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EVIL!

THEISM, ATHEISM, MEANING & MORALITY

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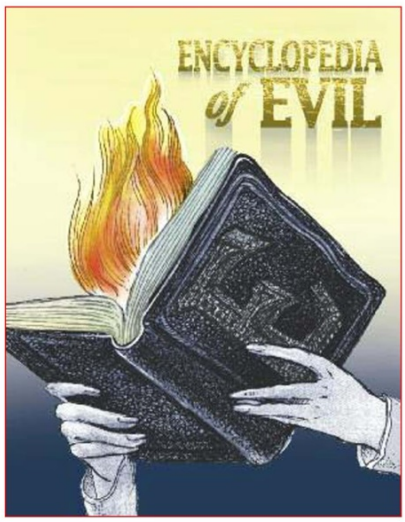
Whence Cometh Evil?

The Concept and Mechanics of Natural Evil

BY GEORGE SALIS



Evil can be defined as something supernatural (pure evil), such as a dark force or a devil, or as something scientific (natural evil), relating to psychology. The former concept has been shown to increase retribution and hostility, the latter has demonstrated the opposite effect, leaning more toward restorative or rehabilitative justice, so it is paramount that we recognize pure evil as being scientifically groundless. The mechanics of natural evil will allow us to decrease the tendancy of criminals to reoffend through rehabilitation, as outlined by the framework of restorative justice.[1]

It has been argued that attempting to redefine evil out of a theological and religious framework and into a natural scientific paradigm is illusory and counterproductive[2, 3] or that evil cannot be rigidly defined and is thus forever amorphous.[4] On the contrary, to say that evil cannot exist outside the realm of metaphysics and theology or that it is unable to be defined objectively is to say that good cannot exist or be defined either. In principle, good acts could be measured as those that allow humans to flourish and, conversely, evil acts would be those that cause suffering.[5] In short, it is possible to measure actions on a gradient of good to evil based on the neurological effects they may or may not have on the brains of conscious beings. To call it evil is simply to distinguish the opposite end of a gradient that also contains good. And just as morality has been tied to theology but has now become secularized within humanism and other movements, so too can our concept of evil.

Diagnosing Evil

Having an understanding of evil begins with understanding morality, which has now been revealed to begin at a very early age.[6] For example, in one of numerous studies conducted by Paul Bloom, et al. at their Yale laboratory, 6- and 10-month-old infants were shown a morality play in which a geometrical shape was either helped up a hill by another shape, or hindered.[7] When both the helping shape and hindering shape were placed on a tray and the infants were allowed to choose one, they overwhelmingly preferred the helpful shape.

In addition to developmental psychology, neuroscience has found that evil occurs in the brain, often in the form of psychopathy.[8] Some psychopathic characteristics include a lack of empathy, compassion, anxiety, or guilt, a skewed theory of mind that results in a type of solipsism, a shortage of emotions, and a "willingness to do *whatever it takes* to satisfy their desires."[9] Simon Baron-Cohen argues that humans have an empathy circuit within the brain composed of 10 interconnected regions, and when the empathy circuit is faulty, an individual is unable to be empathetic and compassionate. This deficiency has been found to be related to both genetic and environmental causes, the latter being something such as an upbringing in which a child experiences severe physical and/or mental abuse. In the United States it is estimated that psychopaths make up approximately four percent of the general population,[10] but nearly 25 percent of the prison population.[11] Another form of empathy deficiency includes antisocial personality disorder, which is similar to psychopathy and is marked by characteristics such as impulsiveness, frequent lying, belligerence, and a lack of guilt. Antisocial personality disorder occurs in 47 percent of male prison populations and in 25 percent of female prison populations.[12]

But not all people with faulty empathy circuits are psychopaths or sociopaths. Those with a properly working empathy circuit can still experience indefinite lapses in empathy during specific situations. Social psychologist Phil Zimbardo demonstrated in his infamous Stanford Prison experiment that individuals randomly assigned to fulfill a certain role can, through deindividuation and dehumanization, perpetrate humiliating and cruel punishments on others.[13] Milgram highlighted that the majority of people, under the influence of perceived authority figures, are willing to inflict increasingly painful and eventually deadly shocks on others.[14] This study was partially replicated in recent years and found that most can be still influenced to inflict pain on others.[15]

Other phenomena that can transmogrify into the service of evil include compliance (following group norms or orders without necessarily believing in them), identification (close affiliation with those of similar interests), and conformity (adjusting perceptions and opinions to blend into and stay loyal to a group). As Michael Shermer explains in *The Moral Arc*:

> All of these factors are interactive and autocatalytic—that is, they feed on one another…together, they form the machinery of evil that arises under certain social conditions…. We can change the conditions and attenuate evil, first by understanding it and then by taking action to change it. By understanding how its components operate and how to control them, we can quell evil and keep it in check through the social tools and political technologies we now know how to employ to the betterment of humanity.[16]

It is not difficult to see how such psychological phenomena, working individually or simultaneously, can cause people who are overall mentally healthy to engage in evil acts.

Punishing Evil

Many people believe that justice requires that evil be punished. However, a more mechanistic view of how people operate (i.e., the view that free will is an illusion) can result in a more restorative sense of justice.[17] Restorative justice relies on rehabilitation and the needs of the victim, which has been shown to have a positive impact in the form of a decrease in recidivism,[18] as opposed to retributive justice, which relies on hard punishments, such as the death penalty or long prison sentences. Studies reveal that a belief in pure evil positively correlates with more intergroup aggression and less intergroup prosociality, while a belief in pure good correlates with less intergroup aggression and more intergroup prosociality.[19, 20]

Unfortunately, these studies did not differentiate between notions of pure evil and natural evil. Burris and Rempel did create a distinction between pure and natural evil through the idea of evil individuals (pure evil) versus evil behavior/actions where the intention of harm is unprovoked and unjustifiable (natural evil).[21] They demonstrated that "evil symbols," such as "666," when associated with an individual, caused participants who endorsed a notion of pure evil to label that individual as evil, thereby increasing hatred and punitive responses toward the labeled individual, while participants who favored the notion of evil behavior, or fostered a disregard for the power of pure evil, responded to evil symbols with a decreased likelihood of labeling an individual as evil. Beyond the shortsightedness and tribalism of harsh punishment, there is the possibility of treating those who engage in evil acts in a way that aligns with the efficacy of restorative justice.

Although such science is in its infancy, there is potential to ameliorate or even cure natural evil based on the mechanisms of the brain, such as rehabilitating psychopaths. Baron-Cohen suggests methods that target the empathy circuit, such as watching educational videos that highlight the emotional complexity of other human beings or roleplaying scenarios that involve being in the position of the victim. Practices of compassion meditation have also been found to increase empathy in participants.[22] The inhalation or injection of oxytocin (sometimes called the "love hormone") has been shown to increase participants' scores on both empathy and emotion recognition tests.[23, 24] However, if people propagate and persist in the idea of pure evil, then the initiative of helping mentally sick individuals (those with lower empathy and compassion levels) will not be as appealing. In the *Moral Landscape*, neuroscientist Sam Harris asks us to consider the consequences if a cure for human evil existed:

> Imagine, for the sake of argument, that every relevant change in the human brain can be made cheaply, painlessly, and safely. The cure for psychopathy can be put directly into the food supply like Vitamin D. Evil is now nothing more than a nutritional deficiency…. Consider, for instance, the prospect of *withholding* the cure for evil from a murderer as part of punishment. Would this make any moral sense at all?…. What if the treatment had

> been available prior to the person's crime? Would he still be responsible for his actions? It seems far more likely that those who had been aware of his case would be indicted for negligence. Would it make any sense at all to deny brain surgery…if we knew [a] brain tumor was the proximate cause for [a person's] violence? Of course not. The urge for retribution, therefore, seems to depend upon our not seeing the underlying causes of human behavior.

Whether evil is viewed as natural or supernatural can have real-world consequences in the functioning of society. We need to exercise our ability to empathize and sympathize for those who cannot, and act in a way that is informed by the latest neuroscience.

Is Empathy the Ultimate Answer to Evil?

We shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking that empathy is a panacea for all the world's problems. Nor is it a potential harbinger for a coming of our Christ-like selves. Among other things, the Bible is recognized for its pithy statements, such as "Love thy neighbor as thyself." But such a sentiment was originally restricted to kith and kin and one's in-group, and continued to foster the existence of the Other, the out-group, which forms the foundation of tribalism. As Shermer elaborates,

> The world's religions are tribal and xenophobic by nature, serving to regulate moral rules within the community but not seeking to embrace humanity outside their circle. Religion, by definition, forms an identity of *those like us*, in sharp distinction from *those not us, those heathens, those unbelievers*. Most religions were pulled into the modern Enlightenment with their fingernails dug into the past.

Whether universal or limited in scope, Bloom notes the excessiveness of the injunction to "love thy neighbor:"

> I know I have obligations to [my neighbors], but my moral feelings to them, my moral beliefs about how I should behave towards them, aren't grounded in love. What they're grounded in is the understanding of human rights, a belief that their life is as valuable to them as my life is to me.[25]

Bloom has argued *against* empathy, which may seem counterintuitive at first. He explains that it causes in-group amity but between-group enmity; it is biased, tending to be reserved for attractive or relatable people, such as those with the same ethnicity; and it is narrow, connecting us to individuals but not to the masses.[26] In addition, empathy gives us tunnel vision. As Bloom explains, "It's because of empathy that the whole world cares so much more about a baby stuck in a well than we do about global warming."[27] The downsides of empathy do not end there: through demagoguery, empathy can be manipulated in a negative way, so that a political leader, for example, can focus a collective's sensibilities on the suffering of the few in order to wage war on the many.[28] By any objective, statistical standard, that would be an immoral policy. Other than being misplaced, empathy can be reversed through revenge-like impulses, causing counter-empathy, or a feeling of pleasure at someone's pain or misfortune[29]—what the Germans call *Schadenfreude*. Empathy can also be harmful to the individual who is empathizing. Females, who tend to score higher on empathy tests, are more likely to be diagnosed with depression or anxiety and other afflictions. Referencing studies by Tania Singer, Bloom adds, "Compassion training—which doesn't involve empathetic arousal to the perceived distress of others—was more effective [than empathy training, which can cause emotional burnouts], leading to both increased positive emotions and increased altruism."[30]

In light of this, empathy is most likely not the main ingredient to consider regarding psychopaths, since they experience an overall dulling of emotions. Rather than placing one's self in the shoes of another and experiencing that person's pain by proxy, it seems that compassion (the willingness to help) can be much more productive than empathy on its own.

The instinctual tools of our brain are not as black and white as we might have thought; they can be helpful in different ways. Such tools, after all, evolved for our survival, albeit in a starkly different environment. In the same vein, Bloom has argued *for* prejudice. "When we think about prejudice," says Bloom, "we tend to think about stupid and evil people doing stupid and evil things."[31] Such is not necessarily the case. Prejudice, in the form of rational schemata and other expectations, can help us navigate reality. In his defense of profiling at airport security checkpoints, Harris argues that it is potentially more productive to stop a bearded and turbaned middle-aged man at an airport than an elderly woman or a three-year-old in a wheelchair.[32] The problem comes when prejudice gives birth to jingoism and racism. Overall, those problems are pernicious exceptions to the intuitive tool of prejudice.

Our brains are not wired to think statistically, or even scientifically. Reason and logic are within our grasp, but they are not necessarily the default motivators of our actions. This fact goes to the heart

of the dichotomy of thinking versus feeling. For example, even when concerning ourselves with vaccinating children or tackling climate change, as Bloom concedes, we tend to need the concreteness of at least one personal link, such as imagining how our children or children's children will feel upon a planet in the grip of a Venus-like runaway global warming. Such empathy can be the impetus for more calculated action.

Depending on the situation, much empathy can lead to evil, but so can little or no empathy. Conversely, in other situations, much or no empathy can lead to good. A breaking down of the dichotomy of thinking and feeling, an amalgamation of the strengths of each way of operating is what we need, not just statistics nor just empathy. "The ultimate goal should be policies and norms that become second nature and render empathy unnecessary," writes Steven Pinker in *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. "Empathy, like love, is in fact not all you need." Faculties like self-control and a moral sense are important, although they have their flaws. Most of all, we are capable of reason, which is not only efficient but indispensable. With tools like these, coupled with compassion and the stuff of feeling, we can create the most effective change in the sphere of the justice system and the world as a whole. **S**

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CONTRIBUTORS

Ástor Alexander is a figurative illustrator and painter. He specializes in portraits and he's a big fan of the American illustrators of the 60s. His work can be seen at behance.net/astor alexander

Dr. Raymond Barglow has a doctorate in philosophy from UC Berkeley. He participated in Berkeley's Free Speech Movement in 1964 and has taught at UC Berkeley and Trinity College. He writes on science, ethics, and public policy issues, and belongs to the Wellstone Democratic Renewal Club.

Dr. Robert Bartholomew is a medical sociologist who holds a Ph.D. from James Cook University in Australia. He is an authority on culture-specific mental disorders, outbreaks of mass psychogenic illness, moral panics and the history of tabloid journalism. He has conducted anthropological fieldwork among the Malays in Malaysia and Aborigines in Central Australia. His most recently books are *A Colorful History of Popular Delusions* with Peter Hassall and *American Hauntings: The True Stories Behind Hollywood's Scariest Movies—From Exorcist to The Conjuring* with Joe Nickell.

Dr. Chris Edwards teaches World History and AP World History at a public high school in Indiana. He is a frequent contributor to Skeptic on a variety of topics and the author of several books. He currently directs the Scientech/Ball State University Summer Institute for Math and Science teachers. He can be reached at scientechsummer @gmail.com

Dr. Ken Levy is the Holt B. Harrison Professor of Law at LSU Law School in Baton Rouge, LA. He received his J.D. from Columbia Law School (2002) and Ph.D. in Philosophy from Rutgers (1999). His principal areas of expertise are constitutional interpretation, criminal law, criminal psychology, criminal theory, ethics, and metaphysics. He is currently finishing up a book, *Free Will, Responsibility, and Crime: An Introduction,* which will be published by Routledge. His academic publications can be found here: https://www.law.lsu.edu/directory/profiles/kenlevy/. A list of his non-academic publications can be found here: https://www.law.lsu.edu/directory/files/2015/04/Ken-Levy-CV-112017.pdf.

Dr. Ralph Lewis is a Staff Psychiatrist at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto, Canada, and an Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto. His upcoming book *Finding Purpose in a Godless World: Why We Should Care Even if the Universe Doesn't* with a foreword by Michael Shermer will be available July 2018.

Dr. Douglas J. Navarick is Professor of Psychology at California State University, Fullerton. He has been on the faculty there since 1973, the year in which he received his Ph.D. from the University of California, San Diego in General Experimental Psychology with a specialization in operant conditioning. From studies of pigeons' choices between schedules of reinforcement, Dr. Navarick's research interests have continually evolved over the years and now focus on people's choices between right and wrong from social, cognitive, and behavioral perspectives.

George Salis is a Swiss-American writer and researcher who focuses on literature and psychology. He has received awards for his journalism and fiction and has taught in Bulgaria, China, and currently teaches in Poland. With spontaneous resurrections, upside-down lightning, a snake priest, and more, his debut novel *Sea Above, Sun Below* (forthcoming late 2018/early 2019) combines Greek and Christian mythology with psychological phenomena to create a tapestry of tales for the adult mind. You can follow him on Facebook or at www.GeorgeSalis.com.

Dr. Margret Schaefer received a Ph.D. in English at UC Berkeley, and has taught at UC Berkeley, San Francisco State, and the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is a cultural and literary critic, journalist, and translator, and has written on issues in psychology and medical history as well as on Oscar Wilde, Kleist, Kafka, and Arthur Schnitzler. Recently she translated and published three volumes of Schnitzler's fiction and two of his plays, which were produced in New York and in Berkeley.

Dr. Robert Stern graduated from Grinnell College with a BA in Classics, did graduate work in Archaeology and Biopsychology, earned his D.O. from the University of North Texas Health Science Center, completed his Psychiatry Residency at Cherokee Mental Health Institute in Iowa, was a Senior Clinical Instructor at the University of Rochester School of Medicine while working at the Rochester Psychiatric Institute, earned a FACN (Fellow of the American College of Neuropsychiatrists), and was elected to the NBOME (National Board of Osteopathic Medical Examiners) in Psychiatry. Away from work he has earned Graduate Jeweler/Gemologist certificates from the Gemological Institute of America. He is retired, and is currently trying to learn to read Egyptian hieroglyphics—with minor success.

Dr. Natalia Pasternak Taschner has a Ph.D. in bacterial genetics and is currently a research fellow at the Institute of Biomedical Sciences, in the University of São Paulo, Brazil, where she heads a project in Microbiology teaching and science education. She has also been working with science communication for 3 years, writing books and articles about all kinds of scientific themes, with special care to raise awareness on pseudoscience and bad science, trying to keep people from being fooled and governments from wasting public money. She runs the international Science Communication festival "Pint of Science" in Brazil.

Dr. Elizabeth Weiss is author of *Reading the Bones: Activity, Biology, and Culture* (2017, University Press of Florida) and *Paleopathology in Perspective: Bone Health and Disease through Time* (2014, Rowman and Littlefield). She has been a professor of anthropology at San José State University (SJSU) since 2004; prior to joining the anthropology department at SJSU, Elizabeth had a post-doctoral research position at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa. Elizabeth has worked with a variety of skeletal collections from Quebec Prisoners of War to British Columbian Indians. She continues to conduct research on past people's bone biology using the California Indian collection she curates at SJSU.

REGULAR CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Harriet Hall, MD, the SkepDoc, is a retired family physician and Air Force Colonel who writes about alternative medicine, pseudoscience, quackery, and critical thinking. She is a contributing editor to both Skeptic and *Skeptical Inquirer,* an advisor to the Quackwatch website, and an editor of Sciencebasedmedicine .org, where she writes an article every Tuesday. She is author of *Women Aren't Supposed to Fly: The Memoirs of a Female Flight Surgeon.* Her website is www.skepdoc.info.

Pat Linse is an award winning illustrator who specialized in film industry art before becoming one of the founders of the Skeptics Society, Skeptic, and the creator of Junior Skeptic magazine. As Skeptic's art director she has created many illustrations for both Skeptic and Junior Skeptic. She is co-editor of the *Encyclopedia of Pseudoscience.*

Daniel Loxton was a professional shepherd for nine years before he became editor of Junior Skeptic. He illustrates and authors most of the current Junior Skeptic material. He wrote and illustrated the best selling award-winning *Evolution: How All Living Things Came to Be,* and the award winning children's three book Tales of Prehistoric Life Series.

Dr. Michael Shermer is the Publisher of Skeptic magazine, a monthly columnist for *Scientific American*, a regular contributor to Time.com, and Presidential Fellow at Chapman University. His new book is *Heavens on Earth: The Scientific Search for the Afterlife, Immortality, and Utopia.* As a public intellectual he regularly contributes Opinion Editorials, book reviews, and essays to T*he Wall Street Journal, The Los Angeles Times, Science, Nature,* and other publications. He appeared on such shows as *The Colbert Report, 20/20, Dateline, Charlie Rose, and Larry King Live* (but, proudly, never *Jerry Springer!*). His two TED talks, seen by millions, were voted in the top 100 of the more than 1000 TED talks. He holds a Ph.D. from Claremont Graduate University in the history of science.

Dr. Carol Tavris is a social psychologist and coauthor, with Elliot Aronson, of *Mistakes were made (but not by ME).*