

Book Review: Making Sense of Evil: An Interdisciplinary Approach.

MAKING SENSE OF EVIL: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH by MELISSA DEAREY
(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 276 pages, £65.00)

The relevance of the concept of 'human evil' is all around us in modern society, as are the dilemmas about how to comprehend and come to terms with evil, and move forward in the aftermath of evil actions. At the time of writing the world was still reeling with the shocking images and realities of the latest 'terror attack'. It began with the attack on the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris on 7 January 2015 and the massacre of 12 people. It continued with a related attack on 8 January, when a policewoman was shot dead in the suburbs of Paris, and on 9 January after several people were taken hostage in a Paris supermarket, with a further four fatalities. In the aftermath of the brutal killing of 17 victims in the space of just three days by French-Islamic fundamentalists, the world sought to make sense of the horror and bloodshed caused by these 'domestic terrorists': 'the enemy within'. The reaction was one of defiance, and vigils across the globe paid tribute to the victims, and championed the importance of freedom of speech. But the newspaper and television reports were quick to explain the events as the actions of 'evil terrorists', and brought to mind the tautology that 'evil actors commit evil actions because they are evil' (see Eagleton, 2010). As Melissa Dearey argues in her latest book *Making Sense of Evil* concluding an action is 'evil' is somewhat of an end point. It is the moral conclusion that fails to tell us much at all about the nature of 'evil', and even less about how to overcome or prevent future 'evil'.

Therefore, I approached Dearey's book with a sense of anticipation. It promised an interdisciplinary and critical approach to the exploration of human evil, with a criminological orientation. Melissa Dearey (University of Hull), with her background in both Cultural Studies and Philosophy, was inspired by her six years experience of teaching a criminology module about the challenge of understanding 'evil'. She was also frustrated by the neglect of evil as a distinct criminological topic. As a researcher and lecturer in the field of human cruelty and evil myself, I have often been disappointed by the limited attention criminology has given to the topic, perhaps dispelled because of the metaphysical connotations, and a reluctance to deal with bigger cross-disciplinary issues such as the nature and origins of cruelty and 'extreme offending'. Popularist, non-scholarly material dominates the field, in part fuelled by the public fascination with 'true crime' novels and documentaries. As an academic, showing too much of an interest in evil, genocide, and serial homicide can be seen as voyeuristic with the implication that your research lacks academic rigour and your motivations are rather morbid. Dearey similarly discusses the controversy that arises from delving too deeply into the study of evil, leaving one open to insinuations that by trying to more fully understand the perpetrators of atrocity one is sympathising with them and paying undue attention to the harm they cause. Dearey, drawing on the work of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, argues that criminologists need to embrace the challenge of understanding evil. Furthermore, she proposes that by drawing on a range of diverse ideas from multiple disciplines we can rethink the

study of evil, and reinvigorate Criminology itself. She poses the important question: 'What can the study of evil teach us about ourselves, society and reality?'

Dearey's enterprise struck me as being both commendable and ambitious, as there is a clear dearth of research and literature of this nature. As a multidisciplinary criminologist myself, with a background in psychology and a keen interest in literature and history, I was expecting great things from this book. The subject of evil is tackled within psychology, but most of the books in the area are conventional in their outlook, drawing mainly on the seminal, but now somewhat dated, work from the likes of Stanley Milgram in the 1960s and Philip Zimbardo in the 1970s. Few go beyond this period of history and develop a more critical perspective, using critical social theory, and even fewer try to integrate these ideas with other core disciplines to which the topic of human evil speaks, such as philosophy, anthropology, media studies, sociology, and politics (to name but a few). I was therefore looking forward to an interesting read. In this sense, Dearey's book does not disappoint. She goes far beyond the popularist, sensationalised and mediated views of evil, avoids the reductionist and essentialist debates that can dominate this field, and engages in a worthwhile scholarly debate. Dearey's text is, however, a challenging read, even for those familiar with a range of theories about the origins, nature and consequences of 'evil'.

The book comprises three sections, each with three chapters, and concludes with a summary chapter that explores the relevance of the ideas put forward for Criminology. The first section focuses on the contributions of theology and moral philosophy. Here Dearey engages with some useful concepts, such as guilt, blame, justice, free will, etc., and seeks to apply them to a modern context. She tracks the shifts in our understanding of evil from the theodicy of Malthus and Augustine, to the 'modern' philosophy of Descartes and Kant. Whilst this was, at times, interesting, I found the philosophical orientation rather dense at times, and quite divorced from both wider historical context (and other non-Western Judeo-Christian constructions of evil) and real world criminological examples. For someone without a philosophical background the debate is heavy going, some of the discussions seem of limited interest (e.g. Foucault arguing with Derrida on their precise interpretation of Descartes), and some of the philosophers rather obscure. Whilst in one sense it was refreshing to explore some new material, I felt there was too much of an assumption that one had already read some of the sources and was already familiar with the philosophical concepts.

The second section looks at evil as a symbol, myth and literary trope using Cultural Studies, and drawing upon, for example, Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutic approach to narrative, and Kristeva's application of psychoanalysis. The way we think about and construct evil was discussed here, and at times this is related (albeit sometimes rather briefly) to modern criminological events and cultural phenomena. For example, the racist police brutality against Rodney King in 1991, and the recent debate over BDSM following the commercial success of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Again, however, some of the material seemed rather obscure, and with no explicit definition of 'evil' I felt she drew in a lot of examples about wider 'deviance' such as

mutually consenting sexual behaviours, instances where there was no apparent intent to harm, etc. that would fall outside most definitions of evil.

The third section is on rather more familiar ground for me, and considers what Social Science has to say about the 'problem of evil', drawing from social psychology, history and political science. It focuses on 'Why people do evil things?' and has more reference to criminological examples and events (including terror attacks and the context of the 'war on terror'). The focus is again very dominated by philosophy, as with the previous section, it relies more on contributions from philosophers at the expense of a range of other theoretical considerations, and individual and dispositional theories are dismissed without further discussion. The pioneering social psychological work of both Milgram and Zimbardo are covered, as is the more recent valuable work of Vetlesen and Staub. With this the focus turns to the power of the situation and social setting, which can enable 'ordinary people' to cause extraordinary harm. This is continued with coverage of Arhndt's 'banality of evil' in relation to the Holocaust and other genocides. This leaves us with the more unsettling notion that we are all capable of evil, given the right circumstances.

This is both an interesting, challenging, and thought-provoking read. But ultimately I was left wondering whether it was overly ambitious; to bring together so many ideas within a slim single-authored monograph. Philosophy dominated the approach, even in the sections devoted to other disciplines, and at times at the expense of some broader (and significant) theoretical approaches and ideas. As perhaps is inevitably the case in such interdisciplinary work, Dearey's own background in philosophy seems to colour her engagement with, and evaluation of, other fields. Such grand designs for rethinking the interdisciplinary study of evil is perhaps better suited to an edited collection on 'evil' combining the work of scholars from a range of backgrounds (see for example the edited collection on serial killing by Waller, 2010). Nonetheless this is an excellent starting point to begin this much-needed debate within Criminology. And as Dearey (2014: 245) concludes, "Perhaps it is time for Criminologists to finally face evil."

References:

- Eagleton, T. (2010) *On Evil*, London: Yale University Press.
Waller, S. (Ed.) *Serial Killers: Being and Killing*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Sarah Hodgkinson (University of Leicester)