

Human Evil: The Mythical and the True Causes of Violence

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Why is there evil? This question has captured the interest of scholars of diverse specialties and backgrounds for centuries. The methods of answering it and the answers themselves have similarly reflected this diversity. My approach is that of a social scientist. The methods and research findings of social scientists can be brought to bear on what for others has been a legal, practical, theological, philosophical, or other kind of problem.

One obstacle for the social scientist is the conflict between the inherent immorality of the topic and the professional scientist's goal of unbiased neutrality. Social scientists are not supposed to let their values cloud their judgment, because it can impede the impartial search for truth. Should we view the crimes of Hitler and his minions with the same dispassionate and nonjudgmental attitude with which we observe the bar-pressing of rats in a Skinner box?

When doing research for my book on evil (Baumeister, 1997), I was struck by how routinely other social scientists rushed to assert that this was not really a problem. To understand is not to forgive, they insisted. Yet I was not so sure. Indeed, my own work pointed toward different conclusions. In particular, as we understand the perpetrators' inner processes and attitudes, we come to see their crimes as considerably less heinous than how others judge them. Most people who commit evil acts do not themselves regard their actions as evil. Therefore, to understand their perspective is to understand the actions in a way that somehow diminishes their evilness.

To be sure, as researchers and scientists our primary goal is to understand. Hence we must perhaps accept that our approach will carry the moral risk of mitigating our condemnation of some of the worst things that human beings do. This chapter will have three sections. The first addresses the question of what is evil, including the gap between perception and reality. The second considers the root causes of such behavior. The third turns to the proximal causation, which ultimately may be more tractable than the root causes.

The Myth of Pure Evil

What is evil? Most people think that intentionally harming someone who is innocent and undeserving of such treatment constitutes evil. Beyond harm, exploitation and oppression may be included. For some, broader definitions would include actions that have been explicitly prohibited by some presumably unassailable authority, such as religious divinities and those who speak for them.

As I said, however, most people whose acts are condemned as evil do not see their own actions as evil. For example, they may recognize that they harm or exploit someone but believe that the action is justified or that the victim deserved to be treated that way. If we as social scientists restrict our focus to actions that everyone *including the perpetrator* agrees are evil, we will have almost nothing to study.

It is therefore necessary to define evil as in the eye of the beholder, who may be victim or observer but is probably not the perpetrator. And this means that evil is defined in a way that is not strongly tethered to objective reality.

Hence let us begin with perception. To understand the perception of evil, it is useful to look at assorted sources, from comic books and second-rate movies to wartime propaganda and theological sources. When I did this, I found some impressive parallels and consistencies that

held up across diverse representations. These I assembled into a composite that I labeled the “Myth of Pure Evil.” Not every case necessarily shows all these characteristics, of course. But in general they do go together more often than not.

Perceptions matter more than for providing a working definition or even as a straw man theory against which objective data can be assembled. The sense that there is evil in the world is widespread. If people perceive the actions of others through the lens of the Myth of Pure Evil, then they are likely to assimilate actual cases and behaviors to it. Thus, the actions of perpetrators are likely to be misperceived to some degree. Indeed, from what we know about social psychology, it would be utterly shocking if victims and observers were to perceive the actions of evildoers in wholly impartial, unbiased, objective terms. The likely fact of these distortions already suggests, however, that the perpetrators of violent and exploitative actions may have a legitimate claim to having been misunderstood and unfairly condemned. That is not to say that they are fully innocent of wrongdoing. But it suggests that it is very possible in the majority of cases that their actions were not as terrible as some of their accusers say. This is not a pleasant conclusion, but it is hard to dismiss.

The Myth of Pure Evil may also be important for us as social scientists to understand for methodological reasons. We researchers are people too and come to the problem of evil with the same ideas, images, and prejudices that others in our culture have. Our initial tendency will be to view the perpetrators of evil through the lens of this myth and to assimilate their actions to it. In a revealing passage in *The Nazi Doctors*, Robert Jay Lifton remarked that when interviewing some of these men, he occasionally began to see the world and the events as the man himself had seen them and to begin to feel some sympathy toward the man. At that point, Lifton said, he always pulled back and reminded himself that this person was an evil monster, not a decent

human being like the rest of us. While I sympathize with Lifton's moral convictions, to me that point is precisely where he fails as a social scientist. This captures the dilemma that I noted earlier, of the conflict between scientific understanding of evil and moral judgment of it. To refuse to understand the perpetrators in their own terms is ultimately to abandon the project of scientific understanding in favor of moral condemnation. My preference is that if you want to understand, then you may have to set aside moral judgments. These people were, after all, people, not evil monsters. We may condemn them and their actions, and indeed we should, but perhaps we cannot do that precisely while we are trying to understand them scientifically. Refusing to recognize the humanity of the perpetrator is probably an insuperable obstacle to fully understanding the genesis of his or her violent acts.

The proper moral condemnation of evil should not be neglected either, however, lest the researchers lose some of their own humanity. When we are done trying to understand the doings of evil scientifically, it may be necessary to deliberately resume the appropriate moral pose and condemn these wrongful acts.

What, then, are the main features of the myth of pure evil? The first component, as I hinted earlier, is the intentional harming of another person. Evil as depicted in sources ranging from children's cartoons to wartime propaganda emphasizes harming others. It is moreover harm done deliberately and intentionally. It does not include harm that is designed to benefit the person, as a dentist or surgeon might drill into someone's body.

Second, the perpetrators of evil are typically portrayed as enjoying the harm they inflict. Even Satan, the biblical epitome of evil, is sometimes depicted as a trickster who takes a sporting pleasure in bringing misfortune on his hapless victims. The link to reality is tenuous here. Victim accounts often emphasize that the perpetrators were laughing or smiling, or that in some other

way they derived pleasure from what they did. Perpetrators' accounts are far, far less likely to indicate enjoyment. The victims' insistence on perpetrator enjoyment may thus be to some extent an assimilation of perception to the myth. To perceive the perpetrators as someone who reluctantly and with anguished inner struggles inflicted harm is to make them seem less evil, in comparison to perpetrators who cheerfully go about their actions and derive pleasure from them. In myth, at least, the latter prevail. Film actors who depict bad guys must usually master a wicked smile and laugh that they use when setting about their dastardly deeds.

Third, the victim is typically depicted in accounts of evil as innocent and good. In many a typical homicide, for example, if the story is fully and objectively reconstructed, one sees a pattern of mutual, even escalating provocations. Yet in the myth, the victims bear no responsibility for what happened to them.

In writing up a series of experiments on how news depictions stoke fear of crime, Heath (1984) compared two different versions of an actual news event. Unknown assailants burst into the home of a suburban couple and viciously beat and hurt them, leaving the man in the hospital in serious condition. Nothing was stolen, and the assailants remained at large. Many news outlets reported the crime in precisely those terms, which understandably stimulated fear among readers and viewers that such random violence was occurring in their community. Meanwhile, other reports added that the male victim had recently been indicted on charges of promoting juvenile prostitution. Consumers who were exposed to that version of the story — which thus departed in a crucial manner from the Myth of Pure Evil — were understandably less frightened by it. It is of course possible that the victim's prior activity of luring girls into sexual exploitation was entirely irrelevant to the attack on him, and so one could say that omitting those details was justifiable.

But that seems unlikely. Random crimes against wholly innocent victims do occur, but probably not as often as the news coverage makes it seem.

Fourth, the perpetrators of evil are often seen as not like us. They are foreign or alien. Earlier I quoted Lifton's comment about refusing to consider the Nazi doctors as genuine human beings. This reflects the common desire to think that people like ourselves could not possibly perpetrate horrific crimes. Dower's (1986) account of the Pacific theatre of World War Two emphasized that the mutual demonization by Americans and Japanese was facilitated because both sides could view their enemy as members of a different, depraved race.

A more humorous illustration of the principle that evil is done by foreign or alien beings was the observation by XX in his study of children's cartoons. He noted that the bad guys generally spoke English with foreign accents. Cartoon characters are not real, and the creators who depict them can make them speak any way they like. Speaking with foreign accents makes them harder to understand. What sense does it make for cartoon filmmakers to make their characters hard to understand? But putting accents into their mouths helps depict them as foreign and different.

The fifth feature, which is probably less common and more prone to exception than the others, is that evil is usually presented as having always been that way. The bad guy in a typical film is not someone who was once good but gradually turned bad over time. Rather, bad guys were that way almost from the start. Satan was supposedly a good angel before time began, but he may always have had rebellious tendencies, and in any case he turned against God before the universe was created. Likewise, we do not ask what unfortunate experiences turned a well-meaning and basically decent Josef Stalin or Adolf Hitler or Pol Pot away from the pursuit of

virtue, but rather we ask how such a deeply evil man could have gained so much power that enabled him to put his agenda of hate into practice.

The sixth feature is an alternative to the first. Alongside intentional harm, a second meaning of evil is chaos. Everywhere people strive to create a social order with peace, harmony, and stability. Evil is precisely the loss or thwarting of that order. Many horror films begin by depicting happy families or loving couples enjoying the stable, well-ordered life and its legitimate pleasures, because that sets up the contrast with the incomprehensible chaos that is about to intrude into their lives.

The final two features are again less universal than the others but nonetheless often found. These are that perpetrators of evil often have inordinate egotism and poor self-control. As I shall suggest, these do have significant resemblance to the truth in many cases. Still, as with most myths, they tend to be overstated to the extent of caricature. To those of us who have studied actual perpetrators, it is wearily disappointing to see the bad guys in one film after another depicted as relentlessly confident and optimistic. They certainly have high self-esteem. Even when embarking on very risky ventures, they remain convinced of their superiority and of their chances of success. Meanwhile, their lack of self-control is most commonly evident in their proneness to rage and violence. In many movies the bad guys turn on each other when their evil project begins to be thwarted. Setbacks cause those in charge to beat, threaten, or even kill their followers. Have you ever watched an action film and wondered how the bad guys always manage to recruit such large groups of lackeys who are willing to die for them, especially because the punishment for any failure is often death, thus making such jobs an especially poor career choice?

Taken together, these features comprise what I call the Myth of Pure Evil. It is not based on some grand knowledge about what motivates some individuals to perpetrate harm. It may be a product of culture, though I suspect that it will not differ greatly from one culture to another.

Root Causes of Evil

I turn now to the basic, fundamental causes of violence, oppression, exploitation, and cruelty. The Myth of Pure Evil means that some sources can dispense with providing bad guys with realistic, comprehensible motives. Fictional and mythical bad guys were born bad, and they do bad things because they like doing them. With actual human beings, however, there are usually different motives and influences. In attempting to integrate a large and diverse literature, I eventually settled on four basic causes, or perhaps to be precise I should say three and a half.

The first and perhaps least interesting one to a psychologist is instrumentality. Evil acts are often merely a means to an end. People turn to violence as one means of getting what they want. What they want is typically not so different from what other people want. They want money, land, power, sex, and the like. They turn to violence in some cases because they cannot get what they want by more accepted, legitimate means. Terrorists, for example, are often motivated by the sense that the accepted, legitimate channels of social action, such as democratic voting or the legal system, will not heed their grievances or give them what they want. Likewise, it is no accident that criminals tend to have relatively low intelligence, because in a society that rewards intelligence in many fields, people who lack that trait find they have fewer options than others for obtaining money and other rewards. At the macro level, war and tyrannical oppression are typically the result of a government that thinks it cannot achieve its ends by less violent means.

Over and over, scholars who study various forms of instrumental violence tend to conclude that it is ineffective. In the long run it usually is. Few criminals become rich and retire to a life of genteel ease and pleasure. Terrorists and assassins do not get the government they want. Wars harm both sides. Domestic abusers do not get the family life they seek. Even imperial colonialism, which is nowadays fashionably decried as a collective evil, was largely a failure. What doomed the nineteenth century's project of building colonies and empires was less a moral self-awakening than the fact that they did not pay. The short-lived scramble for African colonies, in particular, was motivated by the expectation that the continent's natural resources would enrich the colonial powers, but in fact money mainly flowed in the other direction, and the ongoing costs in money, effort, and sometimes blood became unsustainable, or at least not worth the bother.

Yet that is the long-term perspective. In the short run, violence can be effective. Moreover, as I said, many perpetrators of violence do not believe that they have any other way of getting what they want. And sometimes the initial results seem promising. If you are arguing with your spouse over what television show to watch, and you strike him or her with a frying pan, you may get to watch the show you prefer. Assassins and terrorists do get attention and disrupt the social systems of their enemies. Criminals do sometimes get money and other valuables.

Since writing the book, I have come to look at things in more evolutionary terms, and my strong impression is that instrumental violence is in some respect a hangover from an earlier stage in evolution (Baumeister, 2005). As animals became social, they derived the undeniable benefits of social life, but they also encountered a new set of problems. These include social conflict: Some degree of conflict is probably inevitable in social life. A group hunt may yield

delicious food, but the best parts cannot be shared equally by all, and so some method must be used to apportion them. In most animal social groups, aggressive prowess confers status and hence superior access to rewards. The reason the young and weak defer to the alpha male is not respect for tradition nor the sacredness of authority, but the simple fact that if you try to take the food he wants, he will beat you up.

In this view, intraspecies aggression emerged as an adaptation to social life, because it was an effective means to resolve the conflicts that social life makes inevitable. Aggression enabled the biggest and strongest to survive and hence reproduce better than their weaker rivals.

Human beings have developed culture as our biological strategy. The progress of culture has been to offer alternative, nonviolent means of resolving disputes and conflicts. We have money, courts of law, negotiation, compromise, and voting. Evidence has recently accumulated to show that the occurrence of interpersonal violence has been in long-term decline, even despite the horrors of the twentieth century.

Aggression is thus evolutionarily obsolete. We have accepted better ways of resolving our conflicts. Yet we remain social animals underneath the cultural veneer, and sometimes people fall back on aggression to get their way. This may occur especially among people who feel that the avenues provided by their culture do not work for them.

The second root cause of evil and violence is threatened egotism. When I began my research I had heard the standard theory that violence is perpetrated by people with low self-esteem. As I searched for the source and evidence, however, it emerged that this was one of those things that everybody knew but nobody had really ever shown. Moreover, the facts repeatedly contradicted it. A large literature review concluded, instead, that perpetrators of violence typically had very favorable views of themselves, sometimes absurdly so (Baumeister,

Smart, & Boden, 1996). Likewise, our laboratory experiments on aggression found no shred of support for the low self-esteem theory and instead repeatedly found that narcissists were more aggressive than other categories of people (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). When one separates self-esteem from narcissism, the effect of self-esteem is either negligible or, if anything, high self-esteem contributes to aggression such as by compounding the effects of narcissism.

Yet it would be wrong to conclude, simply, that high self-esteem causes violence or that high self-esteem is evil. A more precise formulation is that violence is perpetrated by a subset of people who think well of themselves, and indeed it mainly occurs when they believe that their favorable images of self have been threatened or attacked. In our lab studies, for example, narcissists who received praise were no more aggressive than other people. It was only when they were criticized that they lashed out — and then only at those who had criticized them. Aggression thus emerged as a strategy to rebut criticism and avoid a loss of esteem, in their own or other people's eyes.

The idea that aggression rebuts criticism may seem counterintuitive. Beating up someone who insults your intelligence does not really prove that you are a genius. Yet it does somehow seem to allow the person to maintain the favorable view of self. If nothing else, it discourages further criticism. The function of aggression as a rebuttal to criticism may also have roots in our evolutionary past. In many species, alpha males defend their superior status by fighting off challengers. When the alpha male loses a fight, his status is diminished, and so the attacks on him really do amount to a kind of challenge to his high esteem and put it in jeopardy.

In humans, at least, threatened egotism is not limited to individuals. Violent, aggressive nations and other groups often show the same pattern of believing themselves to be superior to others and also believing that they do not get the respect to which they are entitled. The Iraqi

invasion of Kuwait, which put in motion the events that still influence Middle Eastern politics today, was a good example: Iraq's leaders believed it to be a great power that did not receive the respect it deserved. Earlier belligerents showed similar patterns. Inside nations, also, the threatened egotism pattern can be found. Tyranny and government-sponsored violence are typically perpetrated by elites who believe in both their superiority and in the failure of others to accord them the respect they deserve.

The third root cause of evil is idealism. In some ways this is the most disturbing and tragic, because the perpetrators are motivated by the belief that they are doing something good. Idealists of both the left and the right have sometimes believed that their noble goals justify violent means. The worst body counts of the twentieth century were perpetrated by people who believed that they were doing what was necessary to create a utopian society, whether this reflected a left-wing vision (as in the communist slaughters in China and the Soviet Union) or a right-wing one (as in the horrors perpetrated by Nazi Germany). Earlier centuries witnessed slaughters perpetrated in the name of religion, as people killed to serve their gods.

To be sure, sometimes the idealism was a cover for baser motives, including instrumental ones. Some people used religious wars or persecutions to enrich themselves. Yet it is not reasonable to dismiss the sincere idealism of many of the perpetrators. In a large expedition such as the Crusades, there were some along for adventure and others hoping to get rich. But many honestly believed that they were doing God's work by fighting the infidels in order to reclaim sacred ground for what they thought was the true faith.

The fourth and final root cause is sadism, defined as sincere enjoyment from inflicting harm. Earlier I said that it may be most precise to refer to three and a half roots rather than four. Sadism would be the half. Trying to understand the truth about sadism was among the biggest

challenges in researching my book and formulating the theory. As I said, sadism shows up far more commonly in victim than perpetrator accounts, and it was tempting to dismiss it as a myth. Yet there did seem to be widely scattered signs that it does occur, at least sometimes. True, hardly any perpetrators who have written memoirs claim to have gotten pleasure from killing others. But some of them did say that they thought some of their colleagues and accomplices came to enjoy it.

It is possible that some of them mistook bravado for sincere enjoyment (a mistake that victims in particular may often make.) Carrying out violent acts against others is a difficult and often upsetting task, and one may try out various ways of coping with it. Milgram's (1963) obedience studies reported that some of his participants had fits of nervous laughter while obeying instructions to deliver electric shocks to an innocent and protesting victim. One may easily surmise that had real victims or even accomplices heard those students laughing, they may have assumed that the perpetrators were laughing with joy.

Ultimately, however, I came to think the evidence for sadism was too strong to dismiss entirely. Some people really do seem to enjoy inflicting harm. My best way of explaining this invoked opponent process theory (Solomon & Corbit, 1974). In that view, harming another person is initially upsetting and produces an intensely negative reaction. This seems to be less a matter of moral scruples than of physical disgust. Most accounts of inflicting violence note that the first time one killed or tortured someone was highly upsetting. This then diminished over time.

Opponent process theory holds that the body maintains equilibrium (homeostasis) by instigating a second process to counteract any process that departs from the norm. Initially this second process is slow and weak, but with repetition it gains in strength and may come to

predominate. That is how people learn to enjoy bungee jumping or skydiving: The initial and deep natural terror of falling evokes the opponent process of euphoria, and over time and repeated trials the terror grows weaker and briefer while the euphoria becomes stronger and longer lasting. I suggest the same sort of reaction happens with repeated acts of inflicting harm.

Why do only a few people become sadists? Here one must invoke guilt, I think. There is no moral objection to allowing oneself to learn to enjoy skydiving or bungee jumping, and indeed that enjoyment is the goal. But most decent and normal people will not allow themselves to acknowledge that they may get some pleasure from inflicting harm. Some people have fewer such scruples, however. They too, I think, will initially find it gross and disgusting to kill or maim someone, but over time, as the opponent process gets stronger, they will accept it. Then it starts to become fun.

Studies of torturers provided useful evidence, although one must note as a social scientist that these studies are hardly ideal from a research design standpoint. Still, consider the question of what causes one of the failures of torture, when the torturers get carried away to the point at which they kill the victim or at least inflict such serious harm that the ostensible goal of interrogation is thwarted. Initially I supposed that such excesses would mainly be perpetrated by young torturers, while the more experienced old hands would be able to maintain professional detachment and restraint. Yet the evidence suggested the opposite: Lethal excesses of torture were perpetrated more by the old hands than the rookies. This fits the opponent process theory. The novice torturer is still disturbed by the violence and is restrained by empathic identification with the victim and other factors. As experience increases, however, some (not all) of the torturers may feel less distress and more satisfaction, and so getting carried away becomes more likely.

Another possibility is that sadism is linked to psychopathy. Psychopaths lack empathic identification with others and therefore are perhaps less restrained than others by empathic distress. They may get feelings of self-efficacy from the signs of pain and suffering they elicit, and these may increase over time.

In any case, sadism is not entirely a root cause of evil. In most of these cases, the person begins perpetrating violence for some other reason, generally one of the other three I noted. One has to be engaged in harming others for a while in order to discover the pleasure. When it does happen, however, it begins to become independent of the other causes. At that point, the sadist enjoys harming for its own sake.

From the victim's perspective, these different root causes do make a difference. The instrumentally violent person can be bought off. If he wants your money, you can give it to him, and that in most cases reduces, ends, or avoids the harm that comes to you. Threatened egotism likewise produces violence that is a means to an end, and so victims can sometimes satisfy the perpetrator and terminate their suffering. If and when the perpetrator's egotism is satisfied, the attack may stop. In contrast, the victims of the idealists have fewer options, because in many cases they believe that their sacred goals require the victim's death. It is harder to compromise with an idealist than with an opportunist. And, last, if the perpetrator is a sadist, the victim's lot is clearly the worst. There is not much chance to buy him off or appease him to reduce your suffering, especially if your suffering is precisely what is rewarding to him.

Proximal Cause

I began my project by asking why is there evil. Yet when one recognizes how widespread the impulses toward violence are — compounded by all the moderators that social psychologists

who study aggression have identified — the fact of violence becomes less and less surprising. Instead, one begins to ask, why isn't there more evil than there is?

For example, social psychologists have shown that aggression is increased by being criticized or insulted, by hot temperatures, by seeing violence in the media, and by being frustrated. Who among us has not experienced insulting criticism, or heat, or media violence, or frustration? Who indeed has not experienced these within the past week? In that context, the incidence of violence is surprisingly low.

The explanation of why there is not more evil than there already is can most likely be found in self-control. Many circumstances give rise to aggressive impulses, but people restrain themselves from acting on them. Humans are social animals, and as such, they have the same aggressive impulses that enabled their evolutionary predecessors to resolve disputes in their favor and thereby to survive and reproduce. Yet humans also have a capacity for self-regulation that is at least as strong as that of other social animals. Culture relies heavily on self-regulation, because culture consists partly of a system with rules and standards, and it can only function if people alter their behavior to bring it into line with those rules and standards. More and more, that includes restraining violence, which is mostly disruptive to the smooth inner functioning of cultural systems.

Hence it is probably fair to say that the inner processes of most human beings include some degree of aggressive impulses that are restrained by self-control. The progress of culture in reducing violence and other forms of evil has depended in part on employing people's capacity for self-regulation to restrain their aggressive impulses.

The proximal cause of evil and violence in many cases, therefore, is a breakdown of these inner restraints. When things are going according to a culture's plan, individuals check their aggressive impulses. When those checks fail, the impulses lead to violent action.

Many causes of aggression and violence operate by interfering with self-regulation. Alcohol has been shown to impair self-regulation in almost every sphere that has been studied (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994), for example, and alcohol is well established as a cause of violence (Bushman & Cooper, 1990). (Alcohol is neither a necessary nor sufficient cause, to be sure. It is just a moderator; though it is a rather powerful moderator.) Intense emotion impairs self-regulation, and it too can undermine restraints against violent impulses. Media violence may likewise increase aggression by weakening the inner restraints.

In my view, the role of self-regulation in restraining violence has more than theoretical importance. If one considers the four root causes of evil, it is easy to become pessimistic. Those four will not be eradicated any time soon, and so the problem of evil may appear intractable. But preventing evil and reducing violence do not depend on eliminating the root causes. We can simply strengthen the restraints. If we improve self-control, we can indeed make the world a better place and reduce the quantity of evil. In other words, it may be overly optimistic to hope that violent impulses can be eliminated from human social life.

In recent centuries, many have founded utopian communities in the hope that people would live together in peace and harmony if only certain oppressive social conditions were eliminated. The belief was that we could get rid of aggression by changing society to eliminate its root causes. These experiments have failed over and over. Instead of eliminating the aggressive impulses, it may be more realistic to strengthen the inner restraints against them.

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