

# THE PLURALITY OF EVIL

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**Summary** The author discusses the political implications of the sovereignty of evil, which is the core concept introduced by Derek Edyvane in his forthcoming book *Civic Virtue and the Sovereignty of Evil*. The author's main argument is that citizens would have a hard time achieving a consensus on the preventive politics worth pursuing without first reaching an agreement regarding the evil they are trying to prevent. The problem is that the concept of sovereign evil is plural in its nature and, therefore, leads to new conflicts, rather than to a consensus among citizens. The article tries to identify instances in which a competing understanding of this concept might arise, and concludes by arguing that the model of preventive politics requires more than mere recognition of sovereign evil to become politically viable.\*

**Keywords** Edyvane, pluralism, preventive politics, evil

## Introduction

In his book *Civic Virtue and the Sovereignty of Evil: Political Ethics in Uncertain Times*, Derek Edyvane continues the long tradition of finding a common ground for political action not in what we aspire to achieve – *summum bonum* – but in what we collectively want to prevent from happening – *summum malum*. However, unlike his predecessors he is not primarily interested in issues of stability or legitimacy or justice, but

in civic virtue. The problem that arises in diverse societies is how to achieve a consensus on important political issues among citizens who hold very different and sometimes even conflicting moral values. The character of civic virtue is one such important issue. One possible answer to the diversity dilemma, as Thomas Hobbes realized, is to put aside all those differences that bring us into conflict with each other and concentrate on preventing the things we all want to

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avoid from happening. This is the core of preventive politics, either in the context of religious diversity in mid-17<sup>th</sup> century England that Hobbes was facing or of multicultural diversity we are facing today – citizens can find a common political language through identifying the social evils they want to avoid at any cost.

This type of politics is much less ambitious than aspirational politics, which strives not only to stop civil wars, acts of genocide, wide-spread poverty, massive unemployment or worse, but also to offer a more positive political vision. The problem with aspirational political projects is that they are based on an assumption that we can reach an agreement on common good that we as a political community want to pursue or on basic principles of justice we all want to embrace. Edyvane joins the theorists who are skeptical about such aspirational political projects (Geuss, 2008; Gray, 1997, 2000; Hampshire, 1989, 2001; Judt, 2010), and chooses the two most influential models in recent political theory – Sandel's "politics of common good" and Rawls's "politics of right" – to illustrate in what way aspirational politics stumbles when faced with the diversity dilemma. We can use Rawls's concept of "burdens of judgment" to show how Sandel's approach failed to resolve the problem of conflicting conceptions of good. As long as we assume that citizens can hold reasonable, but mutually exclusive conceptions of good, we are faced with the problem of formulating what the politics of common good should actually entail. In the same vein that Sandel presumes the existence of political consensus on the ideal of common good, Rawls, more modestly, presumes the existence of a consensus on the prin-

ciples of justice. However, the similar problem arises, Edyvane argues, when we need to formulate these basic principles of justice. Even if unbiased, unprejudiced, well-informed and reasonable, citizens still might disagree on what principles of justice their community should embrace. This is the reason why Edyvane turns to the preventive character of public morality and hopes to find a basis in "the prevention of great evils" (Edyvane, 2012: IV, 1) for establishing a consensus on civic virtues. The assumption here is that although all reasonable people might not be able to agree on the common good or the principles of justice, they will be able to agree when it comes to identifying such great evils and their prevention.

The philosophical narrative underlining Edyvane's core argument is a variant of ethical naturalism (using as its starting point shared historical experience rather than the facts about human biology). He follows Stuart Hampshire in his claim that there are universal evils that affect human beings qua human beings, not as members of a specific culture or moral tradition. As Hampshire points out: "there is nothing mysterious or 'subjective' or culture bound in the great evils of human experience" (Hampshire, 1989: 90). Edyvane embraces this line of argument when he, for example, talks about starvation as being "identifiable as evil independently of any particular set of moral beliefs" (Edyvane, 2012: IV, 9). These are, we could say, pre-metaphysical evils because they do not rely on any specific metaphysical framework to be recognized as evils. One could argue that there are no such pre-metaphysical evils and that recognizing something as evil always presupposes certain metaphysical concepts, but this is not the line

of argument I want to explore in this paper. My aim is to show that, even if we accept Hampshire's and Edyvane's idea that there are universal evils all reasonable people want to avoid, this idea can not, at least in the realm of politics, do the job Edyvane wants it to do. The main reason for this is that the concept of evil, just like the concepts of good and justice, is open to plural interpretation and, therefore, fails to resolve the diversity dilemma. Preventive politics faces the same challenge both politics of common good and politics of right face.

### Edyvane on the Plural Character of Evil

Edyvane talks about different understandings of the concept of evil in two instances. In chapter four of the manuscript, he distinguishes between the concepts of *evil* and *harm*. *Evil* is understood as something brought about by human agency (such as genocide), while *harm* is defined as a type of evil that is not necessarily brought about by actions of other persons (such as starvation). Often it is very hard, Edyvane points out, to make a clear distinction between evils that came about through human interference and those that do not involve any such interference. For example, although we can universally recognize poverty as an evil, poverty itself can be caused by human action, by natural causes or by the combination of both. Determining the right causes of a specific evil in a specific context often results in irresolvable arguments and, therefore, lowers the possibility of reaching a consensus on the true nature of evil addressed. This is why Edyvane introduces the concept of *basic evil* where the level of harm is the crucial element and not its true cause. The concept of *basic evil* is contrasted with

the concept of *moral evil* which necessarily presupposes that specific evil was brought about by the actions of rational agents. The politics of prevention of great evils should leave the task of identifying the perpetrators or causes of such evils aside and concentrate on alleviating terrible suffering independently of its source.

The second instance where Edyvane talks about different types of evil is when he introduces the distinction between *contingent basic evil* and *sovereign basic evil*. In the case of *contingent basic evil*, something is recognized as a basic evil from the perspective of a specific moral tradition, but is not necessarily identified as evil by members of other moral traditions. Edyvane gives the example of the egalitarian claim that a society in which the interests of the worst off are not taken into account should be identified as a deeply unjust society because it fails to address what they see as a basic evil. However, since conservatives or libertarians will see things in a very different light, in this case we can only talk of a *contingent basic evil*. On the other hand, *sovereign basic evil* is a term for those evils that are universally understood as such. Edyvane here mentions starvation as one such evil: "conditions of starvation are a sovereign evil" because they are "identifiable as evil independently of any particular set of moral beliefs" (Edyvane, 2012: IV, 9). Again, the politics of prevention should occupy itself with fostering only those civic virtues that are important barriers to *sovereign basic evils*, rather than to different *contingent basic evils*.

Although both distinctions – *basic* vs. *moral evil* and *contingent* vs. *sovereign evil* – make sense, I want to go a step further and argue that it would be

much harder than Edyvane suggests to find a common ground just on the basis of recognizing that there is such a thing as *sovereign basic evil*. The problem of recognizing something as a basic evil requires of us to identify the true cause of such an evil, otherwise our response will most probably be misguided or inadequate. For Edyvane the cause itself is irrelevant, what matters is that we recognize something as universal evil and formulate proper preventive tactics or a response to such an evil. However, I think that it would be very hard to achieve a consensus among citizens with diverse moral outlooks on an appropriate response if there is no agreement on what caused (or can cause) such an evil in the first place. Take Edyvane's example of fostering the civic virtue of austerity as a proper response to avoiding a global economic crisis. We can all recognize that such a crisis is something we all want to avoid. However, that does not mean we will all perceive the virtue of austerity as a proper response to such a crisis or that we will all define austerity in the same way. It seems that the character of the response will largely depend on the way one explains the causes of such an economic crisis. For those who see the main reason for the latest crisis in insufficient state regulation of greedy bankers gambling with other people's money, austerity might seem as a right response. The call for austerity will encourage all citizens to try and live more modestly, to expect and spend much less. This would be especially true for those who buy real estate beyond their means or those in the financial sector who expect enormous bonuses. On the other hand, for people who blame state intervention for upsetting the markets and not only causing, but prolonging the crisis, austerity will have a very different

meaning. In this case, the call for austerity will be directed towards the state and its numerous regulatory agencies, while citizens will be asked to continue spending so that markets can revive themselves as soon as possible. There is also a third narrative of how the crisis came about: the main problem is not to be found in specific political or economic players – the banks, the state, or fiscally irresponsible citizens – but in the capitalist system itself. If we perceive the current economic system as not only deeply unjust, but also unsustainable in the long run, invoking austerity as a civic virtue would only prolong the agony of *status quo*. What we need are not minor reforms, but a radical change of the system itself, and a call for austerity is the wrong way to go about achieving this.

One could argue that only one of these diagnoses can be correct and that we can therefore disregard the other two completely. To do that, however, we must not only analyze, but also agree upon the true causes of the evil – in this case, the global economic crisis – we are trying to prevent. This is exactly what Edyvane tries to avoid when he introduces the concept of *basic evil*. If our goal is only to recognize something as *basic evil*, than there is no need to talk about the causes. Politics of prevention, I would argue, requires more: we need to be able to formulate and reach a consensus on the proper way of avoiding such evil in the future. The example I have given suggests that this can only be done if we include into the equation the causes of evil we are trying to prevent.

The second problem with Edyvane's concept of *sovereign basic evil* is that he assumes that, once the distinction between *contingent* and *sovereign evil* is made, citizens will always give priority

to the latter. The logic behind this assumption is that we can expect a universal consensus on the prevention of *sovereign evil* because all citizens, independently of the moral tradition they adhere to, will perceive it as something they want to prevent. The question is: if a certain *sovereign evil* comes into conflict with a certain *contingent evil*, will all the citizens always give priority to preventing the *sovereign evil*? We can, for example, all agree on civic unrest being a *sovereign evil*, but that does not necessarily mean that those who hold a specific understanding of justice – let us say, the egalitarian concept of social justice – will want to prevent civic unrest at the cost of sacrificing their contingent goal of eradicating deep social injustices. Again, from the perspective of preventive politics it is not enough to achieve a consensus on what *sovereign basic evils* are; it is also necessary to reach an agreement among all citizens that preventing those evils should always come before preventing any *contingent basic evils*.

### The Plurality of Evil Revisited

Preventive politics is put into question if citizens disagree on the true causes of a catastrophe and therefore disagree on how to avoid it. The same can be said if they do not agree that preventing *sovereign evils* should always have priority over preventing *contingent evils*. However, these are not the only instances where the plural character of the concept of evil comes to the fore. In what follows, I want to address these other instances and explore the challenge they present for Edyvane's project.

*The primacy of evil problem:* The possibility that citizens might decide to give priority to preventing *contingent* rath-

er than *sovereign evil* if they, from their moral perspective, perceive the former as more important has already been discussed. There is, however, a possibility that we are faced with two *sovereign basic evils* and are unable to reach a consensus on which of the two evils should be given priority. Bjørn Lomborg, in his controversial study, *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, argues that our current use of resources to prevent ecological catastrophe should be directed towards preventing and alleviating the harm that comes from poverty and diseases in developing countries (Lomborg, 2001). Following Edyvane's lead, we can identify ecological catastrophe, as well as poverty and disease as *sovereign evils*. The question is which of these should be given priority? It would be naïve to assume that all citizens will hold the same priorities when it comes to deciding between the prevention of conflicting *sovereign evils*. Lomborg argues for a change of global policy. He advocates a different allocation of resources based on cost-benefit analysis, while Edyvane is discussing the issue of civic virtues which is not a zero-sum game in a way many policy decisions are. Would it not be possible to develop public ethics in a way that would avoid forcing citizens to make *either/or* choices? It probably would, but there would still be cases in which choosing which set of virtues to develop would entail sacrificing the development of some other set of virtues.

*The abstract vs. the substantive problem:* Citizens holding diverse moral values might be able to agree which *sovereign evils* the community should address in very general terms, but when it comes to clearly formulating the nature of these evils, the values of particular moral traditions kick in, making the consensus re-

quired by preventive politics uncertain. Edyvane addresses this issue in chapter 5 of his book by introducing the distinction between *particular substantive virtue* and *abstract procedural virtue*. He acknowledges that it might not be possible to reach a consensus on what *particular substantive virtue* we should cultivate, but we can still reach an agreement on *abstract procedural virtue* based on the universal recognition of *sovereign basic evil*. We could agree on, e.g., “the abstract prohibition on the collapse of civilized life” (Edyvane, 2012: V, 14) even if we can not agree on how exactly to address this prohibition. This argument is not convincing. Take the example of the protection of basic human rights as a universal goal the whole community can endorse. The violation of such rights would be perceived as a *sovereign evil* and the fostering of respect for human rights as an *abstract procedural virtue*. However, when it comes to defining what the violation of basic rights entails, different moral traditions will offer different accounts, dissolving the consensus on *sovereign evil* into a disagreement on competing *contingent evils*. One example that illustrates this is a document published by the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for the Family in 2000. In *The Family and Human Rights*, apart from the abortion, threats to the “sovereignty of the family” (which include same-sex marriages, high divorce rates and pre-marital sexual experiences) are recognized as perilous for the protection of human rights (Pontifical Council for the Family, 2000). It is clear that advocates of more liberal values would not only refuse to accept such a definition of violation of human rights, but would insist that the freedom to enter same-sex marriage, to divorce and to have pre-marital

sexual experiences is what human rights should actually ensure. The fact that both Catholics and liberals agree on the *abstract procedural virtue* of promoting respect for human rights, in the context of preventive public ethics, is of small importance if they have a deep disagreement on *particular substantive virtues* through which such respect is achieved.

*The problem of moral community:* Even when we assume that there is an agreement on both the true nature of a *sovereign evil* and on how to prevent this evil, we still have to decide who it is that we want to protect. Do we opt for a cosmopolitan option where the whole of the humanity is perceived as our moral community? Or do we stop at the borders of our nation-state and limit our concerns only to citizens of our own political community? Preventive public ethics addresses grave harms whose impact is often not limited to a single nation-state and, therefore, it is important to determine whether we want to make every human being affected by such harms our moral concern or whether we want to draw a line somewhere and make a clear distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Richard Rorty addresses this issue in his essay, “Who are We? Moral Universalism and Economic Triage”, and argues that, in cases where we are faced with a catastrophe, it would be both unrealistic and hypocritical to say that equal moral weight should be given to members of our own political community and to those who are outside of that community. The dark scenario that Rorty has in mind is one where there are not enough resources in the world to satisfy the needs of all the people in it. “[S]uppose that there is no imaginable way to make decent life-chances available to the poorer five billion citizens

of the members of the United Nations while still keeping intact the democratic socio-political institutions cherished by the richer one billion”, he writes, “then they [the richer] will begin to treat the poor and unlucky five billion as surplus to their moral requirements, unable to play a part in their moral life” (Rorty, 1996: 12). We can take this kind of stand of inevitability only if we accept that citizens of more developed countries will always rank interests of their own community above those of less developed countries, even when those less fortunate are faced with such evils as extreme poverty. A more cosmopolitan and less nationalist thinker than Rorty might see things in a very different way. The problem of preventive politics is that it can not avoid answering the question of who it is exactly that we are trying to protect from the worst evils. Again, in diverse societies there will be no single answer to this question. An additional problem is if we include not just the geographical, but also the temporal component: how far are we ready to sacrifice the interests of future generations in preventing the great evils for our own generation? This seems to be an especially important issue for the current discussions on economic stability vs. long-term ecological sustainability.

*The problem of risk:* A number of social evils (poverty, diseases, energy scarcity) can be prevented by the introduction of new technologies. However, such technologies as nuclear energy or genetically modified food are not just beneficial, but they carry a certain risk with them too. These risks are serious enough to threaten the basic interest of all humans and can, therefore, be classified as potential *sovereign evils*. The question that arises is: what risks are we ready to take when

it comes to preventing grave evils? Are we ready to use technologies that could themselves, in the worst case scenario, result in even worse catastrophes? This is the question that Hans Jonas addresses in his *The Imperative of Responsibility*, where he argues for a new ethics that would make us responsible for the future of humanity by forbidding the solutions that could result in the destruction of humanity itself (Jonas, 1985). We can side with Jonas or we can be much more risk-prone: the point is that it is not realistic to expect that citizens will reach a universal consensus on the level of risk they are ready to accept when it comes to these kinds of questions. Again, this issue seems to fall into the realm of policy or high-rank decision-making, and not into the realm that those interested in civic virtue might be concerned with. Nevertheless, an investigation into civic virtues should deal with citizens’ aversion to risk and their access to information that enables them to take rational decisions on these issues.

*The line not to be crossed:* A disagreement among citizens can arise on the issue of how far each of them is prepared to go to avoid something that they all perceive as a *sovereign basic evil*. As mentioned earlier, successful preventive politics needs to do more than just identify a certain universal evil; it also needs to formulate a response to such an evil. This response should be embraced by all reasonable citizens. It would be unrealistic to presume that everyone, independently of the moral values they hold, would be ready to do whatever is necessary to prevent a certain evil from happening. Most citizens would have a certain line which they would not be willing to cross, even if that means being exposed to serious harm. Nevertheless, they would strong-

ly differ in defining what that bottom is. Being exposed, for example, to the possibility of a deadly terrorist attack would fall under the heading of *sovereign basic evil* and, therefore, something that all reasonable citizens would want to prevent. However, it would be reasonable to refuse to support or to be involved in torturing suspected terrorists, even if that proves to be an effective way of preventing terrorist attacks. We just do not want to turn into monsters we are fighting against. Equally, it would be reasonable to argue that we need to do whatever it takes – including torture – to make sure such an attack does not happen. When discussing hope as one of the core civic virtues of the preventive ethics model, Edyvane invokes Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*. Although the ultimate goal of the two main protagonists – the father and the son – is to survive in a post-apocalyptic world, they are not ready to do just anything to achieve this goal (such as becoming cannibals). More important than survival itself is that they, as the boy puts it, stay 'good guys' and that they 'keep the fire', i.e. not lose their humanity. In the end, when faced with a possible catastrophe, different moral traditions will draw the line at very different points.

## Conclusion

In listing instances in which the plural character of the concept of evil makes achieving consensus on the nature of preventive politics much harder among citizens, I was not trying to argue that the pursuit of preventive politics itself is a failed project. On the contrary, it is a worthwhile political goal, both in its theoretical and its more practical guise. Because it is a worthwhile goal that could enrich and enhance our understanding

of what can be achieved through collective political action, it is worth exploring all its benefits, but also its disadvantages. Edyvane's book gives us a detailed account of the benefits, but holds back somewhat when it comes to discussing the disadvantages. One such disadvantage explored in this paper is the assumption that preventive politics offers a much better starting point than Sandel's politics of common good or Rawls's politics of right in defining what are the civic virtues that we should cultivate. This assumption rests on the argument that, although reasonable persons can give conflicting accounts of the good or of the right, they will all agree on universal evils, i.e. what Edyvane calls *sovereign basic evil*. Even if this assumption is correct, using the concept of evil as a mobilizing political force requires much more work than the mere acknowledgment of the existence of universal evils. Even if we agree with Edyvane that "[t]he great, perennial evils are characterised as those states of affairs that are directly felt as evils (by any normally responsive person)" (Edyvane, 2012: IV, 15), we still need to introduce certain narratives that will determine in what way a political community will try to resolve the conflicts within the preventive politics discussed in this paper. Such narratives are necessary even at the level of deciding which *sovereign evils* the community should focus on preventing. I can illustrate this by referring to an example Edyvane himself uses, the issue of war being a *sovereign evil*. The fact that we can diagnose war as one of the *sovereign evils* is not something that is self-understandable or something that "any normally responsive person" would necessarily accept. Homeric heroes as well as followers of Nietzsche or Hegel might see war in very different terms. The rea-



son that today war is perceived as one of those evils that should be prevented is a consequence of the narratives that were introduced after the horrors of WWII. There was nothing inevitable about this process: it was a result of conscious effort to replace the narrative of the warrior ethic with that of war as one of the ultimate evils. It is this kind of complex narratives that are needed to make preventive public ethics a successful political project.

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## Pluralnost zla

SAŽETAK Autor raspravlja o političkim implikacijama suverenosti zla, središnjeg koncepta koji Derek Edyvane uvodi u svojoj knjizi *Civic Virtue and The Sovereignty of Evil*. Autorov je glavni argument da građani teško mogu postići konsenzus oko preventivne politike koju žele slijediti a da ne postignu dogovor oko zla koje žele spriječiti. Problem je u tome što je koncept zla po svojoj prirodi pluralan i stoga vodi novim sukobima, a ne konsenzusu između građana. Članak pokušava identificirati one instance u kojima suprotstavljena shvaćanja ovoga koncepta mogu isplivati, te zaključuje tvrdeći kako model preventivne politike zahtijeva više od same ideje suverenog zla da bi postao politički relevantan.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI Edyvane, pluralizam, preventivna politika, zlo