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**On the Genesis of Intimate, Incidental, and Sociopathic Evil**  
**(DRAFT)**

This paper problematizes the connection between evil and intimacy and the meaning of this for informal social control. While selfishness and a lack of concern for others are often considered “evil,” the “good” is in contrast focused on altruism and preventing harm to others. Of course, we have wicked acts in everyday life which vary across the spectrum regarding the intimacy they entail. On the one hand are those involving a high degree of intimacy, such as the jealous rage between lovers or intra-familial treachery and abuse. On the other hand are acts boldly attacking the faceless stranger, ‘sociopathic’ in nature, such as serial killings or even modern warfare. In the middle of these poles lies a complex category of deviant acts that are ‘incidental’ in regard to their intimate content, such as pick pocketings or robberies, which arise out of opportunity. Drawing on the literary character of Sueskind’s Grenoir from *Das Parfum*, this paper attempts to address the genesis and normative-regulative conditions of these varying forms of intimate, sociopathic, and incidental ‘evil.’ While the majority of modern crimes are incidental in their intimate content, this very peripheralization of the person in regard to property crimes could be seen as a trend of deintimization. And while most violent crimes occur where there is an intimate knowledge between the victim and the victimizer, shall we view them as resulting from suffocation from too much intimacy or rather a rebellion against the environment’s intrusion on an ideal intimacy? Finally, the third category of sociopathic evil, while being the least common, is perhaps the most disturbing, as it is the very meaninglessness, and lack of normative power, of ‘the other’ which fuels sociopathic acts and allows us to label them as such in the first place.

What is the root of evil? This question has been the plaything of thinkers for ages, and I make no claim to bring us any further in this regard. Rather, I explore the concept of evil *through* the notion of intimacy. How do these two ideas intermingle, and can we, in the end, have an intimate grounding for morality? These ideas will be explored here.

### **The Perfume**

The combination of evil and intimacy, for me conjures the thought of the figure Jean-Baptiste Grenoir from *The Perfume* (Süsskind 1985), a book written by Patrick Süsskind, later made into a remarkable film by the same name. This presentation is based on events from the film. Grenoir was called, to quote, "one of the most gifted and abominable personages in an era that knew no lack of gifted and abominable personages." He is born in 18<sup>th</sup> century Paris and abandoned upon his birth by his mother in the middle of a stinky fish market. What makes him unique is first, his complete lack of a personal odour, which sets him apart as an outsider and a freak, and second, his uncanny sense of smell. Grenoir's profound evil becomes apparent as he eventually comes to murder a long line of young women. But there is, nonetheless, an intimacy in his crimes. At the time before his first murder, his daily life is a routine of drudgery and stench, as he works as a tanner's assistant. One evening, he smells something that turns his life around. A young woman is walking through the streets with a basket of fresh plums, and her scent enchants and dominates him, so that he chases these wondrous smells through the streets, as if he has fallen in love for the first time. And when he finds her, still drunk from her scent, he inadvertently startles her, and when he holds her mouth so she cannot scream, she is smothered to death by his hands. Once dead, her beautiful scent vanishes, and so he resolves to learn the art of making perfume, so as to capture such gorgeous smells in the future. Thereafter begins a long set of serial murders, whereby he kills young women in order to capture their scent within a masterful perfume. Grenoir is not driven by rationality, nor by anger or rage in his crimes. Rather it is an odd sense of passion,

emotion, even love - of scent - that drives him. In an odd way, this makes Grenoir a likable character for the audience, despite our horror at the grisly nature of his crimes and the methods he uses to extract scent from his murdered victims.

The moral lesson of his story, especially from the ending - the details of which I will spare - is clear. While the physiological and emotional power of Grenoir's final omnipotent perfume is plain, it is a power that is also profoundly arbitrary and unjust. Grenoir's pursuit of his instincts and sensual desires, if it were universalized, would build a society that is unstable, risky, and uncivilized. Characters in the story randomly fall off bridges, have their houses collapse just as they have reached success, and die suddenly from diseases in anonymity. In contrast, through the power of his perfume, Grenoir the murderer is able to shape his own fate in a perversion of justice that makes modern morality shudder. The lessons delivered by this story, reminiscent of Freud and Norbert Elias, are that civilization implies the suppression of sensual urges, that instinctual emotions and expressed passions survive only in the barbaric past, alongside its stench, accidents, diseases, and intense cruelty. Modernity, justice, and security are based on rational, not sensual, foundations. In this view, evil acts are an outcome of uncontrolled intimacy.

### **Competing Views on Intimacy and Evil Interface**

In contrast, within sociological informal social control theory, human behaviour is controlled and directed by one's intimate relationships. For example, if one has strong emotional ties with his or her parents, he or she is less likely to commit deviant acts because of a fear of damaging or incurring retribution from those ties in the form of shame, humiliation, or reputation. In other words, valued intimate ties coalesce into an internal moral compass. Much other sociological theory highlights the importance of primary group ties and the cohesive integrative potential therein. Tönnies (1988 [1887]), for example commented on the

power of the more intimate community ties, in contrast with the dangerous instrumental motives inherent within the larger, more abstract society. In this view, intimacy is the genesis of good behaviour, whereby a lack of intimate ties creates anomie and evil.

Hereby we come to a problem, whereby intimacy is seen as both a cause and inhibitor of evil. This requires some thinking through. First, it is helpful to stabilize the concept of evil for our purposes here. In order to proceed at all, we will first have to put to the side Nietzsche's (1989) account, from the *Genealogy of Morals*, in which evil is an invention created by the downtrodden out of resentment for the more noble classes. Therein, those in power are negatively labelled, within a religious discourse, as evil, although they actually are good. I will sidestep this problem by focusing rather upon evil as a shared, almost universal, horror against particular extreme acts. An example for this is murder in circumstances other than self-defence or war, which arouses among most persons a strong sense of condemnation. Thereby, beyond mere deviance, we have defined evil here in a general sense of enhanced wickedness, according to how one person treats another, using murder as our ideal example. And by intimacy, I refer to a relationship spectrum, wherein the close face-to-face relationship and the emotional bonds it entails are the most "intimate." How then can we make sense of such intimacy in relation to evil?

### **Categorization**

I will now categorize evil into different intimate forms. I will describe each category of intimate evil, the motives for such acts, the frequency of its occurrence, its corresponding mode of potential negation and informal social control, the type of shock felt by those hearing of the act, us, and the reasons for such shock. First, we have what might be called 'intimate evil' in which a person might murder someone he/she is emotionally very close with, for example within the family. Importantly, within criminology, it is well known that the vast

majority of violent acts are of this type, where the victim and perpetrator know one another closely. The typical motives, discounting mental illness, for such a crime might be revenge for a sort of treachery, or perhaps as an emotional response to a family ‘collapse,’ whereby the perpetrator ceases to see meaning in life, and commits a crime, such as a murder-suicide, as a result. For such intimate evil acts, what might be a negating force, that could have, in its presence, prevented the tragedy from occurring within the perpetrator’s will? Here, it is doubtful whether greater intimacy would have prevented the murder, as it occurred, in the first place, as a reaction to a *broken* emotional tie. Rather, the hypothetical solution, in intimate terms, of how to negate intimate evil would seem to be less obligation between perpetrator and victim in the first place, greater apathy, and thinner and more numerous ties; this constitutes a lessening of intimacy itself, so that treachery does not call for revenge and a relationship's collapse does not evoke annihilation. The horror we experience when we hear of such crimes is indeed intense; we ask, “what happened to allow it to go *that* far,” or “why couldn’t it have been resolved another way?” The emotional response of us, the audience, is close, direct, and empathic, since we also have close intimate relations, and we shudder at the *treachery* embodied by violence against one we love.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are intimate acts in which the perpetrator targets strangers *because they are strangers*. Some of the recent university shootings appear to take this form. In another example, in the Washington DC sniper shootings of the last decade, the shooters targeted random persons filling up at gas stations. The same has happened with highway shootings, where killers shoot at persons in moving cars as if they are hunting. In another famous case, Florida teenagers attacked homeless persons for fun. This ‘sociopathic’ form of evil is based on too little emotional involvement with the victim rather than too much. The occurrence of sociopathic acts, in comparison to the other categories, is probably quite rare, yet they produce much public attention. The motive for such acts ranges from sadistic

pleasure to a revenge against society at large, exemplified through faceless innocents. The negating force against such sociopathic evil would be greater intimate involvement, since it arises from an anomic lack of social connections. The horror and shock we, as the audience, feel here, is strong but different. We think of the ‘bad luck’ of the person who happened to be sitting in the auditorium at the time the shooter struck, try to understand in vain what pushed the gunman over the edge. We may imagine the perpetrator as a black sheep, the bullied child, the outcast, and his faceless victims are twisted symbols of the ‘broken system’ which he must have despised so much. We see the flaws in the system too, yet why did he fail to see *his* victims as also *sufferers* of social conditions, just like himself? Thus, it is the isolated loathing of the sociopath against innocent depersonalized victims that shocks us.

A final type of evil, ‘incidental evil,’ lies outside the other two poles. Within an incidental evil act, the victim is a stranger, but *not a victim because he/she is a stranger*. Rather the victim is hurt as a side-effect of some other goal, such as robbery. Most property crimes involve incidental victims, where the central motive is not harming someone, but rather victim harm may be seen as instrumental to another goal, such as profit. This type of evil occurs quite often as well, at least in comparison to the rarer sociopathic forms. Hypothetical negation of such a crime might arise through a greater degree of objective profit or abundance for the perpetrator, or perhaps through a greater perceived equality of wealth. A larger network of intimate ties may also prevent further deviance of this type, provided the perpetrator is not nested in a subculture which nourishes such crimes. Our horror at such wickedness is moderate in intensity, as we understand the motives quite well. Our moral outrage is thus mainly rooted within an empathy with the victim of such incidental violence. “They were at the wrong place at the wrong time, we say.” Yet our degree of shock appears to be *lower* for incidental evil than for intimate or sociopathic evil. Is this because intimacy itself is not part of the motive, or is it because we have become more used to human beings

being instrumentalized as victims within economic motives in general, whether related to work or crime?

### **Historical Dimension**

It is also useful to look at these three types of evil historically. Structurally, since previous relations were formerly mainly intimate, the realm of violence and evil, where it was expressed, would have been also linked to the intimate sphere. Therefore, intimate evil is likely as old as time itself. While violence within hunter-gather societies against their own members is certainly rarer than today, it is not unheard of. I have even heard of murder occurring within chimpanzee groups, although it is quite rare.

On the other hand, with modernization, strong trends in rising property crimes are observed alongside the processes of industrialization and economic development, leading us to believe that ‘incidental evil’ is also enhanced over historical time. More importantly, because property relations tend toward the communal within hunter-gatherer groups, one of the leading motives of incidental evil might not have existed to the same extent as within modern society.

Third, the category of sociopathic evil depends on the notion of the ‘stranger’ in order to make sense. Hunter-gatherer societies had no strangers with faces. There was no daily meaningless contact whereby one band of hunters runs into the other while chasing the same band of buffalo, *and they ignore one another*. Because of limited populations across thereby relatively larger open spaces, strangers were transformed instantly into friends or enemies, but in either case, they were *known*. As there were no weak ties and few strangers in the most ancient of human conditions, sociopathic evil is a historical development. Of course, exceptions exist, such as inter-group warfare, which might involve the killing off of a stray

enemy tribesman, if he is seen, but the difference is this: the enemy tribesman, if he is attacked, is killed as representing an opposing group in the name of one's own group, as opposed to a *lone person* killing someone because of the fact that he/she is *faceless*. Attacking the faceless because of the facelessness is a product of the movement from *Gemeinschaft* (community) to *Gesellschaft* (society), whose differentiation produced the faceless stranger devoid of meaning and worth.

Thereby, whereas intimate evil is ancient and old, incidental evil may stem from initial stages of economic and urban development, as economic rationality and calculation began to increasingly infiltrate society. In turn, sociopathic development appears to arise after incidental evil, being a thoroughly modern phenomenon. The rise of sociopathic evil implies that the previous instrumentalization of human beings within the incidental phase is intensified so that persons and intimacy, rather than being merely used as means toward another end, become actually targeted - out of motive of rebellion and pleasure - as objects for destruction, as they are anyways interchangeable and meaningless.

Furthermore, the 'negating factors' that were mentioned earlier regarding the possible hindrance of evil acts are shown to be absurd from a historical perspective. Greater apathy, diminished forms of obligation, and thinner ties cannot hinder 'intimate evil' since this evil arises out of an individual longing for intimacy amid a modern crisis, whereby no family is secure, no relationship is obligatory, and every bond involves apathy. Therefore, these "risky" (Beck 1992) relationships tend toward crisis and generate desperation. In addition, incidental evil can hardly be stemmed by greater wealth, abundance for all, or material equality across the board, as our economic system is one that produces wealth by creating inequality. The instrumentalization of other persons is one of the keys to success in business; our objections to *murder* out of the same material motives may be therefore less emotional

and shocking for us since we use such motives ourselves in our daily work lives. Unfortunately, our final negating factor must also be put aside. Sociopathic evil acts cannot be prevented through the injection of more intimacy, as the sociopath does not care about intimacy, and moreover, he/she was built that way, since our society produces conditions in which intimacy is ever more unattainable *and undesirable*. Zygmunt Bauman's (2001) use of the Tantalus myth for this idea is apt; there, the prospect of an ideal community, or ideal intimate relation in our case, disappears just as it appears within Tantalus' grasp or at his lips. However, perhaps we should make a modification. Tantalus, having gone for so long without food or water, ceases to consciously will them, but is nonetheless driven by the instinctual drives toward hunger and thirst. Therefore, Tantalus is conflicted, rarely reaching for the grapes and water he needs, and when he does try to grab them, it is half-heartedly, as if they do not matter. Perhaps in the next step, he will grow to hate them like the sociopath, trying to swat the grapes from the sky, and hoping for a hot sun to dry up the river as well.

## **Discussion**

At the very least, we are taken, at the end, to where we began. Evil and intimacy are “intimately” bound together. We are less horrified and shocked by murders which have no relevance for intimacy. Incidental evil feels *less* evil since the victim's fall seems to have little to do with his/her relationship to the perpetrator. We feel more intensely about crimes where the victim and perpetrator were extraordinarily close, or where the victim is chosen exactly because he/she was faceless for the criminal. Our feelings of horror, disgust, and shock are therefore linked to the notion of the intimate bond.

We return now to our character from *The Perfume*. Grenoir indeed is led by his senses and passions to murder, yet it was his rational instrumentalization of women as a source of scent which allowed him to, even motivated him, to kill. Had he been more accepted by others,

entwined within rich intimate bonds, this instrumentalization would have been difficult, or impossible to achieve. If we imagine Grenoir as a sociopath, hating others, not seeing them as persons, then we miss how he is driven by a strong desire to be loved; that is the reason why he tries to create such a powerful perfume, so that all will love him. We might then suggest that he *loved* the plum girl, because of her scent, and she is suffocated by his closeness. In order to prevent the crime, suppose we remove from the story his extraordinary sense of smell and the passion it inspires. As a result he would probably not kill, but the story would fade away as well, as he would be just another man, to die a sudden and unremarkable death, and we would not care. But we do care, and it is because of smell and desire. Our moral interest arises because of both the emotional intensity of his acts and the dark implications they bring to the fore.

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