
Original Article

Appointing evil in international relations

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Abstract This article examines how evil has been conceptualised in the discipline of international relations and contributes to a body of critical literature that treats evil as a legitimacy bestowing label. By drawing on securitisation theory, it suggests developing a performative approach to evil as an alternative to descriptive and normative approaches. It is argued that such an approach would not only be valuable for understanding the effects of naming and grading evil, but also fulfils three additional functions. First, it facilitates a shift away from applying intention as the primary measure for determining matters of guilt and condemnation. Second, it challenges the privileged position of the powerful when appointing particular phenomena/adversaries as evil. Finally, it provides an analytical starting point for understanding conflict constellations where different parameters of legitimacy seem to clash. This last function requires particular sensitivity towards the audience and the cultural context of ‘evilising’ moves.

International Politics (2014) **51**, 492–507. doi:10.1057/ip.2014.22;

published online 16 May 2014

Keywords: evil in IR; just war; performative theory; securitisation; ethics and IR

Introduction: The Political Significance of Evil

In international politics labels such as ‘evildoer’, ‘axis of evil’ or ‘the great Satan’ are familiar. Political usages of evil denote that the adversaries are beyond reach and the realms of rational dialogue and negotiation, in fact beyond politics. An efficient rhetorical instrument, it would seem. Still, the academic attention towards the process of appointing evil is not just prompted because it is part of political propaganda, but also because the naming process enables implementing particular measures against the evil in question.

This article advances a research agenda on performative evil that can be helpful in illuminating what I call the *mechanism of proportionality* between means and ends, that is, how the stated purpose of measures such as violence, torture, pre-emptive action and so on decides their appropriateness. It is based on the assumption that both



responses to and justifications of evil are closely linked to the way political actors, the policy community and academics assign evil content.

My outline of a performative approach to evil is inspired by the way performativity is conceptualised in the securitisation theory (ST) of the Copenhagen School of security studies. As a basic trait it differs from descriptive and normative/philosophical approaches to evil by abstaining from taking part in substantial evaluations of what ends justify or ought to justify what means. Instead, it observes the mechanism by which claims to counter evil legitimise extraordinary measures.

An important aspect of understanding the mechanism of proportionality is to understand the parameters of legitimacy that are at play in different contexts, that is, what exactly given cultures¹ and audiences find extremely awful and thus outside the realm of rational explanation, or what is found to be a just response when confronting the appointed evil. Hence, the political usage of evil is not as simple as it sometimes appears to be; on the contrary it is often graded by insurgent groups, politicians and academics alike, and the way this is done, I will argue, resonates with the parameters of legitimacy of given cultures.

This article proceeds by investigating the various ways evil has been part of international relations (IR) thinking. It then moves on to outline a performative approach to evil and its advantages, particularly when it comes to safeguarding the IR community against political bias and cultural insensitivity.

The Relevance of Evil in IR

Political philosophy that deals with questions of evil goes back to the ancient Greeks and thinkers like Aristotle and Epicurus (Molloy, 2009). Writing in the Renaissance, Machiavelli, one of the founders of modern political science, was among the most explicit theoreticians on the topic of evil in international politics. For Machiavelli, evil passions were at the core of human nature and they could/should be repressed only by force. Advocating that there is a difference in public and private morality, he argued that rulers, in his case 'the Prince', should be willing to act according to principles that in the sphere of private morality would be regarded as immoral, including the exercise of brutal force. His claim that even 'good' must know how to enter into evil when forced by necessity (Machiavelli, [1469–1527] 1985) has become a cornerstone for the end-justifies-the-means doctrine in *Realpolitik*. In some academic just war literature, this doctrine reappears in more moderate versions that are more restrictive and critical of what types of ends justify what means, also means that otherwise would be considered evil.

In political thinking and in IR, evil has been one of the main issues in discussions on the relationship between politics and morality. Though there is a contemporary shift in how IR has come to understand the problem of evil, evil was predominantly seen as an intrinsic part of politics until the mid-twentieth century. For instance,

Morgenthau, one of the main founders of the realist school in IR, wrote about the 'ubiquity of evil' in politics (Morgenthau and Thompson, 1985, p. 165; Wong, 2000; Molloy, 2009) and implicitly challenged the Machiavellian claim relating evil to human nature. Instead, he argued that evil was tragically present in *all political action* (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 203). For ancient writers like Aristotle and for modern political theorists like Morgenthau and Carr, evil in international politics was connected to either *Machtspolitik* or *man's lust for power*. Perhaps this tendency to relate politics to evil was shaped by the hegemony of a religious discourse that wanted to keep religion clean from the corruption of politics – a discourse that with the popularisation of the secularisation thesis in the social sciences met a strong counter-discourse about keeping religion out of politics in order to protect the sanity of politics rather than the purity of religion (Sheikh and Wæver, 2012).

Notably, normative voices that argue for more morals to guide politics have based their critique of realist assumptions on the same basic perception of politics as being intrinsically evil, while apparently widely acknowledging this as a correct diagnosis of the nature of politics. Central proponents of the English School inspired by, among others, the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, have most strongly advocated for more ethics to guide political practice based on the realist assumption that politics are prone to evil.

Morgenthau believed that *ethical reasoning* was a fundamental aspect of human nature (as opposed to the Machiavellian emphasis on evil). Yet, he observed a tense dialectics between ethics and politics. He saw ethical justification as the precondition for any political action to be considered legitimate, even though the nature of political action, he contended, follows another rationale than the ethical one (Morgenthau, 1945, p. 5). And the tension, according to Morgenthau, should be resolved by the lesser evil principle. According to Morgenthau (1962), the best a ruler can do is to 'minimise the intrinsic immorality of the political acts. He must choose from among the political actions at his disposal the one which is likely to do the least violence to the commands of Christian ethics. The moral strategy of politics is, then, to try to choose the lesser evil' (p. 16).

Morgenthau revised Aristotle's original differentiation between the 'conditional' and 'absolute good' as a solution to the ambivalence of politics by labelling the former 'the lesser evil' (Molloy, 2009, p. 100). He was sceptical, however, towards the option of issuing absolute ethical judgements of purposes justifying the lesser evil, because these, he maintains, would always be coloured by national interest (Wong, 2000). His relativistic conception of ends stands in contrast to some parts of the contemporary just war literature – particularly those representing a legalistic interpretation of the tradition and treat the just war tradition as a theory – because it adopts the idea that there are universal criteria for judgements and thus also ethical ends that at least Western democracies can agree upon.²

The dual questions about the *nature of politics* and *what drives/ought to drive political action* reflect on two macro-level IR positions. On one side, we have



political realism – with Morgenthau a proponent of its classical version – claiming that the interests of the state or *Realpolitik* can lead to evil, but this would reflect an extension of politics instructed by hard-nosed state interest and not moral behaviour. If justifications in the name of higher ethical ends occur, these must be understood instrumentally rather than as a reflection of the ‘real’ motivations of state actors. Hence, evil is an extension or the plausible outcome of interest-driven states.

On the other side, we have proponents of the just war tradition, which is based on a more idealist vision of why (democratic) states go to war and offers normative prescriptions of when war and violence can be justified. The core proposition of the just war tradition is that sometimes states can have moral justifications for resorting to armed force, and when they do they must display ethical conduct in the course of battle. Two questions are at the heart of just war tradition discussions: When are particular acts of violence condemnable and when can counter-violence be justified? Above discussion, however, is the idea that certain situations can justify resorting to the lesser evil. Even though the central concepts of the just war tradition are ‘illegitimate’ or ‘unlawful’ acts of violence, the tradition addresses the same sorts of issues that the philosophical literature on evil addresses, that is, what is particularly brutal/evil/ethically unacceptable, what are our options for interfering, and in terms of counter-measures, how far is it legitimate to go?

To sum up, evil has, for most of its history in IR more or less explicitly been part of three main concerns: (i) the nature of politics (succeeding the more fundamental issue of what human nature is); (ii) what drives/ought to drive political action; and (iii) when violence and counter-violence can be justified. However, there is also a more topical way of approaching evil, which deals more explicitly with evil in political practice. This recent trend represents a considerable shift away from the initial debate on the intrinsic evil of politics towards a fourth concern: Understanding the legitimacy granting mechanism of claiming to combat evil. While evil has most explicitly been addressed in the first and fourth areas, it is generally a more implicit aspect of IR debates on ethics and violence (the second and third concerns).

Although there is a large vacuum from the mid-1900s to the 1990s in the literature that considers evil, events such as the Rwandan Genocide, the Srebrenica massacre and 9/11 triggered a renewed interest in evil (Rengger and Jeffery, 2005). This interest, perhaps surprisingly, has culminated in exceedingly few attempts to define a core of unjust or evil political action outside the just war literature, and direct pondering on evil as a political concept has largely been absent from the debate. The bulk of the recent IR literature engaging with issues involving evil is chiefly shaped by the postmodern and poststructuralist interest in construction processes, that is, how the evil of political adversaries is constructed to legitimise certain patterns of action.³

Over the last decade, most explicit references in leading IR journals involve analyses of the beginning of the War on Terror (for example, Snyder *et al*, 2009), the majority applying discourse analysis or otherwise examining the use of symbols and rhetoric (for example, Behnke, 2004; Rhodes, 2004; Western, 2005; Jackson, 2005b;

Baaz and Stern, 2009; Solomon, 2009). These case studies present sufficient evidence that the practice of (naming) evil has important political effects and that the ethical justification of political action is an important part of politics, as also pointed out by Morgenthau, but explicit theorising on the performativity of evil is absent despite the presence of all the necessary stepping stones.

Another deficit within this critical literature is that most analyses serve to make the point that naming evil is instrumentally important. One part of the discussions below is based on the idea that developing a securitisation approach to deal with the performative dimensions of evil can take a constructivist or poststructuralist analysis even further by identifying the parameters of legitimacy that are at play in given cultures, thus aiding understanding of why and how the evil that legitimises measures of the lesser evil depends on its resonance in a given culture. Discourse analysis is not an entirely different exercise, but can in this context be seen as a helpful tool to operationalise a securitisation approach to evil.

A Securitisation Perspective on Evil

As indicated in the introduction, the ST of the Copenhagen School of security studies offers a helpful framework to theorise about the performative dimensions of evil.⁴ Central to the theory is the appointment of what we could call a universal dynamics of proportionality between the successful naming of a security threat on the one hand and the extraordinary action implying the deviance from ordinary procedure on the other. Originally described as the process of securitisation (Wæver, 1995), this implies a narrowing of response options in the political realm, because they are removed from the sphere of ordinary democratic politics (where negotiation, transparency and accountability are central). The issue at stake becomes an emergency matter legitimising action that breaks with the 'normal' political rules of order and legitimacy. The theory claims that extraordinary measures, such as torture, targeted killings or other types of violent assaults can more easily be justified if a securitising actor can convince its audience that the nature of the threat demands measures that can ensure the survival of the referent object claimed to be existentially threatened (that is, the nation, the state, religion, fundamental values of freedom, the environment and so on).

This logic is easily transferable to the realm of evil. As other analyses show, proportionality in response to what becomes proclaimed as evil is often based on political announcements about the evilness of the evil, as was the case, for example immediately following 9/11 when torture in public policy discourse appeared as a lesser evil in relation to the ethically justifiable end, which was to combat the greater evil (for example, Jackson, 2005a).

Thus, what we could call in this context a process of 'evilising' the enemy or the threat can be seen as an element of the process of securitisation. Securitisation remains a broader concept than *evilisation*, because the latter can be part of the



process of securitisation, though it is not a necessary condition for it.⁵ If the enemy or threat is successfully framed as evil, it can change the character of the conflict to become apocalyptic, in turn increasing the legitimacy of ‘by any means necessary’. In conflict situations, naming evil thus facilitates securitisation, elevates a conflict to a cosmic war level (Laustsen and Wæver, 2000; Juergensmeyer, 2008) and generally heightens public support for war (Lieberman, 2006). Klusmeyer and Suhrke (2002) and Anderson (2006) confirm these effects of *evilising*, since based on their empirical studies they conclude that the successful naming of evil inhibits the search for secular explanations behind distress and that the users of evil are able to place themselves above principles of accountability because of the character of the evil threat facing them (Klusmeyer and Suhrke, 2002).

Similar to the ST concept of security, *evilising* can also be thought of as a speech act, a performative utterance that *does* something. The idea of a speech act, as defined by Austin (1962), implies that performative utterances do not merely describe an objective reality; they represent actual acts. As Balzacq (2005) explains, ‘they are “performatives” as opposed to “constatives” that simply report the state of affairs and are thus subject to truth and falsity tests’ (p. 175).

As argued below, there are several advantages involved in applying a securitisation approach to evil and conceptualising it as a speech act. First, it facilitates a shift away from conceptualising evil in terms of intentions; second, it challenges the privileged position of the powerful when it comes to the right to name threats/phenomena as evil; and, third, it provides a starting point for understanding conflict constellations where different visions of the world clash and can hence bring more to the table than the idea that naming evil can be instrumental for furthering political purposes.

Replacing intention with action as a parameter for evil

Thinking of the process of *evilising* as a speech act facilitates a shift away from thinking of evil as a motivational factor towards a more output-oriented approach, thus enabling a focus on which *acts* are conditioned by the dynamics of *evilising*. This perspective is compatible with the idea that evil should be judged on the basis of outcome more than on the basis of intention, a view that originated in interpretations of Arendt’s review of the famous Eichmann trial. Arendt’s (1963) evaluation of the Eichmann trial after the Second World War triggered doubt about whether the bureaucrats held legally responsible for the Holocaust had any evil *intent* whatsoever. She observed a potential discrepancy between the phenomenon of evil and the persons responsible for the evil action. Arendt’s observations have left clear traces in the broad epistemological debate about whether evil designates *agents* or *actions*, a controversy that is sometimes referred to as the functionalist/intentionalist debate (for example, Jeffery, 2008, pp. 23–27). The main opposing positions in this debate are the Kantian viewpoint, where evil-doing is a conscious choice based on knowledge

about moral law and thus an outright rejection of it, and those who believe Arendt challenged a Kantian connection between evil as an intentional motivation and the *phenomenon* of evil, thus opening up for the idea that evil has no self-evident responsibility structure (for example, Bernstein, 2005).

This epistemological debate is relevant for IR because the difference in where evil is located is linked to the issue of which parameters we use to decide guilt and responsibility in situations of conflict, and accordingly how conflict resolution is considered. If evil is conceptualised in terms of action (that is, its functionality), it challenges much of the political and academic discourse based on a differentiation between, for example, war actions carried out with a good intention on the one hand and terrorist acts carried out with the intention of destroying good on the other, because both types of acts, in principle, could result in the same evil output, that is, civilian casualties, torture and so on.⁶

Walzer, a widely read and recognised just war theorist, published a controversial text that reflects the challenges involved in defining evil based on intentions. Reformulating the idea of the lesser evil and describing the conditions under which political leaders can deviate from ethical behaviour, Walzer (2004) writes that, 'A morally strong leader is someone who understands why it is wrong to kill the innocent and refuses to do so, refuses again and again, until the heavens are about to fall. And then he becomes a moral criminal (like Albert Camus's 'just assassin') who knows that he can't do what he has to do – and finally does' (p. 45). This is what lies at the heart of his concept of emergency ethics and implies that in facing evil, the application of harsh methods or weapons becomes less condemnable, that is, that certain measures, even evil, are proportional to the nature of the threat and can be justified (only) under emergency circumstances.

The problem with Walzer's argument is that necessity, emergency and proportionality are common arguments in war often claimed by both parties and allow political leaders to apply extraordinary means as long as they can provide convincing arguments about necessity, emergency and proportionality. Implicit in his argument is the Kantian idea of intentional evil, and as Asad (2007) has rightly pointed out, Walzer leaves us with the hard-to-measure concept of intention when searching for criteria to distinguish the good evil from the bad evil. Asad (2007) also illuminates the ethical and methodological difficulties contained in distinguishing between terrorist acts and (legal) acts of war when intention becomes central to distinguishing evil from non-evil political action.

The challenges here are twofold. A well-intended act could in principle have more evil effects than a badly intended one (for example, more civilian deaths). At the same time, operationalising intention beyond the spoken word, for example, political statements of intention, is difficult because there is no established, objective method for investigating whether the soldier who triggered the gun that mistakenly killed a civilian had clean and good intentions when the act occurred. Asking why 'terrorists' cannot also claim to have a higher purpose when the ethical nature of a political act is



being evaluated if a statesman's claim can cleanse acts that otherwise would have been evil reveals a troublesome inconsistency.

If the functionalist aspect of evil, that is, the actions isolated from speculations about intentions, is instead applied as criteria for our judgement, then it dissolves the foundation of the argument where the 'purpose' (and thereby the claimed intention) decides the legitimacy of acts of lesser evil. Hence, Walzer's concept of emergency ethics does not provide a *universal* answer to the tension between morals and politics, but illustrates Morgenthau's point quite well that the idea of the ethical end justifying unethical means leads to the negation of absolute ethical judgments altogether. In practice, the matter of intention and just purpose is then a matter of political definition, and defining emergency situations will always be open to normative political practice. As described above, analysing these mechanisms is at the heart of a securitisation approach to evil.

Challenging monopolies of naming evil

A second advantage of taking a securitisation approach to evil is that it removes the privileged position of the powerful when it comes to the right to naming threats/phenomena as evil, consequently making it possible to see the dynamic, reciprocal nature of a conflict. Klusmeyer and Suhrke (2002) have argued that equating terrorism with the force of evil denies such acts any political meaning, removing them from any comprehensible context (p. 35). A securitisation perspective is not only able to illuminate this kind of instrumentality of evil, that is, what the naming practices of evil enable, but also avoids a bias in conflict analysis by black boxing the question of intention. This means that the state cannot enjoy a privileged position when it comes to evaluations/condemnations of evil despite its monopolistic claim on legitimate violence.

In the wake of the first phase of the War on Terror, Elstain's (2003) analyses are an iconic example of how prone means-end discussions are to political normativity and privileging the powerful. Writing in the same tradition as Walzer, Elstain, also an authoritative influence on just war discourse, explains why the US response to the September 11 attacks in 2001 by invading Afghanistan was ethically just. Identifying herself with scholars such as Niebuhr and Tillich, she argues for a greater reliance on ethics to guide and drive political action. Her argument is framed beyond that of defending American national interests, because as she points out, America took action to deal with an evil considered to be a worldwide threat, namely Islamic fundamentalism that, 'threatens the sleep of the world wherever it is established' (*ibid.*, p. 139). At the same time, Elstain announces that because of its superpower status, the United States is the only suitable candidate for acting on behalf of the common good.

Elstain's critics draw attention to the thousands of innocent victims killed in US acts of war, and thus to the responsibility of the United States for producing the same sort of evil it claims to oppose, a charge Elstain would presumably refuse, because

the 'higher purpose' of defending the free world is her main argument. In any case it displays the unsolved dilemma of dealing with actions that are well intended but end poorly. Similar to Walzer, Elstain's arguments are based on an intentionalist concept of evil, but her critics take their point of departure in a functionalist focus on acts. The controversy triggered by her arguments displays the difficulties of establishing a genuine universal ethics of just violence based on a common understanding of just purpose or ends. Political adversaries can hardly be imagined to buy into arguments of good intention, since evil for adversaries would amount to civil casualties, torture or other emergency measures carried out in the name of good intentions. This is the logic applied, for example when the United States talks about its enemy in Afghanistan, or conversely when Al-Qaeda and the Taliban talk about US acts of war (Sheikh, 2011). Thus, it is symptomatic (in both cases) that evil, when committed by the political self, is dismissed or justified with references to the right intention, but when committed by the political enemy it is pointed out with reference to the evilness of their violent actions or other unethical measures. Another point that Elstain's critics have voiced is the degrading of academia resulting from 'aligning oneself so flagrantly with power' (Said quoted in Rengger, 2004, p. 111). Noting this critique is important in the discipline of IR because it endangers the capacity of the academic field if, in conflict situations, it sides with one part and fails to understand what drives *both* parties involved in the conflict.

Removing the privileged position of the powerful also has implications for the thinking on conflict resolution. If evil is applied descriptively to denote essential claims about the 'radical' nature of the other in conflict situations, reconciliation seems less likely. On the contrary, if evil is perceived as a non-intentional output of given decisions (or even as a by-product of good intentions), there is far more room for manoeuvring in thinking on responses to evil. Hence, how closely evil is related to the issue of motivation/intention has practical repercussions on the policy recommendations arising from an intellectual environment. The foundational difference is visible in the ontological debate within the larger literature on evil that is simultaneously about human nature and the nature of evil. The central issue of contention here is whether human beings are essentially good and become evil only by corruption or whether evil is naturally inherent. This issue has its roots in the theological debate about whether good and evil represent a dualism (as advocated, for example, by the Zoroastrians and the Manicheans) or whether this, as argued by St Augustine, represents a heretical claim, denying the omnipotence of God and the weakness of human beings (Rengger and Jeffery, 2005). The nature of the answer has implications concerning how IR moulds its responses to what becomes labelled as evil, that is, whether evil can be cured or not, for example, is reconciliation possible, can improvement of socio-economic factors solve problems of evil and is elimination the only option?

A securitisation approach that does not look at human nature ontologically fosters more room to manoeuvre in thinking about responses to evil since de-securitising the nature of the enemy (an inbuilt recommendation of ST in the realm of international



political conflicts) paves the way for non-violent action. Note, however, that looking at evil through this prism is not, as critics would supposedly voice, the direct way to moral relativism, since it embraces the (normative) commitment of keeping violence at a minimum. ST grew out of a peace research environment in Copenhagen, a driving force being the de-escalation of conflicts. This said, acts of securitising or *evilising* should not always be regarded as problematic. Ethically, moving issues into a red alert zone can be advantageous. In a sympathetic effort to push global poverty higher up the political and security agenda, for example, Hayden (2007) tries to widen the concept of political evil so that it applies to the wrongs produced by extreme global poverty and not just to the violation of civil and political rights.

Evil as a prism for understanding conflict constellations

A world of difference can exist between what a given actor in a given context considers to be the greater evil, thus removing the barriers from which means are considered legitimate to counter it (Sheikh, 2011). A securitisation approach to evil can be used to illuminate this world of difference and hence go beyond demonstrating the simpler issue that naming evil can be instrumental in furthering political purposes. This is the case because naming evil and appropriate responses to it are deeply linked to what is considered extremely precious in a given culture.

An important though underdeveloped part of the ST framework is the emphasis put on the fact that successful securitisation requires that the securitising actor is able to convince the audience being addressed that the emergency situation requires extraordinary measures and that 'normal' behaviour would be an insufficient way to face the threat. For a democratic state actor, the audience will be the state's population, but for militant movements opposed to the state, the audience would by and large be co-ideologists, co-religionists and potential recruits. In any case, successful securitisation – measured by for example, the mobilisation capability of a militant religious movement – indicates something about *resonance* among a broader audience. Consequently, it also reveals something about how deeply rooted the attachment among the audience addressed is to the referent object the actor is claiming to defend.

ST has been rightfully criticised for being too silent about the cultural context in which the audience is situated, instead attributing too much power to the utterance of security. According to Balzacq (2005), ST is problematic as originally formulated because it has described security both as a self-referential process *and* as an inter-subjective process, thus placing itself between two chairs. Balzacq (2005) argues that effective securitisation remains audience dependent and that successful securitisation only occurs when the securitising agent and the audience reach a common, structured perception or interpretation of an ominous phenomena/the threatening nature of the referent object (pp. 177, 181).

Analysts must take into consideration the psycho-cultural disposition of the audience and the power that both the speaker and listener bring to the interaction (Balzacq, 2005, p. 172), in addition to the discourse of the securitising actor. The ability of securitising actors to identify with the audience's feelings, needs and interests or to capture the *Zeitgeist* based on collective memory, social views, trends and ideological and political attitudes is thus important because these elements constitute the cultural context in which the audience is situated (Balzacq, 2005, p. 186). Hence, in an analysis of *evilising* moves, contextual and non-linguistic factors need to be incorporated, that is, the social field in which the rhetorical game takes place, if illuminating the conditions under which successful *evilisation* can take place or if explaining the lack of global consensus about what qualifies as evil is desired.

Stritzel (2007) elaborates on a similar critique involving putting too much weight on the semantic side of the speech act articulation at the expense of its social and linguistic relatedness (p. 358). In his advocacy for what he calls an externalist position in the performativity debate, he maintains that security articulations need to be related to their broader discursive contexts from which both the securitising actor and the speech act gain their power (ibid., p. 360). What he then moves on to suggest is a three-layered focus that, besides looking at the performative force of an articulated threat, also investigates its embeddedness in existing discourses and the positional power of securitising actors. This combination of the social sphere or the cultural context (of actors, structures of authority, intersubjectivity, audience and other facilitating conditions) with linguistic theory based on Derrida and his notion of performativity is also fruitful for the analysis of *evilisation* and legitimacy.

Political philosopher McIntyre (1988) argued decades ago that moral judgments must presuppose some particular tradition's conception of rationality, and that rival conceptions of justice reflect differences in these traditions.⁷ I argue that the successful acceptance of an *evilising* claim reflects the moral judgements of the audience, that is, what is found to be particularly precious and particularly evil at the same time. Though performative acts can be defined as authoritative speech only (Butler, 1997), *evilising* moves only become authoritative insofar that they appeal to the audience.

Moral judgements are often rooted in grand narratives. The principle of freedom, for example is often framed as being beyond contestability in Western democracies. In the United States and Western Europe the doctrine of freedom is especially inclined to become securitised, since the narratives of the revolutions in America and Europe are stories of people dying and sacrificing for a higher cause and a way of life. In the stories about the birth of modernity and democracy, the French and American Revolutions are often portrayed as decisive events in world history, driven by the victorious principles of liberty. In Europe, a particular doctrine of secularism has equal importance and public resonance, because one of the main narratives of modernity, progression and order is connected to the end of the religious wars between Catholics and Protestants that ravaged Europe before the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. In large parts of the



Middle East, the word ‘secular’, on the contrary, would not have the same legitimacy granting connotations. The harsh dictatorship during the Saddam Hussein era in Iraq and Bashar al-Assad-led Syria (both from the secular Ba’ath parties) are illustrative of how secularism can have entirely different connotations in other parts of the world (See also Sheikh and Wæver, 2012).

Hence, the inclination of given referent objects towards securitisation as well as *evilisation*, and towards legitimising the harshest measures in the arguments of proportionality, depends on resonance in a community. In order to investigate resonance the analyst can be attentive towards the sort of analogies, metaphors, metonymies, emotions and stereotypes that are drawn upon (Stritzel, 2007). The bar goes up for what kinds of ‘lesser evils’ can be justified in the name of ‘the greater evil’ in accordance with how fundamentally important and precious the defended ‘referent object’ is in a given culture, and the strength of the narratives and myths that uphold its ‘holy’ status. This means that a securitisation approach to evil can ultimately also indicate something about the parameters of legitimacy in a given culture, *at a given time*. This last amendment is important since parameters of legitimacy are changeable over time and because the strength of the public/audiences’ sentiments concerning a given referent object can also vary. However, the nature of legitimacy structures (based on historical experiences, collective memory or myths) is that they are more permanent than politics, and hence a legitimacy structure *in a given culture* must be conceived of as a hegemonic discourse. These discourses define the boundaries and possibilities for the political appointment of certain actions, issues and actors as evil; hence they are defining for whether an act of *evilising* proves to be successful or not. A securitisation analysis can draw out parameters of legitimacy in given cultures by investigating instances of successful *evilising* and instances where attempts to *evilise* fail.

The question of how much the difference in legitimacy structures matters is not uncontroversial. Whether it is possible to point out universal criteria for evil is debatable (for example, can we not all agree that Hitler was evil, that genocide and child abuse are evil and so on). Although good political (and humanist) arguments exist for promoting universal ethics, attempts in that direction would invariably contain the risk that the discourses on what is universal will be dominated by the powerful and serve to sediment their viewpoints and policies. At the same time, nomination of specific ethical values as candidates for global support often run into the challenges that are an inherent part of cross-cultural understanding. Scholars engaged in the field of global ethics struggle with the matter of how to develop a perspective that can define our obligations to others in a world of difference without being seen as anything other than a Western attempt to impose its particular human rights regime on the rest of the world (Gunn, 2012). The securitisation approach to evil does not take a principal stance in this debate but can only observe instances where clashing interpretations of legitimacy seem to matter. This neutrality can be viewed as a normative limitation of the approach, but it is also simultaneously defining for its value.

Concluding Remarks

This article explored the changing relevance of evil in IR. It appears that evil has more or less explicitly been invoked in fundamental debates on the nature of politics, on what drives/ought to drive political action, on when violence and counter-violence can be justified and most recently on what the legitimacy granting mechanism of claiming to combat evil is. On the basis of the most recent literature on evil in IR, it has been suggested that the dominating critical analyses of evil have laid the stepping stones for developing a speech-act approach to evil, an approach that studies the mechanism of proportionality between evil and the lesser evil, not where/what evil *is*, nor what/who the concept of evil *ought to* be covering.

It has been argued that this perspective is useful not only for the purpose of illuminating the effects of naming and grading evil, but also because it fulfils three additional needs: It facilitates a shift away from using the hard-to-measure concept of intention as a main parameter for deciding matters of guilt and condemnation; it reduces the privileged position of the powerful when it comes to the right to naming particular phenomena/adversaries as evil; and, finally, it provides an entry point for understanding conflict constellations where different legitimacy structures embedded in given cultures seem to clash.

Especially in conflict analysis, the need to develop such an approach is warranted, since it can release the field from the political image that evil is always something committed by the Other and can foster more self-critique concerning the legitimacy standards applied to evaluate the role of 'our own' acts in situations of conflict. These acts always risk being perceived as devilish by the Other, and thus play into dynamics that are important to capture *vis-à-vis* the competing parameters of legitimacy. Purely evil incarnations such as the Joker in the *The Dark Knight*, who reassures Batman that his acts are driven by nothing besides pure evil ('nothing personal' as he claims), remains a fictive figure despite common political attempts to demonise opponents. If the risk of value nihilism is the greatest charge against academic attempts to comprehend the mechanisms of evil, then a research agenda on performative evil can easily escape this criticism by complying with the ideal of minimising the use of violent means in world conflicts. Presumably, the fear of getting charged with moral relativism has prevented IR scholars from theorising the performativity of evil, as I have sought to do through the ST of the Copenhagen School. Admittedly, this path contains the ultimate risk that the devil is found not only behind our adversaries, but also among our own ranks.

Acknowledgements

An initial version of this article was presented at the research workshop 'Evil in International Politics', Frankfurt, 11–12 May 2012. I owe thanks to Stefano Guzzini



and Robin May Schott for their critical comments on earlier drafts. Also a special thanks to Maja Greenwood for excellent research assistance. A later draft was presented at a panel on evil at the 2013 ISA Annual Convention in San Francisco, and I am grateful for the comments provided by discussant Jack Amoureux. Finally, I am grateful for the helpful comments by the anonymous reviewer and by the editors of this special issue, to whom I also owe special thanks for inviting me to explore this intriguing topic.

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Notes

- 1 In this article the term ‘culture’ is not understood as a meta-civilisational category, but is applied as a term denoting that its members share a set of beliefs and notions of validity that serve as a frame for their actions and decisions. Shared meaning can be found in sub-categories of, or a cross-cut of, civilisational categories and faith traditions.
- 2 Rengger argues that the just war tradition has remained relevant in the twenty-first century because it can account for and legitimise Western societies’ decisions to go to war. Attempts to make it into a theory represent the need for ‘a kind of moral slide-rule from which legitimate instances of the use of force can be read off whenever necessary’ (Rengger, 2002, p. 360).
- 3 My survey of the appearance of ‘evil’ in articles published by *Millennium*, *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *World Politics* and *International Security* during the past decade shows that there are also normative and descriptive ways of approaching evil. However, it seems that poststructuralist and constructivist approaches have been dominant in the treatment of evil in IR in the past decade. Yet, it should be noted that part of descriptive posture of evil is found in literature on transitional justice and truth commissions published in journals other than the above mentioned.
- 4 The term ‘securitisation’, coined by Ole Wæver in 1995, was developed into a comprehensive theory in Buzan *et al* (1998). Overall, the Copenhagen School of security studies represents a poststructuralist approach to security and contributes with a broadened perception of security by conceptualising it as a speech act, that is, security as something that is done by uttering it, rather than something that ‘is’.
- 5 The applicability of securitisation is broader and can potentially embrace securitisations in many different contexts, thus referring to processes involving threats to the environment, a company, a nation and so on, and the dynamics of *evilisation* would not always be relevant.
- 6 For this point, see also Asad (2007).

7 Tradition here implies the same as the term ‘culture’ as applied in this article (see Footnote 2): ‘A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined’ (see McIntyre, 1988, p. 12).

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