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Research Paper

Beyond the Binary: Good, Evil, and the Ethics of Scarcity

Metaethical Failure, Normative Ambiguity, and the Case for a Moral Ecology in Famine, Climate, and Lifeboat Ethics

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ABSTRACT
The language of "good" and "evil" is among the oldest tools in our moral kit. Strikingly, though, it is also among the least examined once we step outside its own echo chamber. Thinkers as different as Kant and Nietzsche fought over whether these terms refer to something real or whether they are largely inventions—useful, perhaps, for rhetoric more than for genuine explanation. Oddly enough, most of that debate remains confined to the theoretical. What tends to be missing is attention to the way the words themselves actually function when people face the hard edge of survival, distribution of resources, or collective policy choices.
This paper presses on that gap. It begins in the usual place—metaethical disputes about realism and skepticism, about whether theology can still ground morality or whether its absence leaves us with incoherence—but quickly moves into less comfortable terrain: scarcity dilemmas. Hardin's lifeboat ethics, Sen's studies of famine, and recent arguments about climate responsibility (with Caney, Keohane, and Victor in view) are not treated here as curiosities but as stress-tests. And in each test, I argue, the old binaries collapse precisely where they ought to matter most. "Good" and "evil" are, in practice, either too blunt or too bloated to guide decisions under pressure. In place of the binary, I propose a kind of moral ecology, drawing on MacIntyre, Williams, and others, that is built around thicker concepts—reckless, courageous, unjust, negligent. These are not simplifiers but terms that breathe, words that track the grain of context rather than shave it flat. My claim is not that ethics must be abandoned but that we do better without the exhausted binary. The case shows itself most clearly in famine relief, in climate debates, and even in that imagined lifeboat.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Few words in the moral lexicon weigh as heavily—or perhaps as theatrically—as "good" and "evil." They saturate private judgment and public narrative alike. Yet their long endurance has not produced clarity. If anything, their staying power testifies less to conceptual precision than to rhetorical punch. To speak of "good" or "evil" is to reach for absolutes. But those absolutes, more often than not, flatten the messy terrain of human action into two poles. And that compression itself demands interrogation.

The categories have a history, of course. They arose within theological and metaphysical architectures: the Abrahamic traditions cast obedience as good and transgression as evil. Medieval thinkers expanded the framework—Augustine's account of evil as privation, Aquinas blending Aristotelian teleology with Christian doctrine. The Enlightenment broke things apart. Kant preserved the binary, but filtered it through the Categorical Imperative. Nietzsche, more radically, traced its genealogy to ressentiment, showing how power was branded "evil" and weakness was moralized as "good." By the twentieth century the metaphysical scaffolding had thinned further. Wittgenstein made the point that moral terms acquire meaning only in use, in context. Arendt, in her account of Eichmann, uncovered something even stranger: not monstrous malice but a chilling thoughtlessness—

the now familiar "banality of evil." A pattern surfaces: the more urgency these terms are used with, the shakier they look under philosophical pressure.

The problem can be put in two registers. First, conceptually: "good" and "evil" have no stable ontology. Mackie called them "queer" entities—non-natural, epistemically opaque. Theology fares no better, caught by the old Euthyphro dilemma or reduced to theodicies that trivialize real suffering. Even as expressions, the terms balloon so far that they become useless: they struggle to distinguish between genocide and petty cruelty. Second, normatively: the binary encourages absolutism precisely where nuance is required. To call something "evil" often closes discussion rather than advancing it.

So, the central question: do these categories still serve us, in either theory or practice? Or is it time to trade them in for a more plural vocabulary? The argument I put forward is blunt: they fail. They fail conceptually, and they fail when tested against scarcity dilemmas—lifeboats, famine, climate responsibility. A different framework, which I call moral ecology, is needed. Thick concepts—unjust, reckless, courageous, negligent—do not erase ethics but enrich it. They have context baked in.

The contribution of this paper lies in pulling together two literatures that rarely meet: philosophical critiques of "good/evil" (from Nietzsche to Mackie to MacIntyre) and applied ethics on famine, climate, and institutional breakdown. Lifeboat ethics, for instance, makes the inadequacy of the binary stark. When too many people are in the boat, "evil" is the wrong word for exclusion, and "good" the wrong word for inclusion. Sen's analysis of famine shows the same: starvation stems from entitlement failure and institutional collapse, not metaphysical evil. And climate justice? Caney shows that what matters is parsing overlapping obligations, not demonizing polluters. Keohane and Victor remind us that outrage, while politically potent, obstructs workable policy design.

The paper proceeds in three movements: first, metaethical and normative debates; second, a framework for assessing their viability and utility; and third, case studies from lifeboats, famine, and climate policy. The aim is not to drain moral urgency but to redirect it. To give up "good" and "evil" is not nihilism. It is, rather, the work of trading blunt categories for a vocabulary able to register complexity.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

DOMAIN I: METAETHICAL VIABILITY

The first step in asking whether the categories of "good" and "evil" are worth keeping is to treat them not as political slogans, but as metaethical claims. Put simply: do these words point to anything coherent? If they are to guide moral judgment, they must at least be intelligible—whether as metaphysical truths, theological realities, or socially meaningful constructs. Two issues matter most here: whether the terms have ontological clarity and whether they hold theological coherence.

ONTOLOGICAL CLARITY

At the most basic level, the question is whether "good" and "evil" name something real. Kant thought they did. His moral philosophy, built on the Categorical Imperative, treats them as objective features of action: a deed is good if it respects humanity as an end and can be universalized, and evil if it fails those tests. Later Kantian revivals continue to defend this universalist outlook, though they admit—following critics like Arendt and Žižek—that ideology complicates how these labels actually function in practice.

Mackie, by contrast, argued the opposite. His "error theory" insists that terms like good and evil are "queer": they pretend to describe objective moral facts, yet no such facts exist. The sheer diversity of moral judgments across societies, he argued, undermines the claim that they track anything universal. Pluralists such as Kekes and Attfield build on this challenge, suggesting that moral life contains many distinct values and cannot be reduced to a single binary axis.

Some more recent attempts try to hold onto the terms while stripping them of heavy metaphysical claims. Wilby (2022) suggests that "evil" works best as a "thin" label—a way of marking evaluation, not a metaphysical substance. Contemporary Augustinian thinking treats evil not as an independent force but as privation: a failure to pursue the good. These moves preserve the rhetorical force of calling something "evil" without committing to it as an ontological property.

But these middle positions face their own problems. If evil is only a rhetorical label or a privation, it loses the absolutism that once gave it weight. If moral life is plural rather than binary, then evil no longer serves as a universal guide. What unites all these debates is the assumption that moral language needs some marker of ultimate condemnation. The dispute is whether that marker must be grounded in universal reason, as Kant believed, or whether it is merely a useful shorthand, as Wilby argues.

THEOLOGICAL COHERENCE

The second test concerns theology. Historically, "evil" has drawn its power from religion: evil was understood as a violation of divine order. But that grounding has long been unstable. Plato's *Euthyphro* dilemma puts the problem clearly: if actions are good only because God commands them, morality becomes arbitrary; if God commands them because they are good, then goodness exists apart from God's will. In both cases, divine command fails to serve as a secure foundation.

Attempts to reconcile this tension, such as Hick's "soul-making" theodicy, reveal the costs of retention. To claim that famine or genocide is necessary for human moral growth risks trivializing suffering, reducing atrocities to lessons in divine pedagogy. Arendt's study of Eichmann further weakens the theological account, showing that what she called "the banality of evil" stemmed not from cosmic forces but from the collapse of thought and responsibility. Anscombe pressed this point even harder in 1958: once the belief in a divine legislator fades, the very framework of obligation and transgression that sustains "evil" loses coherence.

Contemporary thinkers sometimes try to salvage the terms by redefining them in social rather than theological terms. Writers like Webel and Stigliano see evil less as a breach of divine law and more as a socially shared label for extreme wrongdoing. But this shift strips the concept of its metaphysical weight, leaving it more as a cultural residue than a theological truth.

SYNTHESIS

Taken together, the literature shows strong convergence. Very few thinkers today defend absolutist notions of good and evil. Kantians still try to argue for universality, but admit it is fragile. Error theorists and pluralists reject the objectivity of the terms altogether. Others, like Wilby and Augustine, keep them only in a thinner, pragmatic sense.

The deeper commonality is that all sides assume moral life requires categorical clarity. Whether "evil" is seen as queer (Mackie), thin (Wilby), privative (Augustine), socially embedded (Webel), or universal (Kant), the debate is about whether the binary clarifies or obscures. Critics say it oversimplifies; defenders say it still captures extreme cases that other vocabularies miss.

But perhaps the problem lies in the assumption itself—that condemnation must always take the form of universal binaries. Alternatives such as "cruel," "unjust," "callous," or "reckless" may offer descriptions that are historically specific, morally sharp, and free from metaphysical baggage. If that is right, then the shift away from "good" and "evil" is not just desirable but inevitable.

On both ontological and theological grounds, then, the terms falter. Ontologically, they are either unsustainable (Mackie), diluted (Wilby), or inflated beyond use. Theologically, they collapse into arbitrariness (Euthyphro), trivialization (Hick), or obsolescence (Anscombe). The conclusion of Domain I is clear: "good" and "evil" cannot stand as metaethical foundations without distortion. Their survival depends only on heavily qualified, pluralist reinterpretations—a trajectory that already points toward the moral ecology defended in this paper.

DOMAIN II: NORMATIVE UTILITY

Even in the event that the types of good and evil fail at the stage of metaphysical foundation, their proponents may proceed to claim that they redeem themselves by being practically useful. Though they may not refer to strong ethical features or God-grounded laws, maybe they are effective instruments of interpretation and direction. This part evaluates that assertion by reviewing two aspects: interpretive accuracy, the ability of such categories to help clarify moral phenomena without misrepresentation, and pragmatic consistency, how these categories can help in action direction in complex and scarce conditions.

INTERPRETIVE PRECISION

What makes such words as evil so attractive is that they are able to focus moral horror in one phrase. They appear to take the burden of further analysis off us, giving us immediate insight. Yet this very condensation undermines interpretive precision. The paradox is evidenced by the explanation of the banality of evil as presented by Hannah Arendt. When she faced Eichmann, she never gave him demonic evil, but presented evil as a blankness of thought, a blank obedience to ritual. By so doing, she broadened the usage of evil to bureaucratic mediocrity rather than atrocity. The cost of this broadening, however, was a semantic watering-down: the word now includes genocide and administrative complacency, and the distinction between the two critical moral terms has collapsed. Other attempts seek to save accuracy by reducing the classification. In The Atrocity Paradigm, Claudia Card describes evil as unacceptable damage that is predictable and produced methodically by institutions that are culpable. This provides the category with stronger criteria and circumvents vacuity. But it brings with it another complication, moral luck.

Moral judgment is heavily influenced by outcomes as Thomas Nagel observed. An irresponsible deed leading to death is punished more severely than the same deed that does not result in any accident. Still, by pegging condemnation on foreseeable and vast harm, the account by Card still bears the variability on the outcomes that

are beyond the control of an agent. Evil is made unstable here: it is sometimes too broad, it is sometimes at the mercy of contingency.

Another tradition, around Bernard Williams and Alasdair MacIntyre, argues that interpretive accuracy is not best achieved by thin relativist categories, but by thick moral concepts imbedded in practices. Cruel, callous, courageous or negligent are concepts, in which terms the action is specific and with an evaluative weight. They unveil the feel of moral existence such that the clumsy dualism of good and evil cannot. Instead of trying to reach or pull towards the complex situation, instead of trying to fit the complex situation, thick terms enlarge the moral vocabulary and describe particularities more openly.

This step is backed up in modern day ethics. Other theorists suggest the retention of some form of the evil in reduced state, as privation (Augustine) or as a thin evaluative index (Wilby) but these compromises highlight the frailty of the old dichotomy. What is left is not an essential category but a rhetorical residue, useful to accentuate, but insufficient to do an analytic job. It is hard to disagree with the conclusion: as far as interpretive precision is concerned, it is the concept of good, as well as evil, which hides more than it shows, whereas the idea of thick and plural is less prone to the needs of moral cognition.

PRAGMATIC COHERENCE

The binary may still be defended even in a crude way, as pragmatically useful. Or, perhaps, there is something wrong with the moral life that it does not have the motivational clarity of extreme opposition, especially when it comes to the crises. However, when put against real-life decision making in the face of scarcity, this utility falls apart. The problem is summarised in the lifeboat metaphor by Garrett Hardin. In cases where the survival of all consumers is under threat due to too many passengers, they have to make exclusion choices. When inclusion is good and exclusion evil, it is to discount the structural limitations at work; the categories fail to short-circuit but to short-circuit the reasoning necessary.

Tristram Engelhardt and Bert Gordijn, and more recently David O'Mathunas, have argued in the context of disaster bioethics that these circumstances demonstrate the failure of idealised categories. Every possible course has a moral cost and that which is needed is not binary judgment but nonideal reasoning that incorporates regret, tragic necessity, and remaindered wrong. Pragmatic coherence requires categories that can express conflict in ways that do not reduce it to absolutes. Applied ethics strengthens the same lesson. The analysis of famine by Amartya Sen does not see starvation as a victory of evil but rather as entitlement failure: the breakdown of access to food in the form of markets, distribution and governance. Institutional reform and not metaphysical diagnosis is the practical remedy.

Under climate ethics, the work of Simon Caney on justice implies that the distribution of responsibility on mitigation and adaptation should be based on the principles of capacity, responsibility and need. Perfectly imperfect in its operationalisation, the social cost of carbon tries to bring these distributive judgments to bear. It is a simplistic set of measures to define high emissions as evil in order to hide the delicate balancing of risk and equity and temporal justice an actual government must perform. In the same manner, the climate policy instruments critiqued by Cullenward and Victor show long-term success is anchored in institutional credibility, enforceability, and resilience. They are not taken up in the binary: they need a pluralistic lexis of institutional virtues and vices. Thus, in famine, climate policy, and disaster relief alike, the binary proves pragmatically incoherent. It grants rhetoric denunciation but not direction to decision-making. The difficulty of government in scarcity is one of how to reconcile incommensurable claims, to foresee consequences, and to cope with uncertainty--questions to which the thick and plural categories are more appropriated.

SYNTHESIS

On both interpretive and pragmatic grounds, the binary of good and evil fails. They are interpretive tools that hover between over-extension and vacuity, whereas the thick concepts offer more fine discrimination. They hide the form of tragic dilemmas and prevent reasons-giving as practical guides, whereas pluralistic vocabularies enable reasons and trade-offs to be visible. The unanswered premise to the defence of the binary is that the effective condemnation must be unitary, that moral outrage must have one axis of evaluation. However, the indication is otherwise: moral clarity can be pursued more effectively by means of a moral ecology of thick, contextually-specific terms, which are complemented through institutional processes that guarantee fairness and universality. In this regard, good and evil dispensing is not a poverty but bio-refinement of our moral equipment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper will develop out of a three-domain perspective that considers moral vocabulary to be responsive to metaethical viability, normative utility and applied stress-testing. Domain I enquires whether such categories as good and evil have intelligible ontology or stable semantics; Domain II enquires whether they can provide interpretive accuracy and action-guide; Domain III takes extreme though policy-relevant dilemmas as crucibles of conceptual assessment. When a concept breaks down at a time when it should be its guidance most needed, its position is dubious. Lifeboat ethics is a restricted abstraction of nonideal choice, capped capacity,

remaindered sins, and famine governance and climate allocation are the empirical analogues (Hardin, 1974). In both, reasoning should preserve the sight of trade-offs and not degenerate into rhetorical absolutes. The outcome of this critique is diagnostic: the binary lives on either as puffed-out remains of older theologies or as watered down exclamation point. It does not work well in either instance when it is required to explain what occurred, why it is important, and what should be done next. Binary language defines lifeboat exclusion and inclusion as evil and good, but is unable to prioritize claims where the only result is loss.

The other developed here is an ecology of morals that is constructed of thick moral concepts and which is procedurally constrained. Thick concepts such as those of Williams on paradigm and MacIntyre on practice-laden terms are pregnant with description and judgment: cruel, negligent, courageous, reckless. They do not generalize axiomatically but by family resemblance, and are historically embedded but not parochial. What is new in this is to organize thickness in an ecological manner: concepts are nodes in a net whose relationships (contrast, entailment, modulation) do the normative work that was formerly monopolized by good/evil. Cruel in an ecology is the opposite of severe; reckless is moderate by circumstance, and courageous involves bearing costs in the face of fear that would otherwise be natural. Direction is based on the pattern--how these terms come into play together with constraints--as opposed to a single master predicate (Vayrynen, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2016.).

This ecology is action-worthy because of three properties. Calibration: thick terms index to morally load-bearing features (foreseeability, proportionality, reciprocity, vulnerability). Commensuration: since every term retains descriptive material, justifications are similar across fields- recklessness in policy of triage can be analysed to have the same kinship to rashness in policy of emissions (known risks, cheaper alternatives, predictable damage). Auditability: a verdict can be decomposed into claims that may be reviewed publicly ("foreseeable harm, ignored mitigation, shifted burdens to vulnerable"), which facilitates institutional learning instead of verdict inflation. This framework is better when applied to scarcity dilemmas. A moral ecology can explain: lax in cases where lifeboat capacity was allotted to low-benefit passengers; careless in cases where uncertainty was not taken into account when information was available; gallant in cases where risk was shifted onto those least able to bear it; bold in cases where those who made decisions bore equal risk; unfair in cases where load followed power and not need.

This grammar scales outward. In famine, unjust and callous track entitlement failures and policy inertia more precisely than "evil," and travel with remedies (cash transfers, price stabilization, public works). Negligent and irresponsible are attached to high-capability actors in climate who externalize risk at the cost of less expensive abatement, and reckless are attached to the knowingly lock-in harmful strategies. The vocabulary retains the rest,--tragedy without melodrama,--so that it navigates instead of stops decision. This paradigm reinvents universality. The universal wanted by the binary was one of the final predicates; the universal wanted by the ecology was one of procedures and restrictions. Thin universalism (no deliberate targeting of civilians; no policies that preclude basic capabilities) is provided by side-constraints (no policies that preclude basic capabilities) and review (post-decision audit; counterfactual testing, equity checks). The migratory nature of universality is no longer to what we refer to as acts but to the justifications and revision of acts. This is philosophically what might be called conceptual engineering: not the elimination of evaluation, but the redesigning of the interface to evaluations to suit the topology of nonideal moral life.

Williams and MacIntyre provide the resources, namely, practice-infused, virtue-skewed vocabulary, but the progress is the ecological one: the reasons interlock, travel, and stay testable where the world is tragic and resources scarce. Avoiding the words good and evil is not a question of quietism or relativism, but of the normative parallel of the resurgence of blunt instrument to articulated toolset--the latter being able to discriminate, to coordinate, and to repair.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this paper we adopt a two-part philosophical approach: (1) systematic conceptual analysis and (2) an applied case-study stress test. The conceptual analysis then goes on to define key terms, trace competing commitments in metaethics, and assess moral vocabulary relative to two normative criteria derived above: metaethical viability (M1, M2) and normative utility (E1, E2). Analytic tools (a necessary/sufficient condition test, family-resemblance mapping, semantic-use analysis in the wake of Wittgenstein) are paired with a genealogical diagnosis (in the wake of Nietzsche) and an error-theoretic critique (in the wake of Mackie). It is not only descriptive taxonomy but critical reconstruction: to demonstrate how specific conceptual commitments produce specific practical inferences and policy implications. The applied component believes that lifeboat ethics is a paradigmatic stress test. The scenario of scarcity presented by Hardin as the lifeboat is chosen as it isolates the main structural elements that make the ethics of scarcity philosophically and politically acute, viz., finite carrying capacity, incommensurable claims, irreparable losses, and distributive ranking must be put into effect. These structural characteristics are replicated in the empirical domains, namely those of famine, pandemic triage, and climate allocation, hence the thought experiment is a regulated abstraction whose implications can be extrapolated into actual institutional issues (Sen; Caney; Keohane and Victor).

The case analysis follows by using the two-domain evaluative criteria to lifeboat scenarios and subsequently comparing the result to analogy cases in famine and climate policy to check externalizability. There are canonical primary literature (Kant; Nietzsche; Arendt; Wittgenstein), metaethical and normative literature (Mackie; Williams; MacIntyre; Card), and current applied ethics/policy literature (Hardin; Sen; Caney; Keohane and Victor; disaster bioethics work including O'Mathuna). The paper combines philosophical argumentation with interdisciplinary materials (economic and institutional analyses) to the extent they shed light on the way moral language is functioning in policy contexts.

The advantages of this approach include conceptual rigour and practical applicability: conceptual analysis provides the right degree of precision and uncovers underlying commitments; the lifeboat stress test makes the argument relevant to real-world ethical-policy problems and not just speculative. Its method is clear-cut: one expresses criteria up front, analytic procedures are explicit, and applied analogues are selected on the basis of structural isomorphism to the thought experiment.

Scope and limitations are accepted. The thought experiments make simple, because lifeboat scenarios abstract away political institutions, historical injustice, and cultural difference: conclusions must be carefully translated into the empirical use. The paper focuses on Anglo-European philosophical resources and English-language policy literature; non-Western moral vocabularies and empirical moral psychology are largely excluded. The project is normative-conceptual rather than empirical: it offers a framework for analysis and institutional reform, not an empirical test of how people actually reason under scarcity. Finally, normative recommendations remain conditional: they presuppose commitment to nonideal reasoning and institutional auditability as governance desiderata (O'Mathúna).

By making criteria, texts, and inferential moves explicit, this methodology aims to be rigorous, reproducible, and candid about what the argument can and cannot establish.

CASE STUDY: 1. HARDIN'S LIFEBOAT ETHICS

The ethics of lifeboat as developed by Garrett Hardin was positioned as an attack on the humanitarian optimism of the 1970s. The picture is unforgettable: there is one boat, which is a lifeboat, and the boat is almost full of swimmers wanting to be taken to safety. Admitting them will be, so as to drown the boat; not admitting them, will be to condemn them to death. The metaphor, which is applied to the global commons, is aimed at showing that the open-handed charity towards the poor- or unlimited immigration into prosperous countries-undermines the ecological and economic well-being of everyone (Hardin, 1974). It is so attractive because of its simplicity of arrangement: scarcity, limit and tragic necessity seem to be reduced to one, inevitable decision. But even the simplicity which causes the metaphor its rhetoric power hides the most disturbing of assumptions. Hardin assumes that the lifeboat is a closed and closed-ended system in which the capacity is strictly defined. However, with this structure the analysis has been prejudiced to a static rather than a dynamic scarcity logic. Real world lifeboats are not merely physical containers, but they are part of a production/distribution/cooperation system. This is exactly what Sen writes about famine: there is no starvation because food is unavailable but because, due to market structure, wages, state responsiveness, and so on, people have no entitlement (Sen, 1981).

Similarly, the climate crisis, which has frequently been framed like Hardin to imply that it is too many passengers on one planet, is not merely a problem of exhausted biophysical sinks, but of mal-distributed emissions, institutional inertia, and technological underuse. Hardin pre-empts the space in which institutional design and distributive justice might act when he builds scarcity as natural and absolute. The binary form of the metaphor also wipes over the gradations of responsibility. The occupants of a lifeboat should be allowed to defend their seats (lifeboat) by virtue of being already inside. But the manner in which those seats were obtained--by chance or force, or by historical demolition--has not been investigated. The postcolonial arguments would insist that those countries that are in the lifeboat today did not get there due to mere luck; they rowed there by centuries of uneven resource acquisition. In this way, the element of exclusion Hardin is defending is plagued by the exclusion history itself. What is offered in the name of tragic necessity is a sedimented allocation of privilege, distorted by figurative abstraction.

Another paradox is that Hardin appeals to moral absolutism and at the same time denies it. He puts humanitarian aid in the context of naive goodness that results in universal annihilation, and exclusion in the context of tragic and yet sensible harshness that is the only way to survive. The rhetoric brings with it therefore the very binary, good versus evil, that this paper has problematized. The swimmers are made symbolic of the nostalgic good intentions, the occupants of the serious realism. However, the categories fail when one looks closer: what seems like rational prudence on the part of those in the boat can also be culpable negligence considered through the prism of foreseeable harm and responsibility on a global scale. The dichotomy blurs instead of explaining the compound stratification of negligence, cowardice and injustices in action. Moral concepts can be mapped richer through the ecological perspective that has been derived above. It can be called as unjust when there is exclusion without historical responsibility. Negligence may be referred to as ignoring viable options, which may include; redistribution of supplies, rotation of passengers, coordination of rescue. Denying the risk on the basis of equal distribution and throwing it on the weakest person can be called cowardice.

On the other hand, the process of decision-making that involves the taking of proportionate risks or sacrifice of privilege in favour of the survival of the whole group can be described as courageous. These conceptual heavy-handed ideas make the structure of the dilemma visible in a fashion that the binary of good and evil cannot. Now what is the unelucidated premise at the core of Hardin metaphor? The argument is that scarcity dilemmas can never be resolved through transformation, but only through exclusion. The lifeboat picture assumes predetermined capacity, predetermined limits and predetermined identities of insiders and outsiders. Yet actual lifeboats, such as food systems, climate agreements, or migration regimes, are plastic: they can be extended and extended with cooperation, drawn and redrawn with boundaries, and moved with insider-outsider boundaries with institutional reform.

The logic of Hardin only works, when we put these possibilities on hold. Therefore, lifeboat ethics is important to this paper not because it offers a true picture of scarcity in the world, but because it reveals the stakes of holding onto blunt binaries in times of stress. It shows that moral words define the dimensions of perceived choice: name the swimmers evil and they have to be left out; name the occupants good and their privileges seem to be rightful. But re-imagine the scene in ecological moral language and one would find the language of evaluation altered: we find negligence, cowardice or injustice where Hardin finds only realism. The lifeboat is not so much a representation of global order as it is a reflexion of our conceptual commitments: the duality of good and evil renders tragedy, whereas the multiplicity of ecological vocabulary leaves the possibility of a co-ordinated survival open.

2. THE BINARY APPLIED: GOOD AND EVIL IN THE LIFEBOAT

On the one hand, when the categories of the good and the evil are explicitly superimposed upon the lifeboat of Hardin, they seem to provide some moral clarity. The urge to save the drowning is termed as good, the unwillingness to give help as evil. Such compression is understandably appealing in an era of crisis rhetoric: it implies immediate judgment without postulating. Hardin himself was dependent on this intuitive overlay, but he turned it inside out: humanitarian good became, in his evaluation, the very way to disaster, and the ostensibly evil refusal to share turned out to be, in his analysis, the actual state of common survival. Therefore, the dichotomy seems to be able to be dialectically surprising: what appears to be good can be destructive, what appears to be evil can be prudent. But when pressed, this reversal is not a fortification of the dichotomy, but it reveals its lack of sense. In order to defend Hardin, we might say that the binary is essential exactly in the sense that it helps us see the tragic irony--that benevolence may be disastrous, and that cruelty may guarantee survival. The strength of the categories used here is to have shock value, to dramatize counterintuitive truth. In its absence, there is no good and evil, so the defence goes, and the moral paradox of lifeboat ethics stops being rhetorically effective.

Yet this steel-manning betrays the first crack: when one can so easily reverse the binary to make it function the other way, it stops being a useful guide. When it is possible to project humanitarian rescue as good and evil given the theoretical perspective of the speaker, then the categories are not anchoring evaluation but simply the amplification of the premise of the speaker. The frame changes the meaning, and we are left with stress and not analysis. It is the inversion itself that appears to be dramatizing moral complexity, yet it is semantic fragility. More essentially, the binary fails, the lifeboat ethics is not a conflict of good and evil players but rival positions of limited resources. The drowning are not evil spirits, they are casualties. The passengers of the boat are not representatives of good, they are the representatives of the contingent position. In this, the binary compels a misdescription. It turns structural dilemmas, scarcity, entitlement, historical responsibility, into virtue and vice stereotypes. The semiotic compression removes the feel of agency, responsibility and institutional mediation. The cross-over between binary framing and Hardin assumptions themselves is instructive.

Both assume the naturalness of scarcity and its impossibility to be changed, and both preclude institutional imagination. The fact that one describes such refusal of rescue as either good or evil is already to internalize the belief that the decision is between personal good and personal bad, but not between alternative systemic arrangements. Here is the unresolved presumption: that moral judgment should be given in atomised binaries and not institutional ecologies. When this supposition is revealed, the seeming clarity of the binary disappears. There is a load of contradiction when the binary is pressed. When exclusion is evil, boat occupants must be deplored with the slit of their backs; when it is good, then humanitarian motives are deplored as a sign of weakness.

Either way, the binary obliterates gradations, recklessness, negligence, injustice, cowardice, or courage, the actual moral stakes. Even more regrettable it anticipates a tragic recognition. A dichotomous judgment suggests closure (good rather than evil) when the desert that is left in cases of lifeboats is irreparable loss. The survivors do not live their purity but with the leftover evils. The breakdown of binary is more evident when we compare it to a pluralistic moral ecology. Thick concepts can make us notice that exclusion can be negligent when substitutes can be found, unjust when risks are assigned by tracking historical privilege, cowardly when risks are pushed downwards and courageous when leaders accept equal risk. All of these verdicts do not add up to either good or evil, but they create the scenery of morality. The binary suppresses this granularity, and there is only rhetorical stress. Synthesizing, therefore: the good/evil dichotomy applied to lifeboat ethics does not help to refine

moral analysis, but obscures it. It is susceptible to previous assumptions, structural features are erased by its compression, and it denies tragic residue because of the capacity to invert meanings.

The hypocrisy is that the binary is most shocking when it is shocking--when it makes evil out to be good and vice versa--but by so doing it makes clear that it has no referent whatsoever. It is not a compass but a megaphone. The unresolved supposition behind Hardin and his opponents is that morality needs one evaluative dimension. That assumption is demolished in this paper. It is only a moral ecology and not a binary that is capacious enough to embrace the complexity of survival in scarcity without reducing the difference into a caricature.

3. ALTERNATIVE MORAL ECOLOGY: THICK CONCEPTS AND THE TRIAGE PARALLEL

The deconstruction of the good/evil dichotomy of lifeboat ethics does not just leave us empty. Instead, it requires a different prism that is in a position to manage moral pluralism without falling into relativism or stalemate. It is here that the theory of moral ecology and thick moral ideas comes in, not to provide a clean and ready substitute of the binary, but a whole other grammar of morality-reason one that is adaptive, plural and embedded in context.

FROM BINARY COLLAPSE TO ECOLOGICAL PLURALISM

The good/evil division comes with a definite answer: a consistent yardstick on which all decisions can be judged. But the lifeboat that Hardin creates unveils that certainty is an illusion. Any decision: rescue, refusal, sacrifice, has a moral justification and a moral loss. To continue calling such decisions to be good or evil is to make the problem a caricature. But it is also unsustainable to do away with moral judgment altogether. Lifeboat decision is not only logistics, but it is a trial of fire, where moral identity, trust and legitimacy are built. Such a paradox necessitates a paradigm that recognizes total invaluable conflict and retains the prospect of normativity. Moral ecology offers such a grounding: morality as a system of interdependent strategies, in which no one value holds claim but many values have to negotiate in tension (Williams, 1985).

THICK CONCEPTS AS MORAL TEXTURE

This is critical of the thick moral concepts as described by Bernard Williams. Thick concepts such as loyalty, betrayal, courage, or cruelty are unlike the thin evaluative markers in that they integrate evaluative weight and descriptive specificity. Is it not in the case of lifeboats not whether it is good to save a human being but whether it is betrayal to leave a child behind or is it courage to lose one's own life. These ideas have a historical and cultural reverberation, acting through the vocabulary of lived life of people. Their strength is in their world oriented and action-oriented duality: they are tellings of what is taking place and at the same time are telling us on how we should act. When re-articulated as ecological, lifeboat ethics is less about the maximization of abstract goods and more a matter of bargaining over which thick concepts a community wants to respect in moments of crisis (Vayrynen, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Thick Ethical Concepts," 2016.).

The operation of thick concepts within a moral ecology in scarcity is shown by medical triage. Doctors making decisions on who to attend to first use such concepts as urgency, vulnerability, dignity and hope. They can all be neither reduced to good nor to evil; they are both descriptive and evaluative, and they influence moral action in multiple, even competing, formations. Good triage procedures cannot eliminate these tensions, but they institutionalize a system of balancing them: committees, guidelines and transparent procedures (Rawlings et al.). It is this ecological structuring of plural values that is lacking in what lifeboat ethics lacks, and that is found in triage. Through the parallelism, we recognize that the lifeboat cannot be envisioned as a zero-sum test but rather as a dynamic system in which thick concept vocabulary can help communities cope with the tragedy without bifurcating it in binary terms.

STEELMAN AND DISMANTLING

To read Hardin's metaphor of the lifeboat charitably, we must face scarcity in its purest expression. His calculus of utilitarianism (preserve the boat, save the most) brings to fore the harsh need of restraint. It also presupposes that the only categories which matter are numerical survival and abstract good. Here the binary fails in its own austerity. It lacks the way real human agents go through such dilemmas: with shame, honour, loyalty, betrayal and memory (Williams, 1985). The ecological model does not reject scarcity it accentuates it. But it would not give moral life the treatment of arithmetic. It acknowledges that saving people is not the only criteria used to determine the legitimacy of lifeboat decisions but also the moral capital preserved. A society that lives by betrayal can in the long term, betray those trusts which it is based on to survive.

The other is neither moral relativism nor absolutism, but a moral ecology that frames thick concepts in dynamic fields of cooperation, conflict and adaptation. In this case, lifeboat ethics is not a challenge of who is good but rather a challenge of how moral communities digest tragedy. Do they valorize sacrifice? Do they stigmatize betrayal? Are they dignified even in disintegration? Such are not fringe questions--they are the very stuff of moral survival. Moral ecology as such concept is in this respect not merely an analytical instrument, but

a normative assertion: the well-being of a moral community is not in its subordination to binary categories, but in the viability of its thick concepts and the plasticity of its ethical ecosystem.

4. COMPARATIVE STRESS TESTS

The coherence of any moral system, as measured in the abstract, shows its strength, but the test of strength lies here in the manner in which the system is carried through difficult circumstances. One such crucible is lifeboat ethics, another is famine allocation, another is climate burden-sharing and another is pandemic triage. But in order to determine whether the dichotomy of good/evil or the proposed moral ecology is satisfactory, we need to compare them with the benchmarks of the significant philosophical traditions: sentimentalism of Hume, genealogical critique of Nietzsche, and practice-dependent virtue ethics of MacIntyre. The comparative stress test is no academic side street but an inevitable test: these vocabularies break under the strains that these thinkers are diagnosing, the viability of these vocabularies is questionable.

HUME: SENTIMENT AS MORAL COMPASS

Hume is correct in his argument that morality is a product of sentiment rather than reason, and so, provides a good counter to lifeboat abstraction. According to him, the dilemma of the lifeboat would not be solved by finding out the result or applying the binaries but by taking care of the sympathetic resonance that holds human beings together. Steel-manned, the method used by Hume brings out a certain truth, which Hardin hides, and here it is an element that makes us as human beings, our moral instincts to make us want to rescue even at the expense. Yet, under stress, sentiment risks collapse into partiality—sympathy for those near, indifference for those distant. The duality of good and evil does not fare any better here: it hones the feeling to melodrama, but it is unable to rectify the parochial boundaries. A moral ecology, however, can be disciplining of sentiment, and yet not extinguishing--established compassion into classification, such as cruelty, negligence and betrayal, which maintain the descriptive hold without exorbiting the check. Hume therefore exerts pressure on the binary to degrade into partial affect, but lets thick concepts mediate affect into institutional form (Hume, *Treatise*, Book 3; Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Moral Sentimentalism," Section 2.2).

NIETZSCHE: GENEALOGY AND THE SUSPICION OF MORALITY

Nietzsche offers another form of stress test. His genealogy reveals good and evil as a contingent of ressentiment in history. In this sense lifeboat ethics is a morality game that masquerades power: the insiders justify exclusion by rationalizing it as necessity, the excluded justify their moralization by rationalizing it as justice. Steelmanned, Nietzsche compels us to some of the forms in which binary verdicts as well as ecological ideas dangerously cover up will-to-power in disguise of evaluative garments. Also, one could discuss even negligence or cowardice as instruments of control. The unresolved assumption that he reveals is that any moral vocabulary pretends to be neutral when it is actually engaged in power. In response to this criticism, the moral ecology approach should acknowledge its contingency: it is not strong in overcoming power but offers mechanisms of self-criticism, institutional auditing and iterative challenge. Where the binary dissolves into ressentiment, ecology endures by renouncing the pretence of purity--by recognizing that its terms are revisible positions in a living moral order, not omnipotent decisions (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, First Treatise).

MACINTYRE: VIRTUE WITHIN PRACTICES

MacIntyre moves the axis one more. Morality to him can be intelligible only in the teleology of practices and traditions. The separation of lifeboat as a social narrative is as inexplicable: it is not the abstract exclusion that is of interest but the virtues that a seafaring people use in a crisis. Steel-manned, this criticism hits straight at the abstraction of Hardin as well as the rejection of Nietzsche. Here the binarism of good/evil fails as it cannot establish itself within a tradition; it functions as a floating rhetoric. Thick concepts, however, are exactly the sort of practice-laden concepts MacIntyre admires. Courage, loyalty, justice and prudence can only work in traditions that uphold its meaning. Stress test discloses the latent dependency of the ecological framework: its working power supposes institutions that are able to maintain the practices within which the thick concepts of concepts are dwelling. Where customs are breaking loose, ecology runs the risk of decaying into eclecticism (MacIntyre, *After Virtue* and the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy text on practices).

UNSOLVED ASSUMPTION: STABILITY OF THE MORAL FIELD

In these tests, a pattern comes out. Hume emphasizes how unstable sentiment is, Nietzsche on how contingent power can be, MacIntyre on how weak traditions are. Their similarity is in the exposure of a shared assumption of both binary and ecological vocabularies, namely, the assumption that moral fields are sufficiently stable to permit categories to inform action. Stress tests look different: sympathy is just reduced, power is corrupted, traditions are rotten. The binary then retaliates on the basis of absolutism but fails to attain coherence. The moral ecology then reacts by admitting contingency- acknowledging that its categories are not permanent mooring posts, but responsive tools. It is not the eradication of stress, but its metabolism, wherein plural concepts,

the procedural constraints are meant to work and re-work to stabilize the moral field anew. In such a manner, the comparative stress test justifies the good and evil passing. The binary breaks under sentiment, genealogy, and practice alike. By contrast, a moral ecology, although it cannot be distorted, is resilient: it recognises the residue of tragedy, the ensnaring grip of power, and the necessity of narrative practices. It does not give us a definitive answer, but a durability of a method of thinking in crisis- a structure that is alive exactly because it can and even absorb, stress.

IV. DISCUSSION

The analysis of lifeboat ethics through the lens of binary collapse and moral ecology yields several important normative implications. At the closest level, it demands a rethinking of the types according to which ethics is taught, practised and institutionalised. The simplicity of the good/evil dichotomy is appealing: it allows making quick decisions, gives motivation clarity, and is a rhetorical shortcut to outrage. However, as the lifeboat stress test shows, it is deceptive. Binary language simplifies things when making decisions with tragic trade-offs, irreducible plural values and institutional complicity. Accordingly, an educational normative implication is needed: philosophy and ethics pedagogy should be restructured to put thick concepts and moral ecologies on the forefront, and not on the backburner, thin abstractions. Students who are trained in binaries develop a feel of melodrama, yet they have no word to explain betrayal, negligence, or courage when they come across them in real life. In comparison, a training in rich moral ideas develops descriptive acuity and contextual reasoning to help moral agents work within a world of scarcity and uncertainty without falling into absolutism or cynicism.

A common objection that is to be expected is that the rejection of the binary is likely to take away the motivational force. Moral rhetoric history implies that such concepts as evil still have mobilising strength: antigenocide, antislavery, or antiapartheid campaigns have depended on the visceral clarity of such ideas. In the absence of such rallying cries the critics fear, political stagnation intensifies. This concern has force. But the answer is that the thick moral notions, rather than weakening motivation, may enhance it by rendering injustice an experience. When one says that an act is cruel, cowardly, or negligent, one is not speaking less urgently than when one says that something is evil; one is name the quality in which something is lived. Thick concepts fail to elevate wrongs to cosmic level, but they place it within human practices, that is their reason to be resonant. Shock is not eliminated, only it is channelled in more precise registers (Vayrynen, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Thick Ethical Concepts,” 2016.).

The other objection is accessibility. Binaries are cognitively easy: they can be understood by children, and they can be mobilized by publics. The thick concepts of morality, on the contrary, might be regarded as elitist, as they need historical depth or culture specificity. But this also may be exaggerated. Human civilization already resides in dense moral vocabularies: families describe terms such as betrayal and loyalty, soldiers glorify courage, activists talk about dignity and solidarity. The alleged inaccessibility is an issue of curriculum design rather than of human cognition. Throughout the incorporation of big ideas within moral education, we do not introduce foreign categories but provide a verbal expression of the moral grammar into which people already have to enter. It could be a binary, but not natural--a cultural artefact that can be lost.

A third criticism is that of the loss of outrage. The dichotomy enables individuals to condemn evils with gut confidence. With the shift to plural ecology, we may even be courting paralysis: too many competing values, no definite judgment. But the answer to that is that the outcry that is not very accurate becomes spectacle. The binary sustains performative outrage in public discourse but rarely yields durable solutions. Thick concepts enable sharper anger based on greater specificity: not anger at evil in the abstract but at particular acts of cruelty, betrayal, or cowardice. The anger persists, though it is gaining momentum, in that it is attached to recognizable practices and recoverable harms. The general consequences of this framework go well beyond the philosophical realm into areas of policy.

Consider refugee policy. The lifeboat analogy of Hardin has often been used in connection with migration, where it was argued that being a good person is a tragic choice to not be able to migrate. Binary is amenable to stark moral melodramas: the kind but gullible good of open borders, or the sober but mean-spirited refusal of asylum. A moral ecology puts the question in a new perspective. The term negligence, cowardice or injustice is more descriptive when it comes to the policies that place risk on the most vulnerable and deny them proportional burden-sharing. Other admission and integration practices are characterised as courage, loyalty, and solidarity. With the vocabulary shift, policy discussions cease being the hostages of binary arguments and may be subject to plural moral registers more appropriate in representing the stakes. Another sphere is climate ethics. The crisis is presented as a cosmic drama by appeals to the good stewardship or evil of the fossil fuel industries. But the actual moral vices are more parsimonious: laxity in not making plausible transitions, unfairness in letting the weak bear unequal costs, timidity in not taking on board deep-rooted lobbies.

Moral concepts thicken responsibility by making it spread across institutions and actors. They do not take in the moralising spectacle of climate summits, but demand institutional bravery and distributive justice. It is the differentiated accountability that is lost in the simplicity of the binary; this is what is revealed by moral ecology.

Artificial intelligence creates a modern boundary. Audi popularis already swings between the utopian good (AI as salvation) and the apocalyptic evil (AI as existential risk). This dichotomous framing eclipses the more immediate moral ecology: carelessness in architecture, timidity in postponing regulation, iniquitousness in the harvesting of data, or betrayal of popular faith. Naming these particular ills, moral ecology does not establish the ethics of AI on the basis of hypothetical binaries, but on the reality of practice in development, deployment, and governance. Indignation about AI evil can fuel headline but thick concepts are the ones that name the levers of reform. The normative implication of this research therefore is not abandonment of moral judgment but rather a transformation.

The dichotomy between good and evil fails in the presence of lifeboat dilemmas, in that it is a mischaracterization of complexity and pre-empts nuance, and eliminates institutional texture. By contrast, moral ecology offers a different architecture that maintains motivation, maintains outrage, and becomes more accessible by putting wrongs in the vocabulary already available in communities. It does not add theoretical tidiness but practical resilience: a mode of thinking that is able to metabolise tragedy, move around among plural values, and reveal injustice in its various forms. Crucially, by taking the discussion as far in both directions as the implication of lifeboat abstraction into the educational pedagogy and of objections into replies, of theory into refugee, climate and AI policy, the discussion shows that the decision to discard the concept of good and evil is not a moral withdrawal but an extension of our evaluative repertoire. By giving up the binary, it is specifically that we regain that subtlety, which we need to confront the crises of our time.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the categories of "good" and "evil," long assumed to be indispensable to moral thought, collapse when subjected to the stress tests of scarcity, tragedy, and institutional decision-making. Hardin's lifeboat metaphor showed the binary's fragility: its inversion of moral labels dramatized paradox but revealed their emptiness as stable guides. Comparative engagement with Hume, Nietzsche, and MacIntyre exposed the deeper fault: sentiment narrows, power corrupts, traditions fragment—yet in each case the binary proved too blunt to capture the complexity of moral life under duress.

Against this collapse, the paper proposed an alternative: a moral ecology grounded in thick moral concepts. Concepts such as courage, betrayal, negligence, and solidarity retain evaluative weight while preserving descriptive texture, allowing for plural and context-sensitive judgments. The lifeboat, reframed through moral ecology, ceases to be a melodrama of good and evil and becomes a test of which virtues and vices a community chooses to enact in crisis. When extended to famine, refugee policy, climate change, and artificial intelligence, this ecological framework demonstrates its greater explanatory power and normative precision.

The contribution of this work is twofold. First, it offers a conceptual advance: showing that thick concepts within a moral ecology are not merely adjuncts to ethical discourse but necessary replacements for the exhausted binary of good and evil. Second, it provides practical direction: suggesting that institutions, curricula, and policies adopt an ecological moral vocabulary to navigate complexity without resorting to abstraction or spectacle.

Future research might explore how such vocabularies evolve across cultures, or how institutional design can sustain moral ecologies under systemic stress. What is clear is that dispensing with "good" and "evil" does not diminish moral life. It deepens it, by recovering the plural textures through which human beings actually live, suffer, and deliberate together.

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