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In this essay I question an assumption of Card’s, which seems to place the (Kantian-style) ethical in a directive relationship with respect to the political. I call attention to the rupture between the two as a marker of modernity and suggest that the political is not only a sphere of power but also a value-sedimented field, with the values in question developing historically as in the case of liberal democracy.

In her recent book, The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil (2002), Claudia Card offers what she takes to be a particular “conception” rather than a general “concept” (5) of evil that centers on atrocities as the key to an understanding of evil. When explaining her choice, Card states that atrocities “are uncontroversially evil,” and are writ so large that their examination makes it easier to identify and appreciate “the core features of evils.” Atrocities qua evils also, according to Card, “deserve priority of attention” (9).

For Card, the priority that has to be accorded to atrocities follows from their being not only uncontroversially evil because nothing about the kind of intolerable harm and culpable wrongdoing that they involve is debatable (4), but also because of their scale compared with other “wrongdoings,” some of which might even be “trivial” (7). Card’s assignment of priority to evil and its justification implies that wrongdoings can be meaningfully distinguished from one another and that the distinctions made carry certain weights. And indeed Card believes, for example, that the murder of one person, even if itself a possible paradigm of evil (9), is a lesser wrongdoing than a genocidal massacre, which in addition to multiplying murders is intent on the extinction of a genus. She also believes, to use another example, that the systemically produced poverty that deprives many children, especially outside the core countries of the capitalist global system, of the basics needed to make life tolerable is a worse wrong than gender-based wage inequity without the same effects experienced by many women in the core countries (109).
To the extent that wrongdoings can be distinguished from one another and graded, it makes intuitive sense that they ought to command a different kind of response. The logic in question is the same as that underlying the legal ranking of offenses and of the punishments associated with them, though Card, in accordance with her idea of forward-looking responsibility, is concerned less with punitive measures than with actions that might ameliorate and prevent wrongdoings. Like offenses considered more grave and as a result given more severe punishments, evils, and especially brutal ones, are to be ameliorated and prevented first. For Card, being given this kind of priority ultimately does not mean that attention to wrongdoings is to be ordered lexically so that evils are to be “addressed as fully as possible before giving attention to other matters,” but rather that “over time” (108), significant attention is devoted to evils, “whatever else we do” (106).

I am in sympathy with Card’s position, which I hope I have shown and will continue to show, is quite nuanced. What I am not certain about is what I think is an assumption that Card has about the linkage of the ethical and the political. This linkage can be formulated in two alternative ways, both capturing the guidance of the political by the moral. One way to understand this guidance is in the form of an application—hence the derivation from a moral theory of conclusions regarding politics. Alternatively, the guidance can be understood as a function of the subsumption of the political under the ethical, with the moral necessarily configuring the political and dictating its logic.

Card describes herself as morally motivated to explore evil. She portrays the secular philosophical thinking about evil as belonging with moral theory and pursued by moral theorists. In this vein Card analyzes several classical philosophical treatments of evil in *The Atrocity Paradigm*, which she represents as offering a secular moral theory of evil, and she positions her own ideas about evil in the midst of other moral ideas about evil (4, 50). In addition, the concept of evil is for Card very much a moral concept (12). At the same time, Card does not hesitate to deploy the idea of evil so as to direct not only individuals but also social justice movements and social institutions toward its prioritization. In the manner appropriate for them, all should, according to Card, prioritize evil. Doing so, Card argues, represents for individuals and organizations alike a more holistic and “higher order choice,” a choice not merely about one or another action but of a general kind of attitude that frames other choices (110–11). It is also a choice that links individuals and organizations, since it is through their formation and support that individuals act best to implement their choice. The fact that organizations can channel and augment the relatively small acts of many opens up the possibility that the best action for individuals can be reasonably effective without requiring self-sacrifice (110).

I am not raising questions regarding the linkage of the moral and the political because I believe that the two should be kept apart. To the contrary, I believe that the separation of ethics and politics that is a constitutive aspect of Western
modernity is problematic. But, I am not comfortable with a response to this problem that posits morality or ethics in a regulative or even constructive role in relation to politics. To situate ethics in relation to politics in this way implies that politics itself is necessarily void of norms and values, or put differently, that the nature of politics is such that there are no uniquely political norms and values. This seems to me to reinstitute the most troubling of the conceptions of politics put into question by problematizing the modern Western separation of ethics and politics, namely, the realist conception that asserts that what politics is objectively about is interests and power, even if sometimes these are cloaked in the language of justice, rights, and the like.

The realist conception of politics is, however, not the only legacy of Western modernity to the theorization of politics. Competing with it is a conception of politics in liberal and democratic, or liberal-democratic, terms that in tension with each other emphasize the rule of law, individual liberty, human rights, as well as equality, plurality, and popular sovereignty, which mixed together in a variety of ways articulate an assortment of possible ideas of justice. The liberal-democratic conception of politics is political because it is concerned with the conditions of possibility of a relatively peaceful even if agonistic cooperative sociality and is neutral with respect to conceptions of the good life beyond this.

Because the liberal-democratic conception of politics involves valuing something, be it the essentially liberal rule of law, individual liberty, and human rights, or the essentially democratic, equality, plurality, and popular sovereignty, and it is not neutral with respect to the conditions of possibility of peaceful even if agonistic cooperative sociality, the claim that it is a political and not a moral conception of politics may seem rather strange. After all, it does proffer some notion of the good, in this case the good society. Yet, I want to insist on this point because I think that the liberal-democratic conception of politics as a political conception, a conception that ranges over the domain of politics, is among the historically contingent accomplishments of Western modernity. Put differently, while I see the separation of ethics and politics that is a constitutive aspect of Western modernity as problematic, I do not think that the formation of a political sphere proper, which is part of the separation of ethics and politics, is problematic. To the contrary, such a sphere is desirable, in particular when the political sphere is conceived not in realist but in liberal-democratic terms, namely when it is conceived in the value-laden, normative terms of the rule of law, individual liberty, human rights, equality, plurality, and popular sovereignty.

Though I want to preserve a political conception of politics, I want to suggest, with a postmodern nod to Aristotle and Hegel, that because morality or ethics and politics are facets of praxis, or purposeful normative human activity, there might be ways to bridge them without undermining what is important
about their respective autonomies. Perhaps a commitment to attend to evil is a bridging norm. Card seems to hint at the possibility that this is so by mentioning very briefly Avishai Margalit’s ideal of a decent society (62) and returning to the idea of decency again when she discusses the prioritization of addressing evils, which she redescribes as the prioritization of decency (96).

Still, I am not certain about this, and something in Margalit’s work reinforces my caution. Margalit’s notion of decency is unlike that of Card’s. For Margalit as for Card, decency is a moral notion. But Margalit thinks of the decent society in institutional terms: it is a society “whose institutions do not humiliate people” (1–2). He distinguishes between the decent and the civilized society, taking civility to mark the relations of individuals; it is the civilized individual who does not humiliate people. While Margalit gives no reason for drawing this distinction and notes that under certain conditions the distinction between decency and civility is blurred, and while in addition it may even seem that he misses something by distinguishing between the decent and the civil, it is possible that, even if in a confused manner, Margalit is getting at the division between the political and the ethical or moral.

Put differently, I think that Margalit’s distinction between the decent and civilized society is important. By defining decency institutionally and distinguishing between the decent and civilized society, Margalit performatively implies that the normative language used to discuss the same problem, in his case that of humiliation, should be different enough when the problem is viewed in the context of individual actions or the actions of collectives or institutions. This should apply, I think, to the problem of evil too.

Notes

1. Card relies on a distinction drawn by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*. For Rawls a relationship of instantiation exists between a “concept” and a “conception,” though not necessarily one that affirms all the logical consequences of instantiation. Card might be weakening this relationship further as is suggested by her assertions that evil is a “family resemblance” concept, which entails that there can be only conceptions and no concept of evil.


3. This has been commented on not only conservatively but also in a manner that promises a possible non-nostalgic alternative, beginning in a sense with Hegel’s critique of Kant’s position clearly expressed in “The Metaphysical Elements of Justice” (in German, 1797) in *The Phenomenology of Mind*. See discussion by Seyla Benhabib in *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*. For another version of the comment see Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*.

4. For discussion of the transformation of the concept of politics that results in the realist conception see Maurizio Viroli, “The Revolution in the Concept of Politics.”
Though not focused exactly on the same issue, for a supportive and extremely detailed treatment of changes that have taken place since the thirteenth century see Quinton Skinner’s *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought*.

5. See Chantal Mouffe’s *The Democratic Paradox*.

6. For a clear current statement of this sense of what is political see John Rawls’s *Political Liberalism*.

7. Rawls himself actually claims that it is at the same time a moral conception different from other moral conceptions by scope (1993, 175).

8. Card’s reference is to Avishai Margalit’s *The Decent Society*.

9. Margalit believes that moral terms are terms of sensibility (290–91), a quality that people can but institutions cannot possess. This is so at least if one understands sensibility as, borrowing from Heidegger, an attunement, a modality of being in the world that colors perceptions and configures one’s comportment, or, even if one borrows from Aristotle instead and thinks of decency, perhaps loosely, as a virtue or even a metavirtue, hence, a moral or ethical disposition.

References


