

Dead Serious: Evil and the Ontology of the Undead

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I don't know whether undead beings exist. I also think it is an open question whether anyone is evil in, say, the way bad guys are depicted in supernatural horror films and serial killer movies. I do think it's nevertheless puzzling that the undead are frequently portrayed as evil in that way. I'm inclined to think that *if* we were to stumble across any undead they would be *less* likely to be evil than any random live person we stumble across. Consider this a call for some undead understanding.

I am going to approach these conclusions in a roundabout way. First, I'll try to sketch something of an ontology of the undead, an account of their nature and variety. Then, I'll show how these considerations should change how we think about the undead and their purported propensity for evil.

Some puzzles about undeath

Commonsense conceptions of the undead aren't perfect, but they are a good place to start.

Without a good supply of undead to study, it simply isn't possible to proceed by studying them as scientists might. I'll therefore begin with our ideas or concepts of the undead.

Some philosophers (the editors of this book, actually) have proposed this account of what we mean by *undead*: it refers to "that class of beings who at some point were living creatures, have died, and have come back such that they are not presently 'at rest'." This definition seems like a good place to start. It is a perfectly reasonable construal of how we tend to think about the undead, to the extent that we do, and it is consistent with how the undead are portrayed in literature, movies, television, video games, and other aspects of popular culture.

On the account we've started with, it is a requirement that there be some death involved prior to undeath. Something undead can't have stayed dead. An interesting thing about these elements of our working definition is that we don't have to have experimented on the undead to know these things. We just have to have an adequate grasp of the concept of 'undead' to recognize that anything that is going to count as undead has to have died (and thus lived), in at least some recognizable sense of having died. Because they are grounded in our concepts, let's call these truths about the undead *conceptual truths*.

Three quick clarifications are in order. First, there can be conceptual truths about things that do not exist. There can be conceptual truths about unicorns, even though unicorns surely do not exist (unlike the undead, perhaps). One such conceptual truth might be that under normal conditions an adult unicorn has a horn. This truth doesn't require that unicorns exist in any substantial sense. The same goes for any truths about the undead.

Second, all I mean by the notion of a conceptual truth is the idea that from where we currently stand, there are some things that would have to be true of an entity for us to treat it as even a candidate for being undead, at least right here and right now. Our experiences might give us reason to change our concepts, and thus the conceptual truths about something, but nothing in what follows turns on these sorts of details.

Third, this definition does rule out some things that we might be tempted to think of as undead. There is a category of creatures called "philosophical zombies." These are beings who, apart from lacking consciousness, are like normal human beings in their outward appearance.

Although the name might distract, I believe that we should hold that philosophical zombies are no more undead than is the rock musician and horror movie director Rob Zombie.¹

Most interesting truths aren't conceptual. Non-conceptual truths require that we learn something about the way the world is put together. Our commonsense concept of a twenty-first birthday party may require that there be someone (or something) for whom the party is intended (a conceptual truth), but this does not settle when and where a particular party is held, nor whether twenty-first birthday parties are generally good or bad. Concepts don't settle these things by themselves. Similarly, that there are conceptual truths about the undead does not mean that all truths about the undead are purely conceptual. We may discover that the undead are somewhat different from what we expected, just as we might learn that particular parties are better or worse than we expected. How and why that might be is something I will address in a moment.

Sometimes we find that a concept is just not decisive on some issue. Consider the idea that the undead are not "at rest." Presumably this means that the undead are not straightforwardly dead. But are they alive? Are they some other thing? I suspect that we will not find agreement in common sense thinking on this issue.

When common sense is unsettled about something, we have to recognize that any attempt to "clean up" or unify our thinking about some concept will require changing how at least some (and maybe even all) of us think about this issue. In the case of the undead, this might mean that any attempt to decide whether the undead are alive, dead, or something else entirely will require departures from the way some or all of us tend to think about these things. These departures might be motivated by things we learn from studying undead specimens, were we to find any.

¹ For a groundbreaking piece of zombie ontology, and further reasons to think that philosophical zombies simply are not zombies in the undead sense of the word, see David Chalmers' classification of zombies at

And, these departures might be motivated by reflecting on accounts we have of life. If, for example, some of the things we thought about the undead relied on erroneous understandings of what life means, then we should expect that a suitably informed understanding of life might change how we think about the undead.

For now, it is enough that we acknowledge that (1) there are some conceptual truths about the undead, (2) these conceptual truths provide partial characterizations of the nature of the undead that require further supplementation, and (3) what supplementation is provided may change the way we think about the undead.

Kinds of undead

I now want to turn to one way of supplementing the way we think about the undead. It's helpful to think about two different kinds of things, *nominal kinds* and *natural kinds*. What makes something a 'nominal kind' is that it is what it is in virtue of our having defined it that way. "The stuff on my desk" is a nominal kind, in that I can think of or treat it as a kind, but the sense in which it is a kind of thing is very loose and largely (perhaps entirely) dependent on my thinking or stipulating that it is a kind. On the other end of the spectrum are natural kinds, things like water and electrons, which are (let us suppose), roughly, real, non-artificial, non-socially constructed kinds of things. In between, there are presumably lots of kinds of kinds, such as *social kinds* (ethnicity, and maybe race and gender) and *artifactual kinds* (computers, toasters, and chairs), and so on.

I believe that the undead do not make up a natural kind (or an unnatural kind, for that matter). Instead, the term 'undead' refers to something closer to a nominal kind, a motley crew of different things whose unity is more a function of how we happen to have constructed the

category and less a function of any unity in the universe's own organization. For example, apart from being both thought of as "undead," there seems to be little that connects zombies and vampires. One lacks higher mental capacities and the other has them. One requires a diet of brains and the other a diet of blood. One has a body that is rotting and the other has a body that is capable of repairing itself from a wide range of injuries. Indeed, whether an undead creature is identical to the creature associated with the body prior to death seems to vary. Vampires pretty clearly seem to be their old selves (albeit with a case of vampirism). Zombies, while sporting the rotting bodies of former people, do not themselves seem to be the persons who once were in those bodies. It's not even clear whether a body has to remain even mostly intact in order to count as undead. At least in principle, there doesn't seem to be any reason to rule out the possibility of composite undead, something constructed out of disparate parts, each of which was attached to a different body, each of which died. Perhaps the Frankenstein monster is an instance of an artificially created composite undead.

If I am right, the undead do not make up a single natural kind. To put the point somewhat technically (bear with me for two sentences), the undead make up something like a nominal kind, where various members of that nominal kind (vampires, zombies, composite undead, etc.) may themselves be further nominal kinds or in some cases natural kinds. What determines the limits of the overarching nominal kind (i.e., the borders demarcating undead and not undead) are largely fixed by what conceptual truths there are about the undead, and any constraints imposed by the universe on the reality of the undead. In other words, there are lots of ways to be undead, and some of those ways may be more and less a product of our way of thinking about things.

I now want to shift from discussing what we might exaggeratedly call "purely conceptual" issues about the undead to ways in which some otherwise perfectly boring facts

about the world should shape our understanding of the undead. In particular, I believe we can learn something about the undead by canvassing some of the possibilities of how undead creatures might come to be.

First, we must acknowledge undead of supernatural origin. This would include any undead brought about by the work of magic. A zombie created by the spell of a sorcerer would be an instance of something undead of supernatural origin, as would be one created by the will of a demon. Prior to the last part of the twentieth century, this may have been the predominant way of thinking about the origins of the undead. You might be tempted to think that *all* instances of the undead must have supernatural origins (perhaps you think this is a conceptual truth). But this does not seem plausible. Indeed, the trajectory of popular culture has increasingly been to emphasize the origin of the undead in viruses or biological weapons programs initiated by entirely non-magical agents (see, for example, Max Brooks' excellent book *The Zombie Survival Guide*, and movies such as *28 Days Later*, *Resident Evil* video games and movies, *Blade* comic books and movies, and so on.). My point is that although we might discover that the undead are entirely of supernatural origin, this is a contingent empirical fact, something we would have to learn from the field and not from the philosopher's armchair.

A second important class of undead origin is *artificial*. These would be undead who were created by agents (whether human, divine, demonic, or other) by entirely non-magical means. The bio-weapons program gone awry in *Resident Evil* or the accidentally released virus in *28 Days Later* would be an instance of the creation of undead by artificial origin.²

² As I was writing this essay, news reports about re-animated dogs ("Zombie dogs!" screamed a few headlines) were surfacing, in light of work done at Safar Center for Resuscitation Research in Pittsburgh, PA. The researchers were horrified that their work on resuscitation was being represented in this way. I wonder if part of the problem is that the researchers have prejudicial views about undead, of the sort this essay is meant to dispel. The existence of these dogs and the headlines they provoked lend credence to the idea of there being undead by artificial means. For a useful summary of the media flurry about it, see Jennifer Bails, *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, July 18, 2005, available here: <http://pittsburghlive.com/x/tribune-review/trib/regional/s_348517.html>.

The third possibility would be undead whose creation is by entirely natural forces, devoid of the intervention of agents. Some accounts of vampirism seem to have this structure, treating it as a virus that developed by mutation on its own, as opposed to, say, the intervention of a lab of genetic engineers or the infernal actions of the devil.

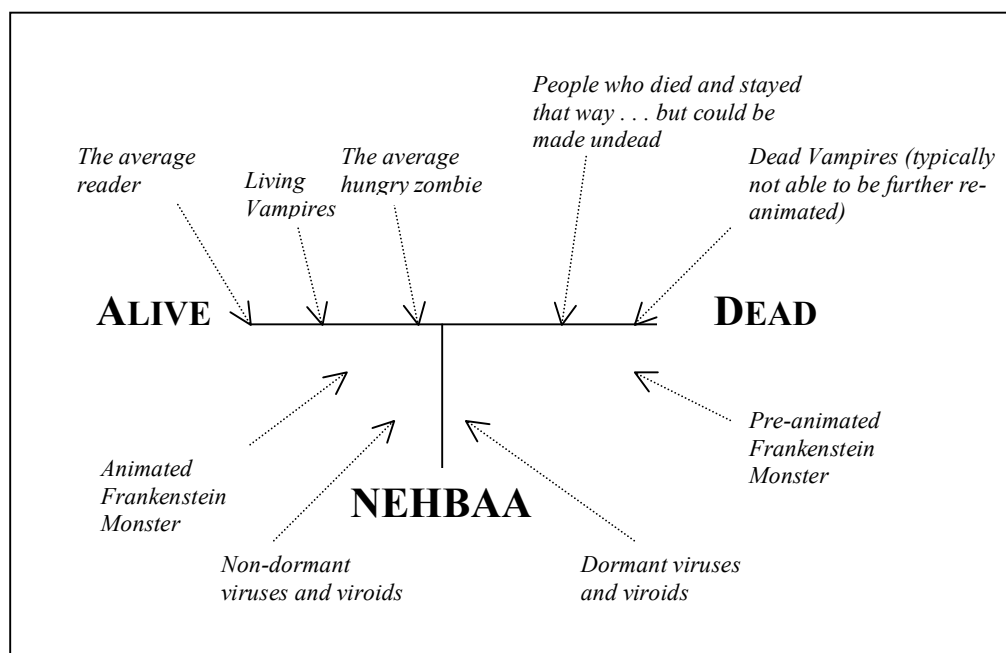
Once you realize that the undead might be of natural origin, you might also wonder whether we have already encountered some undead and just not recognized them as such. Consider that there are a range of mysterious, “quasi-living” entities that we do not yet understand well. These include viruses and the even less well known viroids. It is unclear whether these entities count as living. At least for some of them, it is possible to introduce conditions that stop all quasi-living functioning but then to change those conditions so that their functioning is restored. If we come to count viruses and viroids as living, then those capable of ceasing and recovering their quasi-living functioning might be candidates for the undead. And, given what we know, these might well make up the largest chunk of the undead population. Moving up several levels of biological complexity, there are a range of plant and animal entities whose biological functions can be brought to a complete halt and then restored or “re-started.” It is natural to think of many of these things as living throughout the process—seeds are commonly taken to be alive, even when frozen or put in some context where all metabolic activity ceases—but this raises interesting questions about the extent to which being alive is not merely a feature of an entity (the seed) but instead an entity and a context together. Maybe whether you are alive or dead depends on facts about more than you, but also facts about the environment you find yourself in.

Working out all the possibilities of a context-sensitive account of life is too big a project for this essay, but it does suggest a few possibilities for our reflections on the undead. If we

acknowledge that contextual features play a role in determining what counts as living, we would have to say a great deal more about what those features are if we are not to count the undead as living. In turn, this would open up the possibility that some of the living are undead. Consider that some people (including baseball player Ted Williams) have been cryogenically frozen soon after their death, in hopes that at some later date they might be revived and restored to life. Should we think of this as a case of someone becoming undead? What about someone who “dies” in the emergency room but is then revived? Puzzling cases abound for supernatural forms of the undead as well. Was Lazarus of biblical fame undead? How about the resurrected Jesus? How about everyone whose body is resurrected on Judgment Day? Resurrection somehow seems different from becoming undead, but maybe this judgment is a result of our piecemeal understanding of both of these categories.

A useful way to sort out some of these complexities is to suppose that there is a multi-axis continuum of phenomena with poles that include alive, dead, and not-ever-having-been-alive-at-all (NEHBAA). Different kinds of beings, undead or otherwise, will occupy different places along this multi-axis continuum. That is, lots of everyday stuff will cluster in a range of spaces near one end or another of the alive, dead, and NEHBAA poles (see the diagram below). Your current pet is hopefully alive, but depending on its health it might be more or less close to the dead pole. Your great-great-great grandfather is probably at or very close to the dead pole and remote from the alive pole. Viruses and other unusual creatures rest somewhere between alive and the NEHBAA pole. If we think about things in this way, it becomes natural to think of undeath as including a wide range of states that fall in between all of these poles. Vampires may be alive enough to be counted as alive. Zombies might fall on the other side of a vague line demarcating life and death. Composite forms of the undead (think Frankenstein’s monster) might

turn out never to have been alive as a unit (although many and maybe even all parts will have been parts of different entities that were themselves alive), and thus they would be somewhere approaching the NEHBAA pole. Depending on their construction, composite undead might also come in various degrees of livingness. In sum, the class of undead creatures is likely to occupy a large and diverse state space, with different kinds of undead clustering in different areas in that state space. In other words, there is more diversity among the undead than the usual catalog of vampires, zombies, and so on might lead you to believe.



A touch of evil

People use the word *evil* in a lot of different ways. The sense of evil I'm interested in is perhaps most familiar to us from fictional representations, reserved for a kind of person who has a disregard for morality and a special desire to see others injured. Hannibal Lecter may be the clearest example. Sauron and Iago might also be cases, depending on your interpretations of them. Serial killers, or at least our representations of them (think of John Gacy or Jeffrey

Dahmer), tend to fit the bill. This sort of evil (although maybe there are varieties of evil here, too) seems to be recognizably different from other things we sometimes describe as evil.

I want to acknowledge up front that there are other senses of the term ‘evil’, senses I am not interested in for present purposes. For example, philosophers and theologians sometimes use ‘evil’ as a trumped up way of meaning “anything bad from a moral standpoint,” as in when they discuss “The Problem of Evil” (roughly, how could an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful God allow bad things to exist?). However, this usage is a very large departure from how we ordinarily talk about evil, to the extent that we do. If you sneak a cookie from a cookie jar, you might have done something morally bad, but it is a stretch to call what you did evil in the sense in which we think of movie serial killers as evil. The sense of evil I am interested in is something closer to how a wide range of people—religious believers and atheists alike—might describe an extraordinarily malicious or cruel individual.

Let us call the more restricted sense of evil with which I am concerned *the malevolent sense of evil*. What makes something evil in this sense is having motives to harm others, to damage the welfare or well-being of others, and acting on these motives. Agents are evil to greater and lesser degrees depending on the extent to which they have and act on these motives. An agent who only acted on evil motives would be pure evil. An agent who almost never acted on these motives might be said to be hardly evil at all.

This characterization of evil requires some refinement. Sauron wouldn’t turn out to be evil in the malevolent sense if the reason he aimed to conquer Middle Earth was to secure equality and equal dignity for all races. Although it might be morally wrong to kill innocent humans, hobbits, dwarves, and elves, and generally misguided to try to secure political and social

equality for orcs and trolls, it wouldn't be profoundly, truly, or genuinely evil in the malevolent sense of the term.

In the jargon of philosophers, the motive has to be non-instrumentally held. Non-instrumental motives are motives that cannot be explained by appeal to other beliefs or desires that I have. I just have them. Contrast this with an instrumental motive: my desire to arm myself with holy water and my belief that there is holy water to be gotten at the local church can generate in me an instrumental motive to get out of the chair, to get to church, and to secure holy water from, say, the baptismal fount at the church. Non-instrumental motives don't depend in that way on other desires and beliefs I have. My desire to be happy is a good candidate for a non-instrumental desire: I don't want to be happy because I think it is going to satisfy some other set of beliefs or desires; I simply want to be happy.

Something that is evil in the malevolent sense has to have a non-instrumental desire to damage the welfare of others. There may be other things required as well. Perhaps a creature incapable of consciousness cannot be evil in the relevant sense. Still, I will leave aside other conditions that may be required but which seem less distinctive of evil in this sense.

Again, I do not intend to deny that there are other, less demanding senses of evil. We might also learn that there are surprisingly few instances of malevolent evil in the world. Even if we were to discover this, however, it would not mean that there are not other senses of evil. It would simply mean that what evil there is, is rarely if ever malevolent.

Evil and the Undead

Despite its potentially small range of actual cases, malevolent evil is a sense and perhaps the dominant sense of evil that we associate with the demonic and the undead. What makes the

vampires, zombies, and ghosts of fiction malevolently evil is that they are apparently motivated by non-instrumental desires to do us ill. At least part of what makes the undead of horror movies so horrific is not merely that they wish to kill us—it has to do with *why* they wish to kill us. They do not wish to kill us for some further, recognizable cause we can imagine ourselves sharing but do not happen to share. Rather, it is that they have some basic desire to harm us and that's it.

We might find that the undead are somewhat different from what we imagine them to be. In particular, we might learn that the undead, despite what we tend to think, actually lack the motives required for evil in the malevolent sense. This might well be difficult to determine. There are, however, several reasons why we should, on reflection, be skeptical that the undead will typically turn out to be evil.

First, if it turns out that there are naturally occurring undead, it seems plausible that a good many of them will not be sophisticated enough to have desires at all, much less desires of the relevant sort. If zombies don't really have motives (maybe their brains have decayed too much for them to really have motives, even if they preserve certain functions that we might have once called "instinctual"), then they cannot, strictly speaking, be malevolently evil. They would be more like a deadly virus—the kind of thing we have reason to avoid and to try to control, but nothing that is really evil. Moreover, if it turns out that there is a range of naturally occurring undead from viroids up through insects (assuming these lack motives), then as a matter of numerical considerations it may well work out that most undead simply lack the mental machinery to count as evil.

Second, even if many archetypal forms of the undead have motives, it is not obvious that they have the special kind of motive required for evil. Suppose zombies are motivated to, say, eat fresh brains. Would these motives count as non-instrumental desires to see the welfare of others

harmed? Nope. To the extent that zombies do have desires to eat fresh brains, those motivations likely depend on a more basic desire to get food, and the belief that fresh brains constitute food. That would make an instrumental, and not an evil-constituting motive. Even if the desire to eat fresh brains is non-instrumental, it does not look like it is really a desire to harm the welfare of others. If there were a way to get fresh brains without harming the welfare of anyone, I suspect zombies would be perfectly satisfied. Contrast this to Hannibal Lecter—presumably he would reject harm-free brains as a mediocre substitute, at best. At any rate, there is no evidence to suggest that harm-free brains would be rejected by zombies. In the absence of such evidence, we should conclude that zombies lack the desire that marks out malevolent evil. In short, zombies are not evil—they are just misunderstood.

Even if we find that a majority of the undead have the relevant mental machinery to be capable of non-instrumental desires to harm others, there does not seem to be any reason why they would have those motives in greater frequencies than you or I tend to have them. If they are undead of a sort that suffer from advanced physical decay, this seems to diminish the chance that they could have the relevant sorts of motives (or motives at all). On the other hand, if they don't suffer from advanced physical decay, it does not seem likely that they will have motivations significantly different from the ones we currently have. And, as far as I can tell, most people don't seem to be malevolently evil.

Consider the case of vampires. A vampire simply seems to be the person who was in the body prior to becoming a vampire. There is no obvious reason why having become a vampire would suddenly add non-instrumental motives to harm others. To the extent that vampirism introduces new desires, they don't (necessarily) seem to be of the problematic sort. That is, on becoming a vampire you might want to suck blood and so on, but it is difficult to see why this

should make you want to do bad things to other people when you did not want to do them before. We should not simply assume that vampirism brings with it non-instrumental desires to harm others.

What makes vampires a complicated case, however, is the often-held idea that they are damned or in some sense “fallen.” Perhaps damnation does the work of introducing the relevant non-instrumental desires, making vampires necessarily evil in a way that other forms of the undead might not be. It is an interesting question whether damnation could/would/should have the effect of introducing desires that give rise to malevolent evil, and I am uncertain about the matter. It is certainly the case that the vampire as *necessarily* evil in light of damnation or something like it has received reinforcement in comparatively recent popular culture from at least the early seasons of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television show. Despite its influence, the view of vampirism as necessarily evil (which the show seems to abandon in later seasons, anyway) does swim against an enormous tide of recent popular culture that holds that vampires are not necessarily evil in the malevolent sense, and for that matter, not necessarily damned. See, for example, a good number of Ann Rice’s vampire novels; Tanya Huff’s *Blood* series; Charlaine Harris’ *Southern Vampire Mysteries*; Laurel Hamilton’s *Anita Blake* series; and the recent vampire/mystery novels by Kim Harrison. Indeed, I am told that in at least one genre, the contemporary romance novel, a vampire is *never* evil. In many contemporary comic books—vampires are just people with a condition where they live a long time and need to suck blood (the vampire Cassidy in *Preacher* fits this mold). Something similar can be said for vampires in popular culture outside of fiction, ranging from movies (think *Underworld*) to video games (for example, *Morrowind: The Elder Scrolls 3*). So, even if something about vampires brings with it malevolent impulses, it is important to recognize that this problem is apparently rooted primarily

in supernatural vampires, and to acknowledge that these impulses might be overcome by other motives or values.

The preceding reflections suggest that vampires never really fail to leave behind a basic fact of the human predicament: We've all had bad motives, but with the right upbringing, friends, or environment, most of us tend to do a good job keeping it under control. If so, then even if it turns out that vampires necessarily have malicious motives, it does not follow that they are evil to any great degree, or that they are even evil at all. After all, a vampire might never come to act on any of his or her non-instrumental motives to harm others.

I suspect that the reason why vampires have been associated with irredeemable, malevolent evil is a function of two things. First, there is the need for blood. Wanting to suck someone's blood can seem pretty creepy, and we may be getting tempted to think that creepy equals evil. But creepy isn't necessarily evil. And, if popular representations of vampires are any indication, when a vampire finds a way to circumvent the need for blood we don't tend to think of the vampire as straightforwardly evil. So maybe the creepiness of needing blood makes it easier to interpret the average vampire as having non-instrumental desires to harm us. After all, if they wished us well, surely they wouldn't want to suck our blood? (For what it is worth, I think that in reasoning this way we are reasoning badly. But I also think bad reasoning is widespread. However, I *also* think that there are oftentimes good reasons for reasoning badly.) There is also a second reason, connected to the first, that provides some culturally influential impetus to the thought that at least vampires are typically evil. The original vampire of fiction seemed to act out motives that are easiest to make sense of as non-instrumental desires to harm others. And, at least in some chronicles, the figure Dracula was modeled after—"Vlad the Impaler"—committed atrocities on a scale that we seem to find easiest to explain by appeal to motives of the

malevolently evil sort. Ascribing non-instrumental desires to harm others to someone gives us a way of making sense of what otherwise tends to seem radically senseless. By appealing to non-instrumental motives we can “explain” certain horrific acts: he is someone who wishes us ill *for no good reason—he simply wants us to hurt*.

Resting in peace

It’s time to start summarizing. First, given the distribution of the natural to the supernatural, and what we know about the possibilities available for sources of the undead, all other things being equal, *if there are undead, the largest number of undead are likely to be of natural origin*.

Comparatively simple entities (biologically speaking) such as viruses, viroids, or even more complex things like seeds and insects, likely make up the largest chunk of the undead, much as they do among the not-yet-having-died living. Second, and relatedly, there is no reason to think that among the most-likely-to-exist forms of the undead (the comparatively biologically simple), that many will have the capacities required to be evil in any genuine or profound sense. Third, even among more sophisticated forms of the undead, many of the undead of classical lore seem to lack the capacities required to be evil. Fourth, even if there were undead agents with the right capacities to be evil, there is no special reason to think that they have the motives that make one evil in any greater frequency than we find in regular, not-previously-dead humans. Even if they did have those motives, there is no reason to think that they are fundamentally different than we are in the capacity to act against those motives.

In sum, it is time for us to abandon our prejudices about the undead. It may not be evil to portray them as we tend to, but it is wrong.³

³ My thanks to Diego Nieto for advice on some of the biological issues I raise, and to Katherine Denson, Shaun Nichols, and the editors of this volume for helpful discussions or comments about the material in this paper.