

Grappling With Evil Amidst Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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In this article, Mychailo Wynnyckyj details his experience of Russia's attack on Kyiv in the spring of 2022 and then he argues that the notion of individual rights that lies at the foundation of Western legal and political institutions is incapable of dealing with the collective evil exhibited by the Russian army during their invasion of Ukraine

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This lecture was delivered as part of a benefit conference for the Ukrainian academy that Aaron James Wendland organized in March 2023 at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto.¹ The benefit conference was designed to provide financial support for academic and civic initiatives at Kyiv Mohyla Academy and thereby counteract the destabilizing impact that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 had on Ukrainian higher education and civilian life. The lecture has been lightly edited for the purpose of publication in *Studia Philosophica Estonica* and the original presentation can be found on the Munk School's YouTube channel under the heading: "What Good is Philosophy?—A Benefit Conference for Ukraine."²

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Aaron James Wendland: It is an honor to introduce Mychailo Wynnyckyj. Mychailo teaches at the National University "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy" and

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¹ For details more details about this benefit conference, see: <https://civic.ukma.edu.ua/benefit/>.

² For an archive of the lectures, see: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBoanhrBnRErZb1Xoh_BzrH4iaLw9Q6HX&si=IXawYDGA5jP-L5Ua.

he was recently appointed Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies. Until early 2022, he served as Head of the Secretariat of Ukraine's National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance, and prior to that as an advisor to three of Ukraine's Ministers of Education. Originally from Canada, Mychailo has lived permanently in Kyiv for almost two decades. He was awarded a PhD in 2004 from the University of Cambridge and he gained Ukrainian citizenship in 2019. Mychailo is a regular commentator on English-language media outlets, including *CNN*, *Fox News*, *Al Jazeera*, *BBC*, *CBC*, *CTV*, *Kyiv Post*, and others. His book, *Ukraine's Maidan, Russia's War: A Chronicle and Analysis of the Revolution of Dignity*, was published in English in 2019, and in Ukrainian translation in 2021.

Mychailo Wynnyckyj: I want to thank everyone for joining this conference. As Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies of Kyiv Mohyla Academy, I'd like to express gratitude on behalf of our university community to all those who've supported Kyiv Mohyla in the past and to good people around the world who support Ukraine's fight for freedom, independence, and the survival of our nation in the face of Russia's aggression. During the past year, countless students, faculty, and alumni of Kyiv Mohyla Academy have enlisted for military service in the Armed Forces, Territorial Defense, and National Guard, and are serving in special operations. Others have volunteered their time, effort, and financial and intellectual resources to the war effort. We've all heeded the call to defend our communities, our families, and our freedoms from the destruction and genocide that Russian aggression has brought to Ukraine. We honor those who've made the ultimate sacrifice so that we may live.

Public service is really at the core of the ethics of Kyiv Mohyla Academy. We were founded in 1615. Our history has been tied intimately to the history of Ukraine. Mazepa, Sahaidachny, Petro Mohyla, Pavlo Polubotok, Hryhorii Skovoroda, all of these names, which may not be household names in North America, are well known for all Ukrainians and all of them were Mohylyantsi.

During the past 30 years since the collapse of the USSR, Kyiv Mohyla Academy has been a mainstay of democratic values, free speech, and academic excellence. Our university was the birthplace of multiple protest movements aimed at moving Ukraine closer to its European civilizational home. And in two cases, these movements became popular revolutions. In 2004 and in 2013-14. Each of these events transformed the country in its own way. Each affected Ukraine's geopolitical orientation, the discourse of its population, and the identity of its elites. Without hyperbole, Kyiv Mohyla Academy is the intellectual center of Ukraine.

I'd like to illustrate this claim with a translated quote from, strange as it may sound, a Russian right-wing chauvinist. His name is Innokenty Andreev. He's an ideologue who laid the groundwork for Putin's invasion of Ukraine and contributed to the false narrative according to which Ukrainians and Russians are supposedly one nation. He's one of the authors of the imperialist ideology known as "russkii mir", a Russian world, and this quote is from an article published in 2006 under the title, "Russian Language as Shield and Sword". So, I quote:

A project is currently being implemented in Ukraine that is capable in the future of nullifying Russia's influence there in the intellectual sphere. This project is called Kyiv Mohyla Academy. Teaching at this university is conducted in Ukrainian and English. High-quality teaching of the English language makes it possible in principle for students and researchers not to resort to Russian sources, which may eventually result in the removal of all advanced disciplines from the mainstream of post-Soviet academia and synchronize them with modern intellectual trends in the West.

When a Russian imperialist author attributes blame to Kyiv Mohyla Academy for being a leader in shifting Ukraine away from the post-Soviet space and Russia specifically to the intellectual traditions of Europe and the world, I feel proud to have now been part of this university for over 20 years. Without exaggeration, Kyiv Mohyla Academy is one of the key pillars of Ukraine's intellectual and social development. I say this today because our conference is about public philosophy and civic engagement. Perhaps immodestly, I would like to challenge any other university to compare its own engagement with the civic life of its community and its impact on the development of its nation to that of Kyiv Mohyla Academy in Ukraine. We are engaged. Indeed, some would say we are responsible.

With this partisan, obviously pro-Ukrainian position in mind, I would like to make a few comments on a topic that I've been grappling with since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion. The question of the existence of evil. In fact, I would call my topic an attempt to deal with the riddle of evil as opposed to the more traditional problem of evil. What has come to be known as the problem of evil has a long philosophical history, generally informed by religious teachings. What is known as theodicy involves addressing this question. How do we reconcile the obvious existence of evil with belief in an all-knowing, all-powerful, and, most importantly, fully benevolent God?

Perhaps, the best-known work on the topic was written by the rationalist philosopher Leibniz, who proposed that the world that God created, though imperfect because of his having granted humans free will, was the best of all possible worlds and therefore consistent with God's benevolence. This

conclusion is problematic for a whole host of reasons, but let's leave them aside for now.

Unlike Leibniz, I would like to treat the question of the existence or non-existence of evil, not from the perspective of a believer, but rather using scholastic or secular methods. Furthermore, I note that the question of whether evil exists as a separate force having independent agency, or as a deficiency, as Aquinas had it, or a universal quality of every human, as Kant claimed, is not a question that is to be considered theoretical, philosophically abstract, or even in any way removed from everyday life. In the Ukraine that I experienced very personally from late February to early May of 2022, evil was very much present in our everyday lives. At that time, my family heard Russian artillery on the outskirts of Kyiv, and we learned to distinguish the sound of a 155-millimeter howitzer from a "Grad", multiple launch rocket system. For us, evil was not an intellectualized idea or even an arguably fabricated mystical concept. Its instantiation in aggression, destruction, and death was very real.

As we found out later, our experience was mild. Russian soldiers raped children in nearby Bucha. Russian occupiers murdered civilians in Mariupol and in towns and villages throughout the southern, eastern, and northern regions that experienced occupation. The Russians committed atrocities in Izium, Kherson, Irpin, and countless other towns and cities throughout Ukraine. Were these actions not evil? According to last year's Nobel Peace Prize winner, Oleksandra Matviichuk, incidentally a Kyiv Mohyla graduate, for 10 months of 2022, spanning March to December, the Center for Civil Liberties, the NGO that she heads, documented over 30 000 cases of war crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine. The scale of atrocity is breathtaking. What can be its cause? What's the nature of this evil? Does it possess all humans and therefore represent the dark side of the natural human condition? Or instead, is evil a symptom of human imperfection? In other words, a disease, one that, like all diseases, is eventually curable? How we answer these questions has both far-reaching and very immediate consequences.

If evil is a deficiency and humans are fundamentally good, then there is no moral ground to consider all Russian occupiers guilty or responsible for Ukraine's suffering. Culpability should be extended only to those who actually committed crimes that cannot be atoned for. Indeed, according to the view that humans are fundamentally good and that evil is simply a disease, even perpetrators of the worst atrocities should be given the opportunity to rehabilitate. Only those who do not repent or rather cannot be healed should be punished.

This humanistic position, irrespective of its obvious Christian roots, the idea of turning the other cheek, represents a foundational belief underpinning modern values. Since Augustine and Aquinas, Western philosophy has preached that evil is simply the absence of good, and that evil has no separate ontology, in the same way as cold does not actually exist but is merely the absence of heat, so too is evil an absence of good. Hegel and Heidegger supported this claim. For them, evil is privation, deficiency, a condition that is treatable with education, information, counselling, and rehabilitation.

According to this view, evil has no independent existence. Evil can exist only because of the inadequacy of the human will, as sin or error. It can be treated by medication, education, or correction. Sometimes individuals deviate from their natural state of goodness due to psychological illness, social neglect, inequality, and they do things that are not good. Then they should be helped to right their ways.

The view above is that which underpins the Western, or at least modern European and North American, cultural order. When we declare human rights to be universal, all life to be valued, all individuals worthy of respect, in other words, when we argue in favor of the self-evident philosophical foundations of the institutional order, we take for granted, we propagate a fundamental assumption that people are fundamentally good.

Now here's the problem. They're not. Russian soldiers in Ukraine have massacred civilians on their own initiative, without direct orders to do so. Russian soldiers have raped and murdered women, smashed the heads of infants, castrated POWs. Russian field commanders regularly order indiscriminate attacks on civilian houses, schools, and hospitals. Why Russians engage in such barbarism is beyond comprehension if one accepts established paradigms. This is not about sin or error. These war crimes have not been perpetrated by individuals who are fundamentally good, but who have erred. These actions are evil. Russian barbarism cannot be healed or rectified. This is not a deficiency. This is a real manifestation of evil. One that the ethical theories on which Western civilization is based simply have difficulty comprehending.

I turn to the eminent philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who asserted that every human being has an innate propensity to radical evil. Based on my experience, this seems to be a more credible position, though much less comfortable upon introspection. Kant believed that the propensity for radical evil was a consequence of human beings' capacity for free choice. While we have the capacity to choose to act ethically, by which he meant rationally, and with respect for the autonomy and dignity of others, we also have the capacity to act out of self-interest. And controversially, Kant stated that our propensity towards radical evil is a universal characteristic of human na-

ture. It cannot be eliminated entirely. Again, not a particularly comfortable assertion when one places it in the mirror.

However, Kant also believed that we have the capacity to overcome or stifle our propensity towards radical evil. By using reason to understand ethical principles and by practicing moral actions, we can develop the habit of acting out of a sense of duty and respect for others, and thus overcome our natural propensity towards radical evil. While that position is comforting, it forms the basis for a personal ethic to be followed by each of us who strives to live a moral life, to stifle any evil that might exist within us. But Kant's ethical guidance to ourselves provides little help for understanding empirically observable evil in others.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the author of the famous, *The Gulag Archipelago*, seems to have echoed Kant's position and explained its pitfalls. I quote:

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them, but the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. It is, after all, only because of the way things worked out that they were the executioners and we weren't.

Lately, we've heard many voices calling for an end to this war. Certainly, peace is desirable. The killing and destruction should stop. However, for Ukrainians, the peace that eventually follows this war must be a just peace. Universally, Ukrainians believe that the evil that we have faced must be punished and smashed so that it will not threaten us again. And here we are confronted with a problem. For any peacemaker to admit that one of the parties is evil, lacking good, and the other good and lacking evil, or at least lacking culpability for crimes, would amount to failure. Put otherwise, the foundational values on which Western institutions are built would be undermined insofar as they are committed to the notion that people are essentially good. But if people are, in fact, essentially good, then there should intermediary position between combatants that allows for compromise.

According to the dominant paradigm, some measure of good and evil must be present in both sides of any conflict. Each side is said to have interests that reflect its own interpretations of "what is good". The job of a mediator is therefore to find balance between the conflicting parties and to recognize the legitimacy of the interests of each side. In this view, war is never cast as a conflict of good versus evil, its essence is a differentiation in interpretations of good. War is seen as a disastrous form of misunderstanding. Differences between the warring sides can be healed because both are fundamentally seen as good, or at least more or less equally mistaken. Hence to mediate between means to balance, to be impartial, to be publicly neutral, because both sides have sinned or allowed their inherent evil side

to dominate. They must be prompted to see the error of their ways. In the present case, good must be assumed to be present in the actions of Russia, and some evil, mistakes that can be rectified, present on the Ukrainian side. Understandably, this search for balance elicits outrage in Ukraine. Many Ukrainians are asking, when will the world wake up to the evil that is Russia and its regime? Why does the international community insist upon balance when this war is clearly black and white? When will we stop blaming the victim?

The very possibility of these questions requires a rethink in the West of its foundational beliefs. A recalibration of the paradigm on which international institutions have been constructed. That's not an easy thing to do, but it must be done. Evil must be recognized for what it is and destroyed.

In 1946, the International Military Tribunal, which was established in Nuremberg after World War II, to prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity, stated that aggression is the "supreme international crime because it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole". By referring to the accumulated evil of the whole, the judges of the tribunal were referring to the harm and suffering that aggression causes not only to the targeted state and its people but to the entire international community. The harm caused by aggression reverberates through the international system, leading to further conflicts, instability, and suffering. As I see it, this reverberation also affects the philosophical foundations of what we call Western civilization.

The very public brutality of Russia's soldiers in Ukraine, and the very fact that Russia, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is engaging in an unprovoked war of aggression, are not just appalling facts that are to be politically and economically sanctioned. Russia's political leadership has committed the crime of aggression, and its orders have been enacted with vigor by its soldiers and supported by its population. To claim that this is a result of brainwashing by state media, or that the Russians have been duped into being cruel, is to claim that they their fundamentally good essences have been infected. This seems, as a minimum, a stretch. Certainly, to those who lived through occupation, or witnessed the destruction of war firsthand, the portrayal of Russian military personnel as having even traces of good is problematic. Throughout the past year, and for eight years previously, since 2014, Russian forces, and individual soldiers, have been vigorously and passionately destroying Ukrainians, and all things Ukrainian in the areas that they have occupied. It seems difficult to see these actions as reflecting the belief that humans, though they are capable of error, are fundamentally good.

Peace will of course someday come to Ukraine, and Russian war criminals will be prosecuted. If there is good in every person, as the Augustinian

and Aquinian tradition would have us believe, or if instead there is evil in every person, as Kant and Solzhenitsyn would have it, should the defense of, “I was just following orders”, be considered sufficient to excuse the perpetrators of atrocities? After all, according to this paradigm, evil and good are characteristics of the human will, which can act ethically or in error. But when an action is not willful, logically, it cannot be good or evil. Can an individual who acted without intent be held responsible for heinous crimes? Twenty years ago, in the wake of atrocities committed by Serbs in Bosnia, similar arguments were made to justify the limitation of prosecutions by the International Criminal Court to those giving the orders.

There’s another solution to the riddle of evil, but it is not particularly pleasing to those of us seeking understanding, peace, and justice. If we see evil as having a separate existence from the human actor, then we may claim that the perpetrators of atrocities were somehow possessed, and therefore not responsible, a defense analogous to the idea of temporary insanity. On the positive side, such a position would provide conceptual space for a future peace between Russia and Ukraine. After the personified evil has been destroyed, and its supposedly possessed victims released, the innocent people of Russia and Ukraine can live in peace.

When I was writing the abstract for today’s contribution, Aaron responded to an initial draft by asking if, by positing a separate form of agency or an independent ontology for evil, I was arguing explicitly that the crimes perpetrated by Russia and Russians in Ukraine are somehow guided by Satan or the devil. I assure you that’s not what I’m arguing. In the same way as I believe we need a secular account of ethics and morality, thank you, Kant, Russell, and many others, we need a secular explanation for evil. Evil not as a transgression or error, but evil as a driver of action, of what we sociologists call an agency. In a mystic world, that agency would be anthropomorphized in a devil or Satan figure, but we’re not mystics. But it would seem the problem remains, what is the quality and where is the agency of evil? I’m afraid that today I’ve posed more questions than answers, but that too is the job of a public intellectual, to voice the thoughts and fears underlying public discourse.

During the past year, Ukrainians have experienced evil first-hand. As Europeans, educated and acculturated in a humanistic ethic, we have seen and felt an agency of that which we cannot explain. Russian barbarism and spiteful cruelty in Ukraine is beyond comprehension. For the time being, we are coping with this problem or with this riddle by dehumanizing the enemy. We call them orcs, rascists, a version of fascists, moskali. But the war will end, and they will again be our neighbors. How will we move forward? How will

we coexist? Who or what will we agree is guilty for what has been done and why?

Clearly, the extent of destruction, callousness, and brutality will require compensation and prolonged healing. But do we understand what in fact needs to be healed? I fear that without a profound philosophical understanding of the roots of the evil agency that Ukrainians have suffered through during this war, the phrase “never again”, which supposedly was to be the unifying slogan for elites and institutions after World War II, will yet again ring hollow at some point in the future.

AJW: Thank you very much, Mychailo, for an impassioned and intellectually stimulating talk. If you don't mind, I will follow up with one or two quick questions to potentially push you to sketch a positive alternative to the current European understanding of evil that is based upon certain assumptions about human goodness and that serve as the intellectual foundations for our existing institutions.

So, if I understood you correctly, the current model is that evil is a form of sickness, but it is something that can be cured because we are all fundamentally good. But if we do away with that model, what is the alternative? What model for understanding evil do you have in mind?

MW: I'm not sure I have a fully developed answer to that question. At the end of the day, I have to admit that I'm more of a sociologist than a philosopher. But I think it's important for us to understand that, in the same way as the concept of agency was once attributed to individuals but in sociology has now become attributed also to collectivities, when we talk about evil as something that is a driving force for action, it doesn't necessarily have to be a characteristic of the individual as a carrier of agency or a person of free will.

Traditionally, that is how we've been looking at evil. Evil and good have been characteristics of individuals and characteristics of actions of those individuals. But if we now look at collective action, and we look at something that is happening at an institutional level, at a national level, at the level of an organization called an army, obviously actions are still individually based, but they are very often driven by an agency that is not individual at all.

Now that means that agency has become abstract. And if we now talk about the fact that evil and good are characteristics of an abstract agency, then we have a problem of where it is housed. Do we go back to this sort of idea that goes back to mysticism and early Christianity, where supposedly evil is, you know, housed in a devil or Satan that now possesses individuals,

or can we talk about something that's a little bit more complex, meaning a characteristic of a collective agency or a corporate agency?

This causes problems because it raises the question: do we now attribute collective responsibility? Because if we have collective agency, then presumably we can also talk about collective responsibility. But our institutions are always based on individual responsibility. Crimes and punishments are always individual rather than collective.

So, I'm not sure that I have an answer to you except to say that the issue that we're experiencing today is an obvious collective force, meaning that evil and good are characteristics of collectivities or corporations or nations or group actions. And if they're group actions, then the evil and the good as characteristics of those actions need to have another basis other than just individualism.

AJW: Right. Okay, good. Not to lean too hard on the use of "spiritual" here, but there's something like the "spirit of a people". This spirit has agency, the collective agency of a people, and that can be evil in certain instances. Is that correct?

MW: Precisely. As someone living in Ukraine for the last 20 years, I've experienced two revolutions and now a war. I certainly understand the concept of collective agency. When we were protesting on Maidan, when Ukrainians were volunteering, when we have these grassroots movements, which are something that I study and I become absolutely enamoured and fascinated with, we're talking about a collective agency. Of course, the agency is enacted through the actions of individuals, but those individual actions don't have any kind of force unless they have a collectivity behind them. So, if we can talk about a collective agency, then we can also say that that agency has a characteristic of being ethical and working by rules or being evil and therefore working by different rules. What we're seeing in the actions of Russian soldiers in Ukraine, I would say, is a form of collective agency. Now, the problem, of course, is where is the collective responsibility? And that then becomes an institutional problem for Western institutions that treat individuals as the locus of responsibility and that believe evil is an error or sickness that can be corrected or healed and that humans are fundamentally good.

AJW: Got it! I guess the idea would be, in the new account of evil you are developing, that this collective agent is not capable of being healed. It's not sick. It's something else...

MW: Perhaps it is capable of being healed, but it's not capable of being healed

in the same way as we would heal an individual. In other words, it's not through individual education. It's not through individual responsibilities and then prison terms and those types of things. We need to be thinking in different ways as to how we cope with this problem of collective agency that we find objectionable and obviously capable of atrocity in today's world.