The Psychology of Evil:
Reality and Imagination

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This article suggests that by deconstructing evil it is possible to capture the moral significance of evil actions, characters, and atrocities. Evil is often used as a means to an end—such as obtaining wealth, sex, status, or power. It may also come to the fore as a response to a threat to the self. Furthermore, it may be the result of idealistic fanaticism.

This article also considers the concept of the banality of evil, the existence of social psychological forces, and social experiments that suggest that seemingly normal people willingly commit atrocities believing they are following orders. The role of the non-interventionist bystander is also examined.

Describing the "dark dyad," a toxic combination of narcissism and psychopathy, the article examines the extent to which evil is a function of nurture or of nature. Reference is made to developmental issues, biological patterns, and evolutionary theory to explain why some people are more violent than others.

The final section describes ways of combatting evil from a developmental perspective, emphasizing the importance of "good-enough" childrearing in enabling children to become compassionate and empathic. It also takes a wider social perspective, noting the significance of countervailing powers in institutional and governmental contexts, implying the need for strong civic institutions, such as an independent judiciary and an independent press. In the best of all worlds, leaders and their governments should be truly of the people, by the people, for the people.

Key Words: Evil; Developmental; Neurological; Evolutionary; Psychopathy Gene; Dark Dyad; Narcissism; Psychopathy; Bystander; Milgram and Zimbardo Experiments; Obedience to Authority; Compassion and Empathy.

The opportunity for doing mischief is found a hundred times a day, and of doing good once in a year.

—Voltaire

The evil that is in the world almost always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence if they lack understanding.

—Albert Camus

Introduction

What do you imagine the people who work at Evil Corp, a group of Russian cybercriminals, might be like? Does the name of their organization indicate the kinds of individuals it attracts? Is what they do evil—and can they be called evil? The people who work for Evil Corp have very successfully targeted some of the world's most well-protected corporations. They have stolen their credentials. They have crippled their IT infrastructure by encrypting their computers and servers. And their evildoing has enabled them to demand multimillion dollar ransoms. In fact, the decade-long worldwide cybercrime, ransomware spree by its alleged leader, Maksim Yakubets, has been responsible for losses amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars.

But belonging to such an organization must have a certain appeal. Evil has always stimulated the human imagination. After all, we are fascinated by real-life dark "heroes" like Bernie Madoff, the instigator of the largest Ponzi scheme in history, or Jordan Belfort, the Wolf of Wall Street, as well as the villains of fairy tales and films. "Crime"

is the largest and most successful genre of popular fiction. Could our interest have something to do with a need to better understand evil, to know where evil people could be hiding, and how they differ from you and me?

Of course, recognizing evil is important: villains don't helpfully enter the world equipped with horns and cloven feet, giving off a foul stench. The power of evil is that it isn't always easy to spot. But recognizing evil could be a lifesaver, while failing to recognize a potentially dangerous person or situation could be fatal.

So, how do we begin to recognize evil? Generally speaking, evil involves human destructiveness, people who take pleasure in intentionally hurting others and behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize, or destroy the innocent.

Why do people behave like this? What makes them do terrible things? Taking a deep dive to find explanations, we find that evil acts are often used as a means to an end, for example, to gain wealth, sex, status, or power. There are also situations where evil is a response to threats to the self. Some people are motivated to do evil to gain self-esteem, to live up to a grandiose self-image. In these situations, vindictive acts can be weapons used to put other people down. However, many evil acts are the result of idealistic fanaticism. As the French philosopher Blaise Pascal put it, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction." Far too often, people who live according to an ideology are convinced that that there's only one truth, and this belief, of being in possession of a special truth, lies at the root of much of the world's evil. And some people engage in evil acts because of social and ideological pressures to conform, willingly following the orders of others.

Evil people even create so-called evil enterprises. For example, many organizations subscribe to corrupt practices, including polluting the environment, manufacturing and marketing unsafe products, corporate bribery, and encouraging their employees to engage in corporate violence. Within these kinds of organizations, we can usually find a dominant coalition that has played a leading role in the enacted evil. Either directly or through the people who work for them, these organizational leaders engage in corrupt practices that benefit themselves and other stakeholders.

The ambiguity of evil

As evil sits on the spectrum of right or wrong, how do we decide what's what? How do we determine what constitutes a truly evil act? After all, life isn't one-dimensional. People aren't simply divided into camps of good and evil. Evil is a highly ambiguous concept. Criminals can have their virtues just as honest people can have a darker side. What's seen as an evil act by one person, could be considered quite differently by another. Good and evil aren't fixed, stable qualities. Instead, they are constantly trading places. For some, suicide bombers are princes of darkness; to others, they are heroic freedom fighters. The truth is that there is good and bad in every individual, in every nation, in every racial group, and in every religion. Even the vilest of people can do good from time to time. In fact, it's a rare individual who is completely evil.

However, this doesn't mean that we shouldn't bother to learn more about evil. After all, if we don't acknowledge it, it might capture us. We need to understand the moral significance of atrocities like torture, sexual abuse, mass shootings, psychopathic serial killing, mob violence, terrorist attacks, and genocide. Only by obtaining greater clarity about the nature and origin of evil can we hope to prevent such things happening repeatedly.

A promising beginning to understanding evil is to take a hard look at ourselves. The author Aleksander Solzhenitsyn once said, "The battleline between good and evil runs through the heart of every man." Most of us have at some time found ourselves struggling with evil thoughts. We may have felt the wish to do something unpleasant, to give someone their just deserts. But do these desires mean that we are evil—that we have a darker side? The Swiss psychiatrist/psychoanalyst Carl Jung thought so. He imagined that each of us has an aspect within our personality that we choose to reject and repress—a part of ourselves that we don't like or think society would find unacceptable. According to Jung, we prefer to push this "beast within" into our unconscious. But again, does this mean that we are evil? After all, thoughts are very different from actions. Evil thoughts remain just that unless we feel compelled to act on them.

The question of whether evil is a characteristic that lies dormant in all of us received renewed attention in response to the atrocities committed by Nazi fanatics during World War II. In those dark years, the forces of evil came to the fore in ways that were far beyond most people's darkest imaginings. Sadly, the Holocaust of World War II is only one example of humanity's capacity for cruelty towards our own kind. Looking at the history of humankind, we can see that the forces of evil have triumphed more often than we like to admit. Evildoers have always been with us. Atrocities have always been part of the human condition. Consequently, given the human potential to do evil, it shouldn't come as a surprise that many moral, political, and legal philosophers have been preoccupied with this question. How was it possible for the Holocaust to happen?

Was there something evil within the perpetrators or were the evildoers themselves the victims of circumstance?

Obedience to authority

The philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt, who witnessed the trial of the war criminal Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, noted that Eichmann could have been merely an administrator following orders. She introduced the term "the banality of evil" to imply that evil acts are not necessarily committed by evil people. Instead, she suggested that Eichmann could have been, to all appearances, a rather ordinary, "normal" bureaucrat. However, her statement also implied that if unexceptional, supposedly normal people are capable of evil, then the atrocities perpetrated during the Holocaust and other genocides could be easily repeated.

But was Arendt correct in making this observation? Were people like Eichmann just a dime a dozen? Was he merely representative of the population at large? Is there truth in her observation that evil starts when unremarkable people embark on seemingly unremarkable acts? And could it even be true that the most dangerous people in the world are not the tiny minority who instigate evil acts, but those who carry out these acts for them? Could it be that much of the evil in this world is caused by people blindly following orders, while others, knowing that what was being done was wrong, did nothing to stop it?

Arendt questioned the notion of obedience to authority to explain why quite ordinary people were able to do incredibly evil things. Could it be true that the guards in extermination camps, who were otherwise seemingly normal, loving family men, were

simply following orders? Could that explain why they willingly ran these camps like manufacturing plants, obediently delivering to the crematoria their daily quota of murdered bodies? Were these people just like you and me?

Many of us have found ourselves in situations when we should have taken a stand but to our utter disgrace have remained silent bystanders. There is some truth in the observation that non-action is the devil's most powerful weapon: the devil can't always convince a good person to do wrong but can keep someone from doing what's right. Evil triumphs when good people do nothing. In the vacuum created by fear, ignorance, hunger, and want, it's evil, not good, that rushes in to fill the void. As Albert Einstein said, "The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it." The sad truth is that some people do evil stuff, while others see evil stuff being done but don't attempt to stop it. The Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel once said, "Indifference, to me, is the epitome of evil." Evil tends to rise to the surface when good people don't act. The impact of dysfunctional group dynamics can be devastating.

Group dynamics

When I was thirteen, I engaged unwittingly (helped by my younger brother) in a small social science experiment. During the summer, our parents used to send the two of us to a youth camp for the whole, long school holiday. It made us old timers. We were the ones who knew how this summer camp functioned.

One summer we devised a practical joke that could be reframed as having an evil aspect. When the new cohort of kids arrived, we told them that it was a tradition in this

camp that all newcomers had to participate in an initiation rite. We pointed to a bathtub filled with cold water, standing in the middle of the field. The idea was that each of them had to immerse him or herself in the tub. To our immense glee, thirty kids (all of them much bigger than us) lined up and submerged themselves, one after the other, in the ice-cold water. Our experiment was moving along seamlessly until misfortune struck, in the form of the camp leader who passed by. Pretending to be outraged, he encouraged the newcomers to turn the tables on us. And we got what we deserved, both ending up immersed in the tub.

Several years after our own experiment in obedience to authority, two social psychologists, Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo, wanted to test whether it was true that ordinary people were capable of doing evil things when ordered to do so by individuals in a position of authority. Obviously, their motivation for embarking on such an experiment was to find answers to the question of how the Nazis were able to induce people to commit atrocities—why seemingly normal people turned to evil in circumstances that required their obedience or allowed them to do evil with no consequences.

The shocking outcome of the Milgram experiment was that the volunteers who participated in their study were quite willing to give potentially lethal electric shocks to people when ordered to do so by an authority figure. In Zimbardo's study, a mock prison experiment, the students who took on the role of "guards" abused the assigned "prisoners" with impunity. The dramatic results of these two studies revealed how quickly ordinary people were prepared to engage in extraordinary evil acts when placed in a toxic environment. The extremely troublesome conclusion to be drawn from

these studies was that under the right circumstances all of us could be capable of resorting to evil acts. To quote Zimbardo, "The line between good and evil is permeable and almost anyone can be induced to cross it if pressured by situational forces."

The Milgram and Zimbardo experiments showed that people in positions of authority could easily sway people in subordinate positions to do unimaginable things. Unfortunately, in today's world the truth of this is out there for us all to see. We are frequently appalled by the consequences of toxic leadership. Too many leaders know how to manipulate their followers into engaging in horrendous acts. Some people have a desire to control others, encourage their dependency needs and discourage their capacity to think for themselves. In pursuit of their own selfish motives, they are able to push their followers to engage in evil acts.

Subsequent research, however, has shown that the Milgram and Zimbardo studies failed to provide evidence for the hypothesis that *all of us* turn to evil when placed in certain situations. In fact, during both experiments, numerous people refused to follow orders. The reactions of these people point out the significance of free will. They denote that we do have a choice, that we can use our free will to choose between good and evil, that we don't need to be pawns in others' games. But will we be capable of acting with discernment when faced with suspect, authoritative directions? Will we be able to exert a degree of self-control?

In many instances, evil behavior is also a consequence of a loss of control. For example, evil acts are often committed under the influence of drugs or alcohol. In the

heat of passion, the moral enormity of evil actions often gets lost. And, of course, there is also the question of personality. People who assault, rape, and murder may lack sufficient impulse control.

The dark psyche

The question of impulse control points at the psyche of people who do evil. What kinds of personalities do they have? Why do some individuals take pleasure in evil acts? What motivates them to carry them out? Here, I'm considering a spectrum that ranges from less obvious personae, such as school bullies and ransomware trolls—even those otherwise upstanding members of society who see evil being done but remain bystanders—to the most invidious evildoers, like rapists and serial killers.

Although the personalities of evil people come in various shades, several possess qualities that can be summarized as the "dark dyad," a toxic combination of narcissism (self-centeredness, a need for constant, excessive admiration, and a sense of entitlement) and psychopathy (manipulative, vindictive, with callous insensitivity to the feelings of others). People with these characteristics are more likely to engage in evil actions.

Nurture and nature

How do people become this way? Is it a function of nature or nurture? Is becoming an evildoer a developmental issue or are these people simply born bad?

From a nurture point of view, observing children with psychopathic tendencies, there seems to be a strong causal connection between a dysfunctional upbringing and

deviant behavior. For some, exposure to abuse during childhood creates conditions that make it more likely that they will embrace evil. These are children who never developed the security that comes with feelings of self-confidence and personal competence. Due to their personal history, compassion and empathy are alien to them. Instead, the most significant themes in their life are anger, hatred, envy, and vindictiveness.

From the nature perspective, neuroscientists have investigated some of the biological mechanisms that could explain why certain people are more violent than others. Most of the neurological research into psychopathology has focused on regions of the neocortex of the brain that govern impulse control. Some neuroscientists have suggested that a breakdown can occur in the feedback mechanisms between the amygdala and the higher, cognitive cortical structures of the brain, affecting the emotional pathways that regulate judgment and action. However, the application of neuroscience to the understanding of evil is still in its infancy.

Evolutionary psychologists have also added to the nature/nurture controversy. Advocates of the "selfish gene" theory have suggested that assault, rape, and murder could even be seen as rational acts, in that they could have been beneficial to our species' survival. Those of our paleolithic ancestors who were willing to participate in violent actions might have been the beneficiaries of more resources, and subsequently blessed with more descendants.

Taking these various perspectives into consideration, the origins of evil could be explained as the outcome of the mutual interplay of biological, psychological, and

social factors. But whatever its origins, the essential question is how to prevent evil from coming to the fore.

Preventing evil

Most of us look at genocide, suicide bombing, and similar acts of extreme violence as completely incomprehensible. However, it may be that the reason why we react in this way is because we don't really want to understand such atrocities. We prefer to keep such things beyond the common realm of human experience, rather than face up to the horrifying fact that people who seem just like us can decide to do evil and appear to obtain pleasure from it. However, if we do this, we give these people a power that they should never have. "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" is no way to deal with the problem of why such horrendous things happen and how we should respond to them.

Mental acrobatics

The human mind has an infinite capacity for rationalization and compartmentalization. Human reasoning can excuse any form of evildoing. We can find justifications for anything, from cheating in exams, to participating in crooked financial deals, to the senseless slaughter of thousands of people. And tragically, many of the people who feel justified in doing horrible things to others may even believe in the correctness of their actions. In fact, more evil is done in the name of righteousness than in any other name. What mental acrobatics do people like Bashar al-Assad, the president of Syria, Alexander Lukashenko, the leader of Belarus, or Min Aung Hlaing, the military dictator of Myanmar, perform to rationalize their atrocities? Can they sleep well at night? Do they experience any feelings of shame or guilt about what they have been doing?

Sadly, the people who make wars, the people who kill and torture, imagine that they are virtuous, respectable people with noble ideals. All too often, they're able to construct their own convoluted narrative to explain and justify their evil actions. The paradoxical nature of what they say and what they do, however, escapes them.

Ironically, perpetrators of mass murder and torture may express love for their children— they may make touching comments about family life—while having no compassion at all for their victims. Instead, they have become masters of compartmentalization. They know how to mentally separate conflicting thoughts, emotions, or experiences to avoid the discomfort of contradiction. In fact, many who participate in horrific activities imagine that they're doing something great, and that their activities are morally justified. Unfortunately, they don't realize that the essence of morality is the ability to question the morality of what they're doing.

What is moral?

What constitutes morality has been the subject of great controversy. Is it possible to speak of morality in absolute terms, or is morality dependent on circumstances? Doesn't each society develop its own set of norms and standards for acceptable behavior, thus contributing to the notion that morality is entirely culturally conditioned?

If we assume that there is no such thing as morality in absolute terms, how can we deal with people who torture, murder, or engage in child abuse? Shouldn't they be called to account? Should we just let them be? Is it morally justifiable to hold on to the notion that morality is relative when evil acts are undeniably concrete? Isn't some form of judgment warranted, given the terrible consequences of these people's actions?

The atrocities of World War II emphasized that the ultimate struggle between good and evil takes place inside each of us. Each of us has a responsibility to make thoughtful, moral choices and we abnegate that responsibility if we refuse to judge a challenging situation when faced with it; if we sit on the fence, neither agreeing nor disagreeing; if we hang onto the belief that there are no absolutes; if we have no sense of personal responsibility for actions taken. We need to accept that the responsibility for choosing between good and evil is within the reach of each of us.

The Greek physician Hippocrates realized this dilemma a long, long time ago. He believed that we need to live according to the principle of "*primum non nocere*," meaning "first, do no harm." This maxim—one of the principal precepts of bioethics taught worldwide to people in the helping professions—can be considered a basic guideline applying to all moral choices.

Given the human capacity to do evil to other human beings, we should never stop asking ourselves the question whether what we're doing is good or evil—whether we're causing harm to others. Being prepared to pose this question is a responsibility we have toward ourselves. And it is an awesome responsibility that we should not subordinate to other people. As Confucius said, "He who searches for evil must first look at his own reflection." We should never let our guard down in questioning that what we're doing is morally justified. Furthermore, we should constantly remind ourselves that nobody is immune to evil. We're all prone to regressive processes. It's very easy to enter the dark abyss where evil dwells. In fact, there are many regressive

social and psychological forces at work that can easily lead us astray and can create a fertile basis for evil. This makes finding ways of prevention a real challenge.

Creating a secure base

Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote, "Nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer; nothing is more difficult than to understand him." To prevent evil from coming to the fore, we need to make sense of its contributing factors. We need to know why some people do evil things. Also, we need to understand how evil imprisons people.

Although moral development is a life-long challenge, its foundations are created early in life. From the earliest years, the challenge for caregivers is to help children feel secure in their skin—to imbue them with a solid sense of self-confidence. This is what child development is all about. Without having acquired a secure base, it will be difficult for children to face life's many challenges and deal with the inevitable setbacks that are part of the vicissitudes of life. Without a secure base, it will also be hard for a child to acquire a questioning mindset and to learn from experience.

Children acquire an understanding of what's right and wrong in various ways. First, they learn by observing the behavior of the people who are most important to them, usually (it is to be hoped) their parents. Hence, to help them understand the differences between right and wrong, the challenge for parents is to create congruence between what they say and what they do. Consistency in the way they handle their children is of utmost importance.

Fortunately, with respect to moral development, Homo sapiens has a flying start. We possess a build-in capacity to respond to signals given by others. In fact, as social

beings, humans are "programmed" to learn from one another. In human interaction, behavioral mimicry—the automatic imitation of gestures, postures, mannerisms, and other motor movements—is all-pervasive. And it is this human proclivity to mimicry that creates pro-social behavior. From our earliest beginnings, the ability to interconnect with each other—to understand each other's feelings—was a great advantage for our species' survival. It would have been very difficult for Homo sapiens to prosper without cooperative behavior. Neuroscientists have hypothesized that the human brain possesses mirror neurons, cells that become activated when they see someone else doing something. Supposedly, these mirror neurons allow human beings to literally feel what others feel—to "live" their emotions.

According to these neuroscientists, these mirror neurons are responsible for emotional contagion, that is, conscious and unconscious processes that trigger similar emotions and behavior patterns in other people. This process of emotional contagion helps synchronize our emotions and enables us to express our wants and needs to others through body language, facial expressions, and emotional assertions. These mirror neurons determine empathic and social behavior, fundamental processes in fostering learning and development.

Thus, just as there are phases of physical and mental development, there are phases of moral development. Taking the mirroring process as a starting point, the internalization of what's right and wrong very much depends on what children experience in their home environment—the kind of "contagion" they're exposed to while growing up. Children come to realize that certain types of behavior will be rewarded, while others will meet with disapproval. If there is "good enough" parenting, the focus will be on reinforcing positive behavior rather than punishing what's

perceived as negative. Children learn how *not* to get into trouble. They internalize correct and incorrect behavior.

Depending on the parents' consistency in applying the rules, children will also learn to assess whether these rules are fair or not. And if the parents have provided a sufficiently secure base, children will become courageous enough to challenge these rules in situations when they believe that they're not applied correctly. They want to ensure that everyone affected by these rules is treated fairly. Step by step, during these negotiations of what's believed to be fair, children acquire a deeper understanding of the difference between "good" and "bad" behavior, an understanding that will provide the foundation for more intricate moral thinking in the future. And as moral development progresses, reactions of shame and guilt come to the fore in situations where children know that they have broken the rules.

Although parent-child interactions are significant in creating an understanding of what moral behavior is all about, children become even more practiced in making "correct" moral choices during interactions that take place within a larger social context. They will encounter children who behave in selfish, destructive, or mean ways and have to deal with them. When this happens, they may experience feelings of anger, hatred, envy, or resentment. If they believe that they have been wronged, children may have the kneejerk reaction of wanting to retaliate. On these kinds of occasions "good enough" parenting will come into play. When unpleasant incidents occur, the parents' response to the child's emotions is critical. Their challenge is to "hold" their children— to put them at ease and prevent them from acting in a similar way. These kinds of incidents give parents the opportunity to teach their children the wisdom of taking time

out, to cool down. It enables them to explain that there are more constructive ways of dealing with frustration.

Gradually, if parents have created a positive learning environment, children will be able to process these situations by themselves. They come to appreciate that there are positive ways of managing their emotional repertoire. They learn to go beyond knee-jerk reactions and to understand why certain people behave the way they do.

Eventually, children learn to recognize when they might become upset before they actually do so. They learn to manage strong emotional reactions, to take a deep breath, and regroup. Consciously and unconsciously, they have metabolized their destructive impulses and understood the power of introspection and self-awareness. The ability to engage in this psychological "work" is part of their emotional and social "armor," helping them to decide the "right" or "wrong" action to take.

If there has been good enough parenting, and good enough moral development, children will know when something isn't right and will have the courage to say so. Although there will always be powerful socio-psychological forces at play that could encourage obedience to authority, children will be aware that there's also such a thing as personal responsibility.

Difficult experiences can be teaching opportunities for parents to explain their meaning to their children and help them channel their destructive responses toward more creative endeavors, including "good works," even if only on a small scale. Challenging encounters give parents the chance to teach their children that goodness is its own

reward and that helping others can enrich their own appreciation of life. And if parents successfully create such a positive educational trajectory for their children, it will act as a bulwark against evil. The kind of moral education that emphasizes personal responsibility is an antidote to ignorance.

Human behavior will always be the product of the forces of nature and nurture. But, as I have suggested, various psychological and socio-cultural factors will determine how these innate biological processes play themselves out. Within this matrix of human nature, depending on childhood experiences, specific behavioural patterns will come to the fore. These will determine the extent to which competitive and cooperative behavior will evolve, the balance between aggressive and helpful behavior, and whether compassion and empathy will become an essential part of a person's character.

Thus, from a developmental point of view, humanity's most important challenge is how to raise non-violent children. And even though children may start small, it is through small acts of kindness that we can prepare the way for a better world. Starting in a small way, each new generation can have a positive influence on institutions, communities, and societies. Conversely, neglected or misdirected children, starting in equally small ways, can leave small marks of unpleasantness and, as adults, their behavior will negatively affect humankind. We only need to think of the abusive childhoods of Hitler and Stalin to see how this has played out in our recent past.

Even if there should turn out to be such a thing as a psychopathy gene, we could expect its effects to be ameliorated through positive, nurturing childrearing practices.

Biology isn't necessarily destiny. The children of evil people don't have to be evil. They can turn into good people. It is a social imperative to make an all-out effort to prevent the abuse and emotional neglect of children and essential for parents to create an ambiance characterized by responsive affection and nurture, non-punitive guidance, and value-based learning experiences. With "good-enough" parenting, children will become compassionate, empathic, altruistic, courageous, and less susceptible to outbursts of anger. They will have a greater ability to understand the feelings of others and appreciate the benefits of healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

Don't be a bystander

Every time we are faced with moral dilemmas, we should remind ourselves that the most common defense put forward by evildoers is that they didn't know what was happening. And even if they knew, they may claim that they weren't responsible for their actions; they were just following orders. These are unacceptable excuses. People like Eichmann were not just helpless puppets within the Nazi hierarchy. They accepted the dehumanization of others. They willingly corrupted themselves, starting with small transgressions. And as they began to sell their soul in small quantities—making a trivial compromise here, rationalizing a minor evil there—eventually real evil dropped its disguise and bit them in the face.

We all have an obligation to refuse to let the bad win. We should never let evil hold the field. If we don't stop evildoers, we not only protect them, we also become willing enablers. We cannot be bystanders. Good intentions can sometimes do as much harm as malevolence. Often, the terrible things that happen in our world are not down to the people who do evil, but to basically decent people who refuse to confront the existence

of evil. If we are not courageous enough to take a stand against evil, there is no hope for humanity.

Societal considerations

As Carl Jung pointed out, one of the biggest difficulties in contemporary society is that we try to locate the evil in other people rather than take personal responsibility for it. Too often, we project onto others what we fear within ourselves and those others become the recipients of our hatred. When we feel wronged, we split people into camps of good and bad, often encouraged by the behavior of populist, demagogue-like leaders. Unfortunately, when we fail to look within ourselves, we fail to see the extent to which we harbor moral ambiguities. Each of us has a personal responsibility for the moral choices we make because individual behavior creates the foundation for group, community, institutional, and governmental behavior.

Taking business organizations as examples, business leaders shouldn't have to make a choice between profitability and social responsibility. They need to recognize "the tragedy of the commons." Too many people act independently according to their own self-interest but contrary to the common good of all. They endanger the world through their uncoordinated actions. A much more constructive way for business leaders to act is to have a shared sense of doing good. They need to connect what they do with a purpose beyond profit. In other words, in organizational life they need to create situations of profit with purpose. Given the fragility of our planet, organizational leaders should make social responsibility part of their mandate.

The same can be said of other institutions, including governments. Can it be morally right for governments to do things that individuals aren't permitted to do? Isn't it the function of a well-functioning government to make it easy for people to do good and very difficult for them to do evil? Making this happen, however, will very much depend on its leadership.

Unfortunately, many of our political leaders are responsible for much of the evil present in our world. And given the scale on which they operate, the evil they create can have exponentially negative effects. Far too easily, demagogue-like leaders (helped by the social media that have become a new weapon of mass destruction) can reframe evil into something that presents as heroic. Once in public life, evil is easily perpetuated. In comparison, actions for the general good are rare, extremely fragile, and difficult to disseminate.

Clearly, instead of being led by populist, demagogue-like leaders, we need value-driven, non-divisive leaders who aren't motivated by the politics of hatred—leaders who encourage independent thinking, aren't obsessed by control, and don't abuse their power to dominate other people. Given the corruptive influence of power, however, this will be a real balancing act. And as the obedience to authority studies have shown, when decent people are placed in evil situations—and in spite of their basic decency—the outcome can still be horrendous. The danger that people will lose their ability to think for themselves is ever-present. This is why it is imperative that there are countervailing powers within governments made of strong civil institutions, including an independent judiciary, and an independent press.

Avoiding the darkness

Much evil starts when we begin to treat people as things, when our caring side is muted, and when there is a lack of compassion and empathy. All evil begins with the belief that the existence of other people is far less precious than our own. It is a sad truth that when we stop acknowledging the humanity of others—when we perceive others as sub-human and to blame for everything that is wrong in the world—we see evil emerging.

Fortunately, as part of our developmental trajectory, most human beings possess the qualities of compassion and empathy. And these characteristics can be extremely powerful forces that can serve as an antidote to evil. When we respond to other people's needs, when we engage in selfless acts, we make ourselves and others feel better. In fact, the people who feel best about themselves, are those who do the most for others. And although, at times, group dynamic processes may exploit our worst instincts, these socio-psychological forces can also be called upon to cultivate the best in us. Like evil, altruism is also readily responsive to situational forces.

When we look around, we can see that many people, at great cost to themselves, carry out acts of kindness, both big and small, and that doing so seems to put them in a zone of transcendence. They have come to realize that doing good induces others to reciprocate—that doing good can be contagious. Even though nobody can save the world, each of us can do a little bit of good while we live our lives. We aren't helpless puppets controlled by the forces of evil. We don't have to go into that darkness. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and

for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it—always."

The challenge for each of us is to learn to tame our private demons and conquer evil wherever it looks us in the face. In other words, being good is something we must choose over and over again, all day, every day, for the rest of our lives. Each moment of our lives, each decision we take, gives us the choice of working toward the light or sinking into the darkness. Every day, we have the opportunity to do good and to be good. Every day, we can be kind to others. So why not take advantage of it? Even though we may do good without receiving any acknowledgement, we should never feel disheartened. At least, we have tried to make the world a better place, however small our good action might be. If we spread goodness, it will continue to be spread by our descendants, a wonderful legacy to leave behind. The happiest among us are not those who get more, but those who give more.

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