

Religion and the Science of Good and Evil¹

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Introduction

What is evil? Is it a force that good people resist and bad people embrace, or is it just a word for the harm people do to one another? Should we fight ever more fiercely against evil, or can the fight itself be a source of evil? These questions are vitally important because their answers would help us understand how to reduce human suffering.

In popular culture, certainly, pure evil motivates countless villains. The Avengers, Star Wars, The Dark Knight, The Lord of the Rings, Spiderman, Harry Potter, and countless other films pit a protagonist representing good against an antagonist motivated by pure evil. The film critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert observed that “Enjoying being evil is the key to any successful villain,” and sociologist James William Gibson writes that many contemporary novels and films depict enemies who are “deeply savage animals [and] perverts who commit crimes for pleasure.”²

The concept of pure evil as a force is important in politics as well. In his 2002 State of the Union address, then President George W. Bush used the phrase “axis of evil” to refer to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. According to President Bush's speech writer, David Frum, the phrase was developed to articulate in a few sentences the justification for deposing the regime of Saddam Hussein.³ Supporters of the administration from both parties argued that, in the words of Democratic Representative Tom Lantos: “There is nothing simplistic in having moral clarity. And I think this battle against evil, whether it's an axis or not an axis, has moral clarity... .”⁴

The concept of evil is important not just in popular culture and politics, but also in religion. Cultures throughout the world have arrived at a similar conception of evil as a force in human affairs, often personified as the devil, existing in opposition to good.⁵ In this view, a central role of religion is to help believers to support good while resisting and opposing evil or the devil.

Now, there's no doubt that human beings cause other people harm through violence, oppression, and crime, so if we define evil as any harm that is caused by such deliberate actions, there is no question evil exists in the world. But is it accurate to say that evil is not just a kind of *harm*, but a fundamental *force* in the world, or that those who bring about evil results are fundamentally motivated by a desire to commit evil?

This morning I will try to answer this question by arguing that pure evil as force in the world is a *psychological* construct. In fact, much of the harm committed in the world is motivated by *moral feelings* shared by virtually all human beings. Second, I will claim that there is an

1 © 2012 L. Karl Branting.

2 R. Baumeister, *Evil: inside human violence and cruelty*, Henry Holt and Company (1997) at pp. 66,71

3 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Axis_of_evil

4 <http://www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd63/63nr04.htm>

5 R. Baumeister at p. 67.

inherent gap in perception between victims and perpetrators of harm that means that the world will *always* seem to contain injustices. Finally, I will argue that humanist values expressed in the UU principles provide an escape from the vicious circle that comes from our inability to see those who harm us as anything but evil or to see those whom we harm as anything but whiners who need to get a life.

The Causes of Evil

Let's start with the reasons people harm one another. When social psychologist Roy Baumeister interviewed death-row inmates, he found that *none* of them felt like they had done anything wrong. Said one prisoner, "I am the hunted, the caught, the prey, the victim of the crafty, the cunning, and the powerful." Another said, "I may have committed a crime, but all in all I am a bigger victim than a perpetrator." Even serial killer and rapist John Wayne Gacy said, "I see myself more as a victim than a perpetrator ... I was the victim, I was cheated out of my childhood."⁶ A systematic study of homicides in American showed that the majority of cases involved "reciprocal provocations in which mutual hostility escalated until one person killed the other. ... Many killers see themselves as having been attacked or victimized by others, and in their eyes they were defending themselves or striking back."⁷

Now, undoubtedly prisoners have many self-serving rationalizations, but it's striking how rarely perpetrators describe themselves as having a gratuitous or sadistic desire to harm others. If the perpetrators of even the worst acts of violence often feel that their actions were not evil but justified, why is there such a widespread belief in pure evil? Put more simply, how can there be so much evil in the world with so few people who think they are evil?

Of course, there really are psychopaths who harm others because they place no value on others' welfare, and there are even a small number of sadists who enjoy the suffering of others. Violence also comes from testosterone-fueled contests for dominance. And yet, much of the violence in the world is caused by people who feel that they are justified or even righteous in their actions. Two main sources of morally-motivated violence are *revenge* and *ideology*.⁸

Revenge and Ideology

Consider *revenge*. Although we don't ordinarily think of revenge as a *moral* motivation, the sense that a transgression can be rectified only by retribution against the transgressor is a human universal. Blood revenge is explicitly endorsed in an estimated 95% of the world's cultures, and is a major factor in tribal warfare.⁹ The Hebrew Bible is filled with admonitions to revenge, such as "Whoso sheddeth blood will have his blood shed," "An eye for an eye," and "Vengeance is mine," Achilles says in the Iliad that revenge is "sweeter far than flowing honey."¹⁰ Experimenters have found that the portions of the brain associated with pain, disgust, and anger are triggered when one perceives oneself to be intentionally harmed, and the act of avenging the harm stimulates the same pleasure circuits as respond to cocaine, tobacco, and

6 R. Baumeister at 49.

7 Ibid. at 54.

8 S. Pinker, *The better angels of our nature: why violence has declined*, Viking (2011).

9 Pinker at 529.

10 Iliad XVIII. 109.

chocolate.¹¹

Now, some of you may be wondering, how do social scientists get away with creating revenge scenarios in the laboratory? One approach has been to ask college students to write an essay which is then given an insulting evaluation by a fellow student (who actually a confederate of the experimenters). The insulted student is then given an opportunity to punish the critic with a fake electric shock, a deafening blast from an air horn, or by forcing him to drink hot sauce in a bogus experiment on taste. Not only do students jump at the opportunity for revenge, but if the experimenter blocks the revenge by pretending that the equipment is broken, frustrated students drink much more at a subsequent wine-tasting study than those who consummate their revenge, as if to drown their sorrow.¹²

Evolutionary psychologists believe that the emotion of revenge evolved to facilitate group cooperation. Numerous experiments and game theoretical analyses demonstrate that effective cooperative behavior requires a mechanism to punish free-riders and exploiters. As we evolved as social beings, so the theory goes, we developed a deep sense that exploitative behavior is a wrong that needs to be righted. In the language of social science, revenge is often “altruistic” in the sense that people will voluntarily pay to punish free-riders and cheats even if the punisher receives no reward and will never encounter the free-rider again. So, even though forgiveness is surely morally preferable to revenge, revenge is nevertheless a moral-motivated source of harm to others.

A second moral motive for harm is *ideology*, which has caused the worst violence that humans have ever inflicted against each other, including the European Religious Wars, the Russian and Chinese civil wars, the genocides of Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Pol Pot, and the Holocaust. What makes ideology so dangerous is that it promises a utopian reward that outweighs any cost in human suffering, and it promotes a view of the opponents of the utopian goal as infinitely evil and therefore deserving unlimited punishment. Speaking of the dangers of religious ideology, Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg once quipped that “With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.”¹³ But this observation applies to more than just *religious* ideology: *political* ideology is at least equally capable of leading even good people to do horrible things.

For example, the closest real-world embodiment of evil for many people were the German Nazis of the early twentieth century. What could be more evil than the systematic murder of millions of innocent civilians? And yet, as a matter of historical fact, many Nazis were utopian idealists, guided by a vision of a perfect society. Historian Zygmunt Bauman wrote that the mentality that led to the Holocaust was a gardener's mentality in which weeds must be removed to realize a vision of a beautiful garden. “Killing all those people, like weeding a garden, boiled down to a fairly unpleasant chore that had to be done to achieve a ... wonderful outcome.”¹⁴

11 Pinker at 531.

12 Ibid at 530.

13 http://www.physlink.com/Education/essay_weinberg.cfm, based on a talk given in April 1999 at the Conference on Cosmic Design of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, D.C.

14 Z. Bauman, “Modernity and Holocaust Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1989.

A more recent satanic figure is Osama bin Laden. Surely a person who caused so much death and destruction must have been motivated by evil itself! But in reality, both bin Laden's public pronouncements and his recently-released private papers show that he was preoccupied with morality. As summarized by William Saletan, bin Laden's private writings showed that "he wanted to serve Islam and honor God's commandments. He was obsessed with right and wrong. He condemned the Times Square bomber for betraying an oath of loyalty to the United States," and he expressed revulsion at the tactics of al-Qaida in Iraq for indiscriminately killing Shiite civilians.

It wasn't just the killing that worried bin Laden [about al-Qaida in Iraq]... it was the oppressive fanaticism. ... He instructed his followers around the world to focus on education and persuasion rather than 'entering into confrontations' with Islamic political parties. ... Bin Laden wanted to do the right thing ... to win hearts and minds ... to persuade people, not kill them. He [just] thought [that] killing was the way to get there."¹⁵

Now, if so much harm and violence is inflicted by people who feel justified in their actions, why is it so hard to see anything but pure evil behind these crimes? For example, many people find that even asking whether Nazis or Osama bin Laden had some moral motivations is offensive and outrageous and an insult to the memory of their victims. But why is that? Social science can provide some insights.

The Moralization Gap

Now, it isn't feasible or ethical to explore these questions by generating evil acts in the laboratory, but social psychologists have devised devilishly clever experiments to capture our intuitions about evil. In one important experiment, students were asked to read a story about a college roommate who offers to help a struggling student with coursework but then reneges, causing the struggling student to get a low grade in the course, change majors, and switch to another university. The participants were asked to read the story and were then randomly assigned to retell it from the perspective of the perpetrator, the victim, or a neutral third person. The embellishments and omissions in the stories as they were retold provides a window into the differences between perpetrator's and victim's perspectives. These differences reveal that everyone seems to have two built-in narratives that are triggered simply by taking the view of a victim or perpetrator. These narratives are something like the following:

Perpetrator's Narrative: The story starts with a harmful act, but I had good reasons for doing it. I was responding to an immediate provocation, or I was just reacting to the situation in a way that any reasonable person would. I had a perfect right to do what I did, and it's unfair to blame me for it. The harm was minor and easily repaired, and I apologized. It's time to get over it, put it behind us, let bygones be bygones.

15 W. Saletan, Bin Laden's documents: Al-Qaida letters show the moral and political failure of terrorism, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2012/05/bin_laden_s_documents_al_qaida_letters_show_the_moral_and_political_failure_of_terrorism_.html.

Victim's Narrative: The story begins long before the harmful act, which was just the latest incident in a long history of mistreatment. The perpetrator's actions were senseless, incomprehensible. Either that or he was a sadist, motivated only by a desire to see me suffer, though I was completely innocent. The harm he did is grievous and irreparable, with effects that will last forever. None of us should ever forget it.¹⁶

Harvard professor Steven Pinker refers to these diverging narratives about a single harmful event as the *Moralization Gap*.

The Moralization Gap occurs not just between college roommates, but also between member of different nationalities and religions. The most intractable historical conflicts usually feature a difference of perception under which each group views itself as an innocent victim and the other group as treacherous, destructive, and evil. Consider the following conflicting narratives:

- The American Civil War was necessary to abolish the evil institution of slavery and preserve a nation conceived in liberty and equality. The American Civil War was a power grab by a centralized tyranny intended to destroy the way of life of the traditional South.
- The Crusades were an upwelling of religious idealism that were marked by a few excesses but left the world with the fruits of cultural exchange. The Crusades were a brutal invasion of Muslim lands and the start of a long history of humiliation of Islam by Christendom.
- The Six-Day War was a struggle for national survival that began when Egypt expelled UN peacekeepers and blockaded the Straits of Tiran, the first step in a plan to push the Jews into the sea, but it ended when Israel reunified a divided city and secured defensible borders. The Six-Day War was a campaign of aggression and conquest. It began when Israel invaded its neighbors and ended when it expropriated their land and instituted an apartheid regime.¹⁷

For most of us, one of these narratives seems obviously true and the other completely preposterous. Sadly, this list could easily be extended to dozens, if not hundreds, of historical events with radically conflicting narratives.

Where does the moralization gap come from? The answer is a matter of active research, but the most popular current answer is that it comes from the fact that we are fundamentally social entities who depend on making others believe whatever makes us look best. The best way to make *others* believe what makes us look good is to believe these things *ourselves*. This is one of many self-serving social biases that are vital of our ability to function in groups but that make it very hard to be completely honest with ourselves.¹⁸ It is related to the so-called Lake Wobegon Effect, in which a majority of us rate ourselves above average in every desirable talent or trait.¹⁹

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid at p. 492-493.

18 Robert Trivers, *The Folly of Fools: The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception in Human Life*, Basic Books (2011)

19 Pinker at 490.

Consequences of the Moralization Gap

The moralization gap – the discrepancy between how those who are harmed and those who harm view the same events – has two important consequences. First, it leads to cycles of revenge because a retaliation that seems proportionate and just to a victim almost always seems disproportionate and unjust by the perpetrator, causing the perpetrator to feel like a victim who has a right to retribution. Second, it makes a consensus on justice almost unattainable because victims and perpetrators can never see eye to eye.

Let's start with the first of these two consequences. A simple laboratory experiment illustrates how the moralization gap can lead to an escalating cycle of retaliation. Experimenters created a device that places a precise amount of pressure on a finger placed beneath a bar. Experimental subjects were told to “press down on the finger of a second participant for three seconds with the same amount of force they were feeling. Then the second participant got the same instructions. The two took turns, each matching the amount of force he or she had just received. After eight turns the second participant was pressing down with about *eighteen times* as much force as was applied in the round that got it started. . . . [P]eople underestimate how much force they apply compared to how much force they feel, so they escalated the pressure by about 40 per cent each turn.”²⁰ In real-world disputes, the misperception isn't about pressure on one's finger, but about other issues of fairness or harm. But the gap in perception between those who inflict and those who receive pain drives a spiral of revenge. Like the Hatfields and the McCoys, each side each becomes increasingly merciless because each side feels itself to be the victim.

The second consequence of the moralization gap is that it makes a consensus on justice almost unattainable. Any restitution, retaliation, or other settlement satisfactory to victims will seem punitive to perpetrators, and any resolution satisfactory to perpetrators will seem insufficient to victims. This is what makes the cycle of revenge so hard to break.

So, let's take stock. I have argued that while some perpetrators of violence know that what they are doing is wrong, many of the worst perpetrators believe that they are fully justified either for retribution or to achieve some religious or political goal. Each of us is hardwired to see the same events differently depending on whether we were the victim or the perpetrator of harm, and these conflicting narratives occur on a wide range of scales, from personal (between roommates) to global (between nations, tribes, or religions). The moralization gap leads us to attribute evil when we are harmed, but to see no evil in the harm that we do, to escalate into cycles of revenge, and to be frustrated that evils are never truly set right.

Bridging the Moralization Gap

These insights from social science are valuable only if they somehow help us reduce evil in the world. But how can they? Let's consider three approaches, which for convenience I'll call Old Testament, New Testament, and Humanist.

1. Old Testament. Identify individuals responsible for evil and neutralize them.

²⁰ Pinker at 538.

2. New Testament. Love and forgive those who do evil.
3. Humanist. Embrace institutions based on human rights.

Let's start with the first, the Old Testament approach of neutralizing individuals who are responsible for evil. In some cases, this is unavoidable. Osama bin Laden made himself the mortal enemy of the United States, and his actions left no real alternative to neutralizing him in some fashion. But even with terrorists it is a mistake to pretend that their only motive is evil, if for no other reason than that you need to understand your adversaries to prevail against them. Apart from this *pragmatic* factor, branding adversaries as evil is dangerous for two *moral* reasons:

- First, the perception that the 'other' is evil is the engine that drives cycles of revenge, which can run for generations or centuries.
- Second, if the other is perceived as evil, then anything that we do is justified by the higher good of eliminating evil. To use examples from our own history, demonization of the Japanese during WWII set the stage for unrestricted civilian bombing culminating in two atomic strikes against civilian targets. Similarly, the 'War on Terror' opened the door to torture by the state by portraying our adversaries as pure evil.

So, while it is sometimes necessary to fight against those who do evil, ignoring one's adversaries' motives and framing the fight as good against evil risks endless cycles of retribution and opens the door to acting in an evil fashion oneself.

The second option to reducing evil is the New Testament-style approach of loving and forgiving those who do evil. Forgiveness directly bridges the moralization gap by saying that who's at fault doesn't matter. At a personal level, forgiveness can relieve the destructive burden of victimhood. At a political level, Tolstoy showed how to fashion this approach into the technique of non-violent resistance used with tremendous effectiveness by Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

The philosopher Peter Singer in his book "The Expanding Circle" argues that originally human morality was limited to immediate kin, but over time the circle of individuals to whom people are capable of being compassionate and altruistic towards has steadily grown.²¹ I imagine that the moral giants who have walked among us—Jesus, The Dalai Lama, perhaps—were able to extend their moral circle to include all humanity. But, try as we will, most of us will never be like Jesus or the Dalai Lama. It's just not realistic to expect the survivors of ethnic cleaning or the Nazi holocaust, for example, to forgive their victimizers or to ponder whether their terrible crimes had some moral motivation. Moreover, the world is full of situations that reward those who have a reputation for vengefulness. We would live in an earthly paradise if every person's moral circle encompassed the entire world, but such a paradise would be going to have to wait for a major overhaul of human nature.

This brings us to the third option, the humanist approach of embracing institutions based on

²¹ P. Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press (1981).

human rights. The inherent worth and dignity of every person is one of the seven UU principles, as well as part of the humanist tradition of other religions. Institutions based on this idea can bring peace even in situations in which the urge for revenge is overwhelming and forgiveness is beyond the reach of mere mortals.

The concept of human rights is a product of the Enlightenment. Historian Lynn Hunt in her book “Inventing Human Rights,” describes how humanism arose from the confluence of multiple streams of thought, including Enlightenment philosophers who reasoned that a government's legitimacy comes from the consent of the governed, and that the rights granted by legitimate governments are shared equally by all citizens, by criminologists who argued that torture and execution should be abolished because they violate individuals' right to physical integrity without serving the aims of justice, and even to the sudden popularity of epistolary novels that for the first time enabled people of one class to understand and sympathize with the feelings and thoughts of members of other classes.²²

Humanistic institutions protect us from the consequences of the moralization gap by requiring us to treat others as though their motives are not evil even if we think they are. There is nothing hypothetical about benefits of humanistic institutions. Steven Pinker has shown that the likelihood of violent death in western democratic societies is roughly 100 times lower than the estimated violent death rate among preindustrial people. Just since the beginning of the Renaissance, the homicide rate in Western Europe has fallen by a factor of roughly 50. Key factors in this remarkable decline are that western democratic states have preempted the right of retribution for crimes, and neutral courts provide reliable reconciliation of other kinds of disputes. The moralization gap means that parties are often dissatisfied with the outcome of trials, but this dissatisfaction doesn't spiral into cycles of revenge because state institutions stand between any pair of mutually aggrieved parties.

In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired in part by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu, was empowered to grant amnesty for politically motivated crimes that occurred between 1960 and 1994, when Apartheid ended.²³ Amnesty for perpetrators of political crimes was often very bitter for survivors and families of victims, but requiring of full, honest admission of crimes meant that the harm was acknowledged, setting the stage for forgiveness. Even though complete justice in South Africa was unattainable, the cycle of revenge was broken.

Conclusion

I began with the question, “What is evil?” I hope that I have persuaded you that the answer is that evil is simply the the harm that people do to one another, *viewed from victims' perspective*.

- Why do people harm others? In many cases, it is because they think that their victims deserved it and that it would be wrong not to punish them. In other cases, they think that the victim stand in the way of a higher good.
- Why do victims view perpetrators as evil? The reason is the moralization gap, which

22 L. Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, W.W. Norton & Company (2007).

23 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth_and_Reconciliation_Commission_\(South_Africa\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth_and_Reconciliation_Commission_(South_Africa)).

- prevents victims and perpetrators from understanding each others' point of view.
- Can the fight against evil itself be a source of evil? Absolutely, because when you imagine yourself to be fighting pure evil, anything you do is permissible. After all, if there is one thing that the Khmer Rouge, Mao Zedong, the Nazis, and Al Qaeda all had in common was moral clarity; what they all lacked was any sense of human rights or the inherent worth and dignity of every person.
 - How do we bridge the moralization gap? *Forgiveness* bridges the moralization gap by making fault irrelevant. Unfortunately, ordinary mortals have limited powers of forgiveness. Fortunately, *humanism* protects us from the consequences of the moralization gap and our inability to forgive by forcing us to treat others as though they aren't evil even when we think they are.

In summary, humanism protects us both from the evil of others and from the potential evil within us.

We owe an immeasurable debt to the humanist thinkers who have given us our liberal religious faith and our law-governed democratic society. May we make ourselves worthy of these gifts by following humanistic principles in our lives and by preserving them for future generations.

Let it be so.