

## Sociological Theories of Agency and Evil<sup>1</sup>

Yuki Nakamura

Graduate School of Human Relations  
Keio University  
2-15-45 Mita, Minato-ku, Tokyo 108-8345  
Japan

### Abstract

*This paper explores how sociological models of agency can be applied analytically to comprehend the evil done by perpetrators. Within the context of this paper, evil is a social action that harms others. For a long time it has been debated whether agency or social structure determines perpetrators actions when harming others. By utilizing sociological concepts such as the unintended consequences of action and the chordal triad of agency, it is possible to see the relation between the perpetrators' actions and their external environment. The emphasis on agency is necessary for truly understanding evil as a social action and its different processes within modernity.*

**Key Words:** Agency, evil, structuration theory, unintended consequences of action and chordal triad of agency

### 1. Introduction

Traditionally evil has been a theme reserved for philosophy, literature, and religion. It was not considered to be a topic for scientific research and inquiry. Unlike the humanities that so openly debated and explored evil, sociology in contrast has either avoided the topic all together or made great efforts to disguise it as something that could be considered worthy of its scientific investigations. It was a territory considered to be foreign to the endeavors of sociology and the other social sciences. After all, evil is “the baggage of morality, metaphysics, emotions, essentialism, and psychology...all of the things that sociology has defined itself against in the course of its development as an autonomous discipline.” (Cushman, 2001: 80). Evil as the deviation from collective morality and as an unworthy theme for the rationalized endeavors of the social sciences influenced later developments. It was only until later, partly in due to the atrocities that were committed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and ironically, also because of the reevaluation of modernity that sociology along with the other social sciences would attempt to incorporate evil into its discourse and to consider it as a subject of its investigations. As a result, evil has increasingly been seen as something social –an external force that lies beyond the agency of individuals. Absence, displacement, pathology, empathy, and the scientific language such as crimes and deviance are thought to be the product of supra-individual social forces. Agency which is the most important driving force for evil doing is therefore denied.

If evil is to be reintroduced adequately into social theory and mainstream sociology it has to be treated as an agency-driven social action. The importance and centrality of agency was stripped away along with all of the terms associated with it: “self-hood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1992). However, external forces alone “in and of themselves, cannot explain some of the most salient aspects...that characterize evil” (Cushman in Geddes, 2001:82). The present article argues that evil as a social action that harms other human beings against his or her will is an inherent part of agency. Sociological theories of agency show that regardless of how well-intended or ill-intended an agent may be there are consequences that stretch out in time and space that harms others and are therefore evil.

---

<sup>1</sup>This paper is supported in part by a Grant-in-Aid for the Program for Leading Graduate School of Keio University for “Science for Development of Super Mature Society” from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science, and Technology in Japan.

The structuration theory developed by Giddens sheds light in how agency is the driving force in the structuration of the social world. The chordal triad of agency is also applied to account for the spatial-temporal adjustments that agents do depending on the contingencies that arise at the moment.

### ***Evil as a Social Action***

Seeley suggested sociology is a social action theorem (Seeley in Wolff, 1969:111), sociology *can and must* inquire the topic of evil. If evil is to be studied under the discipline of sociology it must be treated as a social action. However, it is not the traditional type of social action that sociology has focused in the past. Most theories of action and agency overemphasize the positive, good and progressive elements of agency. Just by invoking a list of terms associated with agency makes this apparent. Agency is always associated with “selfhood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998:962). Human agency tends to be regarded as something that works for the common good and it is perceived to be progressive because of its creativity and the freedom it seems to entail with it. However, like with everything else in this world agency also has its dark side. In the same way modernity itself and its institutions carry with it destruction and suffering, agency is also more than capable of doing evil. By “thinking of evil as a residual category camouflages the destruction and cruelty that has accompanied enlightened efforts to institutionalize the good and the right” (Alexander, 2003:109).

Evil is an intentional social action that harms other human beings against his or her will as it has been defined by Arne Johan Vetlesen (2005)<sup>2</sup> and Thomas Cushman (2001). Cushman (2001:81) explicitly points out that to do evil is to inflict *excessive* pain and suffering, Vetlesen on the other hand gives a more open definition on purpose. By removing the “excessive” infliction of pain and suffering, Vetlesen avoids the problem of defining the point where the excessive infliction of pain and suffering starts. The open definition given by Vetlesen also takes into consideration the possibility of expanding the different ways in which evil can be inflicted. By not restricting evil to solely the physical infliction of pain and suffering it also gets rid of the popular notion of evil associated with death. Evil can be done without torturing and killing people. One of the main characteristics of evil is its changing nature. The way evil is done differs depending on the epoch and structure in which the individual agent is located. Although it is indeed important to consider its perceptions-individual and collective- as well as the social and cultural processes that surround evil it must be kept in mind that evil *is a social action* lest the examination of evil will commit the mistakes done by past theories.

### ***Evil as Structuration***

In Giddens’ structuration theory’s (1984) “it is much more possible to see a saint than a sinner”, it is also the case that “if we are interested in looking at the ways in which agency is enabled by the infrastructures of modernity, we are likely to find out our best examples in those whose acts would be classified as “transgressive” (Cushman in Geddes, 2001:83). Some of Giddens’ key concepts shed light on the problem of the evil in modernity. Why is personal consciousness detached from responsibility and accountability? Why are there interpretations on the Holocaust that focus on the agent while others approach the matter from structure? Is there any intentionality of doing evil from the individuals that are simply following orders and doing their jobs? The concepts of agency, duality of structure, the stratification model of action, the unintended consequences of action and the types of consciousness developed by Giddens serve as the foundation for truly understanding evil as a social action and its different processes within modernity.

In *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979) and *The Constitution of Society* (1984) Giddens formulates the basic ideas that compose his structuration theory which is the reason he is known as the most important action theorist in modern sociology. For Giddens agency is the agents’ “capability of doing ... things” (Giddens, 1984:9) and it “does not refer to a series of discrete acts combined together, but to *a continuous flow of conduct* [italics in original]” (1979:55). By asserting the importance of temporality –“the continuous flow of conduct”– in the agency of individuals Giddens had an enormous impact in the concepts of agency that were developed by the theorists that came after him. The different temporal-spatial elements of agency established by Mustafa Emirbayer and Anne Mische (1998) and the different types of agency conceived by Steven Hitlin and Glen Elder (2007) are all unconceivable without having Giddens’ work in the background.

---

<sup>2</sup> “...to intentionally inflict pain and suffering on another human being, against her will, and causing serious and foreseeable harm to her” (Vetlesen, 2005:2).

Agency “refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place” (Giddens, 1984:9). The implications is that “the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently” (Giddens, 1984:9). Even the most redundant office worker, a thoughtless soldier or a bureaucrat merely reproducing past norms and procedures at the end of the day ‘could have done otherwise’. In fact, one of the most famous arguments in support of the notion that the Holocaust occurred because the Germans wanted it to occur is based on this aspect of agency develop by Giddens that agents ‘could have done otherwise’ (i.e. Goldhagen, 1996). Unlike the popular belief that Nazis diligently followed orders because disobeying an order could otherwise end up being a death sentence; Goldhagen points out that evidence suggests otherwise. Structuration –as the name itself reveals– is a process. By making an analytical differentiation between social structure and social systems and developing the duality of structure Giddens planted the seeds necessary to incorporate the external, structural elements that were up to very recently thought to be the sole and major cause of evil in the actions carried out by the agents. It conceptualizes the social forces to be integrated into the structural properties of social systems that are both the medium and outcome of the reflexive monitoring of action when doing evil.

Structure constrains and enables the agents in their everyday social interaction and activities. Agents reproduce and transform social systems by recursively drawing on structure (rules and resources). ‘Transformative rules rather than rules of transformation’. There is however, another aspect that allows the duality of structure besides the analytical separation between structure and system: the unintended consequences of action. The fact that structure is both constraining and enabling does not necessarily “prevent[s] the structured properties of social systems from stretching away, in time and space beyond the control of any individual actors” (Giddens, 1984:25). All actions have consequences that escape the scope of intentionality and monitoring from part of the agent that caused it. The unintended consequences of action are perhaps what truly unify agency and structure both theoretically and empirically speaking. It holds the keys in uncovering why individuals despite being ‘good’ or ‘decent’ are capable of harming others. It reveals what is the role of the evil in human agency within what was up until now seen as a cog in the machine.

### ***Giddens’ Stratification Model of Action***

A proper understanding and analysis of evil must also take into account the context and external influences that are the consequences of the agent’s action. “To study the structuration of a social system is to study the ways in which that system, via the application of generative rules and resources, and in the context of unintended outcomes, is produced and reproduced in interaction” (Giddens 1979:66). The key in understanding why evil (especially post-Milgram evil) tends to be misunderstood exclusively as the result of social forces that influence individuals without slightly touching the agency of human beings is because most frameworks tend to overlook that these social forces are the unintended consequences of the agents’ actions that give feedback as the unacknowledged conditions of action. The stratification model of action developed by Giddens, the agent’s action has a set of consequences that stretch out in time and space beyond the reach of the individual himself. The unintended consequences of action are then reflected in a feedback which becomes the unacknowledged conditions of actions that in turn influence the agent’s action. The model implies Giddens’ philosophy that an appropriate framework should not only contain the seeds of transformation despite dealing with reproduction but it should also at the same time deal with transformation itself.

The reflexive monitoring of action is “the intentional or purposive character of human behavior: it emphasizes ‘intentionality’ *as process* [italics in original]. Such intentionality is a routine feature of human conduct and *does not imply* [italics added] that actors have definite goals consciously held in mind during the course of their activities” (Giddens, 1979:56). The reflexive monitoring of action is always grounded on the *rationalization of action* which are “the capabilities of human agents to ‘explain’ why they act as they do by giving reasons for their conduct” (Giddens, 1979:57). This definition in particular should be dealt with carefully because the rationalization of action is not the capability of the agent to discursively manifest their activities but it is the *understanding* they have of those activities in order to carry them out with relative ease. Nevertheless, the reflexive monitoring of action and the rationalization of action are differentiated from the motivation of action. As Giddens says, “if reasons refer to the grounds of action, motives refer to the wants which prompt it...motivation refers to potential for action rather than to the mode in which action is chronically carried on by the agent...” (Giddens, 1984:6).

Although the motive may not be fully expressed in the agents' action and the outcome of such actions, it can nevertheless have a direct purchase on the agents' decisions and actions without being a break from routine. If reasons "refer to the grounds of action" and motives "refer to the wants which prompt it", it also means that actions can be directly motivated and still be based on routine. A soldier may be motivated to fight for freedom and peace but shooting and killing people may be done because it was an order or a job that is part of the organization's routine. Evil as reflexive monitoring of action works in order to manifest itself in the structuration of social systems. The model implies however that there are aspects in agency that are out of the reach of the capabilities of the intentionality of the agents themselves. The unintended consequences of action which are the unintended results of the monitoring of action also condition the intentionality of agency as unacknowledged conditions of action conditions that the agents are not aware of. It is only with the stratification model of action that evil in agency can be fully understood as an intentional social action. There is always a degree of agency in the individual regardless of the degree of routinization an action has. Acknowledging the agency of individual perpetrators by using Giddens' model of agency only shows the frightening reality that even individuals that seem to be unrelated to the suffering of others can be accountable for it. As Max Weber proclaimed nearly a century ago, "it follows that as far as a person's actions are concerned, it is not true that nothing but good comes from good and nothing but evil from evil, but rather quite frequently the opposite is the case. Anyone who does not realize this is in fact a mere child..."(Weber, 2004:86).

### ***The Chordal Triad of Agency***

It must be remembered that agency is the agents' "capability of doing ... things" (Giddens, 1984:9) and that it is "*a continuous flow of conduct* [italics in original]" (1979:55) which implies the capability of *not* doing as well because the agent at any given time and place could have done otherwise. The social world however is not static and can never be completely controlled. It is highly contingent and even the most carefully monitored and planned of actions can have unimaginable consequences that were not intended in the first place which escapes the scope of the agent. A proper model of agency then, must take into account *the double constitution of agency and structure* in which the "temporal-relational contexts support particular agentic orientations, which in turn constitute different structuring relationships of actors toward their environments" (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 1004). The chordal triad of agency –which is the key concept for understanding Emirbayer and Mische's agency–, is constituted of three temporal dimensions: the iterational element, the projective element and the practical-evaluative element that focuses on the past, future and present respectively. Each of the elements are defined as follows:

*The Iterational Element:* "the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time".

*The Projective Element:* "the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future".

*The Practical-Evaluative Element:* "the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations".  
(Emirbayer and Mische, 1998:971)

There are actions that are more inclined to the past in the same way there are actions that are more inclined towards the future or the present. However, this *does not* mean that an action is *exclusively* oriented towards a certain time horizon. Agency is always composed of these three temporal dimensions. In one way or another temporal dimension can be predominant depending on the time and place but the other two elements never disappear, on the contrary, they are always present. The term chordal triad itself denotes the ever present existence of the three temporal dimensions whenever an agent engages with the contingencies of the social world. The agent will carry out the action by either routinely reproducing past patterns of thought and action or project future vision by evaluating the present.

### ***The Chodal Triad of Agency in Perpetrators***

At first sight, the efficiency of the ‘bureaucratic killing machine’ in the Holocaust and the apparent *thoughtless* evil committed by Adolf Eichmann seems to have been done as the result of a bureaucratic and hierarchical organization that may allow no room for the agency of individuals. But given a closer look to the analyzes made by Bauman (1989) and Arendt (2006) on the Holocaust and Eichmann with the temporal orientations that surge from the chordal triad of agency; it will be revealed that events such as the Holocaust and Eichmann’s actions which may have seemed to be devoid of agency are in fact unconceivable without the constant adjustments done to account for the contingencies of the world. As Bauman points out, the “objective had to be implemented; how this was to be done depended on the circumstances, always judged by the ‘experts’ from the point of view of feasibility and the costs of alternative opportunities of action” (Bauman, 1989:15). In order to account for the contingencies and problems that surge at the moment agents adjust their temporal orientations and as a result can be more inclined towards a specific time horizon (the past, future or present). Individual accounts and testimonies at different periods for example show how Eichmann depending on the time and place, had a different understanding of the ‘solution’ and the way it should be carried out.

For various reasons individuals that serve and work in a bureaucratic institution can be the representation of an agent that is –relatively speaking– constantly engaging in actions that are more oriented towards the past: in other words, in the iterational element of agency. Max Weber pointed out that modern bureaucracy is governed by laws or regulations and functioned through the officials following those general rules (1978:956-958). It would not be a surprise that a bureaucrat that bases its daily activities on regulations and general rules and is also part of a vast hierarchic chain of command will be regarded as thoughtless, even dehumanized. In fact, a double dehumanization has even been argued in which the dehumanization of the victims is as necessary as the dehumanization of the perpetrators in order to carry out mass atrocities. Because Bauman bases his arguments of the Holocaust on Weber and Milgram’s works, he also overlooked the agency that is necessary in order to carry out and manage such a destructive activity in the first place. By quoting Herbert C. Kelman, Bauman argues that “moral inhibitions against violent atrocities tend to be eroded once three conditions are met, *singly or together* [italics added]; the violence is *authorized* [italics in original] (by official orders coming from the legally entitled quarters), actions are *routinized* [italics in original] (by rule-governed practices and exact specification of roles)...” (1989:21). Routinized patterns of thought and action are the argument par excellence of those who advocate structure’s supremacy over individuals’ agency when examining evil. But even the most habitual of actions is agentic “since it involves attention and effort, [even though] such activity is largely unreflective and taken for granted; as actors encounter problematic situations requiring the exercise of imagination and judgement, they gain a reflective distance from received patterns that may (in some contexts) allow for greater imagination, choice, and conscious purpose” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998:973).

Thomas Cushman (2001) offers a theoretical analysis of the key agents that created and molded the Bosnian genocide using the temporal-spatial model of agency developed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). Individuals exercise different kinds of agency depending on their social interactions and structures. The Serbian elite – Slobodan Milosevic, Radovan Karadzic among others– will have different temporal orientations and more space to maneuver and manifest their agency than a bureaucrat that is constantly bounded by regulations. All agents always display the three temporal dimensions of agency (iterational, projective, and practical-evaluative) with one of them standing out depending on the temporal-spatial exigencies.

Cushman starts his analysis by pointing out that elements of the past, future and present were deliberately rearranged and fixed by the key architects of the Bosnian genocide for their ongoing social actions. It is also worth mentioning that the past is always and especially present among intellectuals. History can then be modified at the image of the architects of evil by accommodating it to the exigencies of the present. The tension in Kosovo was deliberately put into use by Milosevic in order to construct a political identity that the ‘mob’ could identify with. Milosevic’s political identity shifted from a “communist apparatchik to nationalist ‘savior of the Serbian people’” in a highly calculated speech and timing to gain desired effect. In retrospect he was indeed successful but in order to account for the high degree of contingency and unpredictability of the social world, “history...was a force that was *activated* [italics in original] by agents to refashion their identities and, by way of that, to alter the specific contours of the present and future” (Cushman, 2001:89). Radovan Karadzic being a poet and a psychiatrist himself is seen as the principal architect not only of the war but of the ideology of the Bosnian Serbs.

By appealing to the Western audiences through the media, Karadzic displays a temporal dimension that is oriented towards the future (projective) of which Eichmann is the other end. He argued his views and reasons for evil (as a social action that harms other human beings), by denying his role in the massacre at the same time. Karadzic did so by “redefining and redescribing those events in terms of history, the present, and the future” (Cushman, 2001:93). The continuous flow of conduct that constitutes agency is what enables the agented evil to efficiently manifest itself in the infrastructures of modernity in one way or another within specific conditions of social time and space. Individuals that harm other human beings do “so not as automatons or dupes of historical or cultural forces, but as willful agents who reflexively responded to the contours of both local and global history, who reflexively adapted themselves to the exigencies and contingencies of the unfolding present, and who reflexively presented an ideal vision of the future that their actions would, ideally, bring about” (Cushman in Geddes 2001:82). The reflexive response and adaptability of the evil as the reflexive monitoring of action coincides with the processes for the creation of discourse and collective consciousness that was formulated around the Jews during WWII in Germany and the “hidden enemies burrowing from within” (Hinton, 2005:285) in Cambodia by the Nazis and the Khmer Rouge respectively that was aimed to intentionally eradicate a certain group of people. Things do not just happen out of nowhere, they are constructed and carried out. As Alexander says, it was “the act of murdering millions of Jewish and non-Jewish people during the Holocaust must be seen as something valued, as something desired” (2003:115) and the same could be said about what occurred in the Bosnian War, Cambodia, Rwanda and many other events and places.

### **Conclusion**

It has been argued that due to the traditional displacement of evil sociology has not been able to approach evil satisfactorily. In order to tackle the problem of evil in the way it deserves after the catastrophic 20<sup>th</sup> century the evil in agency as a theory of action is what can illuminate the reflective and unreflective character of the agents’ action as well as the unintended consequences as cultural and institutional processes in society. Due to the nature of our times and the modern world, there has been a tendency from part of the perpetrators to take advantage –as fully aware social agents– of the structures and notions of society to allocate culpability in a way that benefits them. As Vetlesen has argued, if and when perpetrators gain a “hearing, the limit posited by the phenomenon is abolished, effaced. In this domain, relativization, comparison, complexity stop being the assets they are in purely intellectual terms and become instead a most welcome ally in the hands of the perpetrators. That is *one weapon too many* [italics added]” (2005:12).

“Good and evil, then, are not metaphysically motivated; they are just the benefit and harm people do to each other” (Kekes, 1988:18) and human agents are indeed well capable of doing both good and evil. Agency as the capacity of harming others varies greatly on the spatial-temporal location of the agent but it is still an inherent aspect of being human. People can commit atrocities because it is part of the human condition and because the social mechanisms of modernity enable the agency of individuals to do so. As Alford pointed out, “if one can know and accept this in oneself, and one’s friends, people who hardly ever act-out in socially damaging ways (except perhaps as citizens of a rich and powerful nation in a troubled world) then we can see the evil in others” (2006,16). Being alive means making decisions and performing actions that influence others whether it is intended or not. Evil as an agency-driven social action has also consequences that stretch out in time and space. A proper understanding of agency-driven evil is necessary more than ever because of the problems that people face during modern times. To understand evil is to shed light to an unknown aspect of the duality between agency and structure.

### **References**

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.
- Alford, C. Fred. “Evil Be Thou My Good”. *The Good Society*, Vol. 15, No. 2:pp. 13-16. PennStateUniversity Press, 2006
- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Penguin, 2006.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Polity, 1989.
- Cushman, Thomas. “The Reflexivity of Evil: Modernity and Moral Transgression in the War in Bosnia”. pp. 79-100. In *Evil after Postmodernism: Histories, Narratives, and Ethics*, ed. Jennifer L. Geddes. London: Routledge, 2001.

- Emirbayer, Mustafa and Mische, Anne. "What is Agency?" *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 103, pp. 962-1023, 1998.
- Giddens, Anthony. *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. London: Macmillan, 1979.
- . *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: U of California, 1984.
- Goldhagen, Daniel Jonah. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: Vintage, 1996.
- Hinton, Alexander Laban. *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide*. Berkeley: U of California, 2005.
- Hitlin, Steven and Elder Jr., Glen H. "Time, Self, and the Curiously Abstract Concept of Agency". *Sociological Theory*. Vol. 25, No. 2: pp. 170-191. American Sociological Association, 2007.
- Kekes, John. "Understanding Evil" *American Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol. 25, No. 1: pp. 13-24. University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Vetlesen, Arne Johan. *Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2005.
- Weber, Max, David S. Owen, Tracy B. Strong, and Rodney Livingstone. *The Vocation Lectures*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004.
- , Guenther Roth, and Claus Wittichedt. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology Vol.2*. Berkeley: U of California, 1978.
- Wolff, Kurt. "For a Sociology of Evil". *Journal of Social Issues*. Vol. 25, No. 1: pp. 111-25. 1969