impossible. Our normative conceptual system is goodness-oriented and also committed to the idea of the good life in such a deep sense that only with the greatest difficulty does it allow us to make sense of bad or wicked things. Perhaps we find a taboo here. It is not really permissible to think of evil in any serious and detailed way, otherwise one may be taken to recommend it. Social censorship works. Artistic and mythological references are of course needed because they are likely to map the terrain and stimulate the mind, but to take evil seriously is to become wicked.

In what follows I discuss a special case of evil in interpersonal relations, namely, the use of coercive power based on threats (Airaksinen, 1998, 1987-88). In this case two rational agents meet and they discuss their relevant positions, as if they could reach an agreement on

how to proceed. This is an illusion however. The moral evil in the situation makes the situation in some sense Anon-standard. But we will also notice that mere irrationality does not make coercive threats successful. Under irrationality the who situation collapses into meaninglessness, as one might guess. What is needed is an coercive institution. It is possible to institutionalize evil. Only in an institutionalized context can coercion work effectively and efficiently. This is a kind of anarchistic conclusion: institutions make evil possible in the praxiological sense. In sum: coercion is a perfect example of rational and logical evil which is not based on error but requires knowledge. Coercion also creates an illusion of cooperation and choice, which tends to hide its true nature, especially in those effective and efficient institutional cases.

## **II. THE ILLUSION OF COERCIVE POWER BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AGENTS**

A basic question of the praxiology of Ahard power is this: How are rational agents supposed to reason about their threat-strategies, if they want to influence another person's actions to their own benefit? In this part of the paper my basic method is that of analytical philosophy combined with praxiology. I assume first that the agents we discuss here are rational individuals who want to maximize the outcome of their actions, in the usual way. Later I will relax this condition in order to create a more realistic situation. In such high stress situations as those of coercion and threats, agents may find it difficult to plan their actions according to the canons of rationality.

I try to show that coercive threats do not work in two-person non-social cases, understood as strategic games. This may sound unintuitive on common-sense empirical grounds and it should be explained why this is so.

Description of coercion:

Agent A threatens agent B by X (beating), when X is a disvalue to both A and B. A wants Y (money) from B. If and only if B does Y, A does not do X. For B, X is a greater loss than Y. Therefore, B does Y, and A is successful. All this is rational. B is able to minimize his loss by accepting the loss of Y and A gets what he wants.

This is not unconditionally so, for the following reason. B has the choice of resisting A. If B refuses to do Y, A cannot get Y. But in this case A is committed to do X, or to realize his threat. But B can ask: Why would A do so? Now he cannot get Y and X as such is a disvalue for him (however small). Hurting B cannot intrinsically benefit A in any way but means, on the contrary, waste of energy and a risk of harm to the agent himself. Therefore A has no motive to do X, as B must realize. It follows that B can safely refuse Y, even when he is threatened by X. But if B is able to refuse on rational grounds, A cannot present an efficient threat. A knows this all, as he is a rational and well-informed agent. In such a situation coercion never existed, against the initial stipulation that it did. A just pretended coercion. Coercion never gets off the ground, so to speak. All threats are just stylistic features in a violent and evil context. They manifest evil, nothing else. Only if B is scared or otherwise irrational, A may succeed.

Such reasoning works only if A is a rational utility maximizer. What happens if he is not? Suppose A may be irrational. Then B needs to reason as follows:

If I refuse, I save Y but X may or may not happen B because A is irrational it is impossible to predict what he will do. X may follow Y. Therefore, I must refuse to Y, because my own worst position is the loss of both X and Y, and I can save Y only if I refuse. I may then receive a beating but I save my money anyway. The worst case is that I get the beating (X) and lose my money (Y). This is what I must avoid.

On these grounds rational A refuses to co-operate with B. A thinks he is in a winning position, and this is so regardless he gets (harmful) X in the end.

The same reasoning is valid even if A is like a sadist and, as such, enjoys X. In this case X is no longer a loss to him. A will do X independently of what B does. A enjoys X, which makes B's decision deterministic and clear. So, B should refuse to do Y. In this way B can save Y. B will get X anyway. Here A's sadism is a form of irrationality as well, not because A's behavior cannot be predicted B it can B but because it is based on his rigid emotions. His emotions are not sensitive to utility calculations, and in this sense they are B in a sense B too predictable. A does X however harmful it is to himself. His emotions which reward him of doing X are so overpowering that it does not matter how harmful X as such is to him. Such emotions are truly evil, as they harm both X and Y. This is evil: it harms us all. Notice that in normal conditions A's emotional tendency to perform X is conditional on the amount of harm X brings about to him. He does not beat B up if he thinks he gets a long prison sentence for it. Yet, if A really wants to do X, he may always deceive himself into believing that he can avoid the related harm. This is what evil people seem to believe. Their emotions make them epistemically irrational in the sense of , denial of truth, self-deception and weakness of will, as I said in the first section of this paper. Moreover, B has now way of knowing what evil thoughts A may entertain in their interaction. B's best choice is always to refuse Y, or not giving A what he wants. A sadistic agent must look irrational to B.

### **III. THE SUCCESS OF INSTITUTIONAL COERCION**

I show next that threats work only if we can add to their descriptions such social elements as institutions. In other words, effective and efficient threats between rational agents work only if suitable social institutions support them. This is a kind of Hobbesian argument which shows that in the State of Nature social power does not exist. Social power is a social construction. This also supports Hobbes's idea that nothing is evil or wrong in the State of Nature. He thinks that social institutions bring about justice and, consequently, the possibility of evil as a failure of justice. Without institution all is chaos of force and violence. For instance, the two-person individual case of coercion is not coercion at all. It is mere violence. My argument establishes rational evil in a more direct sense: threats work only in an institutional setting and this constitutes the rational game of coercion B without mitigating its characteristic evil nature. Nevertheless, my argument is still Hobbesian in a broad sense of the term.

The institutional rational rule of coercion is as follows:

Only if A is an institutional agent is his threat position X convincing to B in the sense that the institution guarantees the realization of X just in case of not Y by B. In this case B should agree to Y B when B knows about A's background. Coercion emerges as a type of effective interactive strategy

If A is an institutional agent with, say, a reputation to lose (informal case) or a norm to follow (formal case), A will do X only if B refuses to do Y. This perfect state of affairs is due to the fact that A's loss of reputation is more important than the disvalue of X. In the formal case A acts according to the preset pattern he is programmed to follow. The informal agent may be a mobster and the formal agent a police officer. For the first type of an agent a failure means the collapse of identity and status whereas for the second it is mishap which, because it is against the rules, must not happen. The same can be said of a professional coercer, such as police. He cannot start negotiating around his threats. Notice here that even if some or even most of the police threats were both legal and just, as threats they would still represent *prima facie* evil. A possible world without threats is better than one where threats exist, *ceteris paribus*. Threats can be justified but they are still evil. Threats aim at intentional harm to persons and they submit an agent under another's will.

A dilemma emerges: (i) When evil is discussed objectively, as if from an outsider's vantage point, the evil-making characteristics seem to disappear and so the object of study becomes distorted beyond recognition; but (ii) if we internalize the wicked position we become wicked, which we certainly do not want to happen. It is too easy to take the formal coercer's viewpoint under the pretext of justice. This could be used as an explanation of the fact that even if goodness is accessible through systematic ethics and the social sciences, evil is not. Evil tends to vanish. I shall try to show that if to a certain degree we can make sense of evil, then we must take a detour via aesthetic regions and myths. This is to say that wickedness becomes a personal style and viciousness a myth, either personal or institutional. A good example is one's reputation as a efficient coercer, or why not as a just officer? These are institutional myths which must first be created and then carefully nurtured ( Laver, 1982).

A psychological possibility exists as well, as follows: A is not a sadist. Only if B refuses to do Y, A becomes specially motivated to act and do X, say angry; and this constitutes the crucial extra motive to X. But we need to ask, why would A become angry. Frustration, perhaps? The problem is that B cannot know about A's psychological constitution in advance. Therefore B's best bet may still be to refuse Y. If B can know about it, anger is a kind of institutionalized social fact. In this case the background institution of A forms B's source of knowledge about A's motives.

As stated above, the crucial decision rule for B is the following one: because he cannot know what A is going to do, B must act so that the worst alternative will be eliminated. Clearly, the worst possibility is such that X and Y are both realized, for example B surrenders and loses his money and still gets beaten. He can avoid this fate by refusing to do Y, or what A wants from him. If B is lucky, no X follows. This is his ideal situation, but he cannot bring it about by means of his own decisions. Now, only if X is an institutional coercive agent, is it rational

for B to do Y. If A is indeed an institutional agent he will do X, if needed, and moreover he will not do X when he gets Y. This would ruin his reputation as well, or be against the rules. This is to say that institutional threats and coercion can be effective and efficient to the degree that they become invisible. Both agents know the rules of the game even before it begins and both are able to anticipate their opponents' actions so that no explicit threat need to be issued and no resistance is even considered. In a sense, B becomes an institutional victim who may fail to notice this fact. Evil is then fully embedded in an effective and efficient action context which is cemented by the relevant institutions. This is why so much of all the evil is not visible. It is part of a rational, social plan of life and its professional embodiment. Threats become invisible and in a sense accepted.

From the praxiological point of view this is to say that threats can indeed be Efficient and Effective, in Professor Wojciech Gasparski's sense ( Gasparski, 2000, p. 366-377). I do not discuss his third E, which is ethics. Instead I showed that the efficiency of threats can be evaluated only in a fully social context. In an ideal case threats need not be presented at all, since all agents know them anyway. This is a standard case in a society where hard social power is well organized and established. Effectiveness, or the goal directedness of action, presupposes that the coercer and his subject person share the social reality where they act so that both sides understand what can be done and what cannot. For instance the coercer must know what the victim is afraid of and what he considers a negative value. Because this is so difficult, many threats are based on violence, which is a universally feared disvalue. In this way my approach combines praxiology and the analysis of social action and its institutions.

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