

The Question of Evil

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There is no greater misfortune
than to underestimate your enemy.
Underestimating your enemy
means thinking that he is evil.
Thus you destroy your three treasures
and become an enemy yourself.
-- *Tao Te Ching*, c. 500 B.C.E.¹

Ever since the horrors of September 11, I have been trying to penetrate the question of evil. You know what I mean: intentional human cruelty to other beings. Countless bad things do happen in this life...accidents, floods, drought...but it is the bad things caused by human beings, who as moral agents ought to know better, that we understand as "evil." Yesterday I saw in the newspaper a photograph of a man casting his vote in an election in Africa. He held the ballot between the stumps of his two wrists. Both of his hands had been cut off by opponents of democracy as punishment for voting in the last election. Evil.

Why is there evil? We can speculate about the ultimate purpose of evil in the scheme of things, but we will probably never know for sure. Yet the practical form of this question, what causes evil, is one that we had better answer soon. Evil now has access to big weapons and life-altering technology that can affect us on a global scale. We may be running out of time.

President Bush has answered the question of evil by saying simply that we are good and our opponents are evil. He has called the war on terrorism a war of "Good against Evil" and has asked the world to choose sides. He has identified several countries as the "Axis of Evil."

Unfortunately President Bush is wrong. While his view fits comfortably with our stereotypes and prejudices, it does not accord with the facts. According to years of research by some of the world's best social scientists an axis of evil does in fact exist. But it is not the axis envisioned by George Bush. Instead, it is an axis of psychological processes.

¹ Mitchell, Stephen. (1988). *Tao te ching: A new english version with foreword and notes*. New York: Harper & Row. 69.

The existence of this psychological axis of evil does not absolve perpetrators of responsibility, nor does it mean that we should not oppose evil actions. A lot of research in the field of conflict resolution has shown that, in the long run, a part of the best strategy for resolution is to make certain the other party quickly realizes that you can and will reciprocate if you are harmed. The point of reciprocation is not revenge but communication. Curiously, this strategy can often maximize the self-interest of everyone involved in the conflict.² This strategy assumes that the parties involved are in an ongoing, long-term relationship. In the present case, this assumption is true: the world is one.

Understanding this psychological axis does however give us leverage for dealing with the root causes of evil. And it warns us that our attempts to eliminate evil by warfare or assassination or precision bombing will never succeed. If we persist in this sort of fight we will produce instead nothing but evil upon evil.

The Roots of All Evil

It should come as no surprise that, like everything else created by human beings, evil begins in the mind. From what I've found in looking at the question of evil, it appears that six main psychological components contribute to the axis: attachment problems, trauma, modeling, shadow, projection and inflation. A seventh component, a social-psychological component, creates systemic evil. Taken together these maleficent seven give a close approximation of what we are concerned with, close enough to be useful.

Since attachment problems may begin to develop as early as the first months of life, it makes sense to start our exploration here.

Attachment Problems

A nine-year-old boy purposefully pushes a 3-year-old into the deep end of a motel pool then pulls up a lawn chair to watch the younger boy drown. An eleven-year-old girl orders a ten-year-old out of her yard; when he doesn't leave she shoots him with her parent's gun. Serial killer Ted Bundy in the course of his life raped, mutilated and murdered perhaps thirty or more young women and girls. The true stories of evil are almost unimaginable for most people.

People who find such stories horrible to contemplate are people who have developed a capacity for forming an empathic relationship with another living being. For most, this capacity begins developing at the very first moments of life through our relationship with our principal caregiver, usually our mother or father. Psychologists refer to the strong bond that occurs in this relationship as *attachment*. When the parent ("attachment figure") is emotionally present, by

² Axelrod, Robert. (1990). *The evolution of cooperation*. New York: Penguin. (First published 1984).

being sensitive to what the child is doing or feeling and by responding appropriately, the child usually develops what is called *secure attachment*.

Psychologist John Bowlby has looked at a huge amount of attachment research, with both human and animal subjects. He found that secure attachment as an infant not only predicts social competence as a young child, but also is essential to the health of the adult the child grows to be.³ Secure attachment provides a safe base for social and biological development. Children learn that they themselves are valued and that other people are a source of comfort and support. They are able to connect.

If on the other hand the parent is absent or rejects the infant's need for comfort or for exploration, the child may develop *insecure* or *disorganized* attachment. There may be a genetic component to some attachment problems, but parental behavior always has a huge influence. The parent may be unavoidably absent, due to hospitalization or illness. The parent may be unskilled, neglectful, alcoholic, or abusive. Or the child may be abandoned and bounced from one foster placement to another.

To varying degrees, childhood attachment problems foreshadow problems later in life, including chronic fear, depression, inappropriate aggression, and anxiety. Moderate attachment problems may produce the salesperson who swindles you without remorse. This person is not interested particularly in doing evil; he simply perceives an "easy" way to get what he wants and has no sense of interpersonal relatedness or affection to get in his way. Severe attachment problems can result in a person who feels no qualm about harming others physically, and who at the same time often boils below the surface with feelings of intense rage caused by a sense of abandonment.

In the earliest stages of life, the infant naturally needs to have the mother available to meet the infant's every need. This is called age-appropriate healthy narcissism. If the mother meets these needs, the child will begin to develop a healthy self-feeling, and will gradually develop an interest in the well being of others beside himself. If on the other hand the mother is emotionally needy and uses the infant to satisfy her *own* self-centered needs, the child never develops a healthy self-concept, but instead becomes unhealthily narcissistic and self-centered. When these kids grow up, their feelings often alternate between grandiosity and depression. Any perceived insult or ridicule can bring on feelings of intense rage and an obsessive need for revenge. Heinz Kohut calls this "narcissistic rage".⁴

It is important to realize that narcissistic rage can be triggered by a threat to *anything* that is central to the self—our body, our friends and family, our gender or ethnicity, our nation, our religious or political beliefs. We know from

³ Bowlby, John. (1973) *Separation: Anxiety and Anger*. New York: Basic Books.

⁴ Kohut, H. (1978). *The search for the self: Selected writings of Heinz Kohut, 1950-1978*. Vol 1. Madison, CN: International Universities Press.

studies of war that scapegoating and harming of enemies is particularly likely to occur under conditions that result in a perceived attack on the sense of self: hardship, threat, stress, and frustration.⁵ Rage arises as an attempt to get away from the wounding pain and also to destroy the enemy who violates us in this way. Often there is a complete lack of empathy and a thirst to assert power and control.⁶ People with chronic narcissistic rage may treat others sadistically.

In a 1999 article in the *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, Peter Fonagy of University College London points out that attachment problems tend to be passed from generation to generation. Children with attachment problems often grow into adults who are themselves incapable of forming attachment, and who have a higher than average likelihood of being abusive. Narcissistically disturbed mothers bring up narcissistically disturbed kids. Evil perpetuates evil. Fonagy says that in as many as 80% of the cases, infant attachment classification can be predicted on the basis of the parents' attachment classifications made before the birth of the child.⁷

Attachment problems can be brought about by individual cases of abuse and neglect and also by large-scale disruptions of adequate parenting such as those brought on by war. Writing in *The Atlantic* about Afghanistan and Pakistan exactly one year before September 11, correspondent Robert Kaplan pointed out that many of the Taliban are orphans of war who had never known the company of women. "Indeed," he says, "the most dangerous movements are often composed of war orphans, who, being unsocialized, are exceptionally brutal (The Khmer Rouge, in Cambodia, and the Revolutionary United Front, in Sierra Leone, are two examples)."⁸ It was the Revolutionary United Front who hacked off the hands of the courageous voter.

Trauma

Psychological trauma is a shock to the system that occurs when a person experiences, witnesses, or is confronted with events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury or a threat to the physical integrity of themselves or others. We are concerned here not with trauma caused by earthquakes and other natural disasters, but with human-made trauma—the trauma caused by war, oppression, suicide bombers, army tanks rolling through your neighborhood, the chopping off of hands. These traumas as well as

⁵ Staub, E. (1989). *The roots of evil: The origins of genocide and other group violence*. Cambridge, New York & Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ Kohut, H. (1978). *The search for the self: Selected writings of Heinz Kohut, 1950-1978. Vol 1*. Madison, CN: International Universities Press.

⁷ Fonagy, P. (1999). Male perpetrators of violence against women: An attachment theory perspective. *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, 1, 7 – 27.

⁸ Kaplan, Robert D. (2000). The lawless frontier. *The Atlantic online*. September, www.theatlantic.com/issues/2000/09/kaplan.htm.

physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and/or emotional abuse can be sources of childhood attachment problems.

According to Dr. Fonagy, parental abuse puts the child in an impossible situation. Abuse activates the need for protection and comfort, but the potential source of protection and comfort is also the source of the abuse. There is some evidence that this situation can create a sort of moral numbing because it reduces the child's ability to reflect on itself. Fonagy says "Maltreatment may cause children to withdraw from the mental world. Their attachment behaviors, their proximity seeking, is disorganized because they desperately seek physical closeness while trying to create mental distance."⁹

A curious and unfortunate fact is that many traumatized people seem almost compulsively drawn to situations reminiscent of the original trauma. Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, past president of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, tells of a Vietnam veteran who had lit a cigarette at night and caused the death of a friend by a Viet Cong sniper's bullet in 1968. "From 1969 to 1986, on the exact anniversary of the death, to the hour and minute, he yearly committed "armed robbery" by putting a finger in his pocket and staging a "holdup," in order to provoke gunfire from the police." Van der Kolk adds that the compulsive re-enactment ceased when the veteran came to understand the meaning of his actions.¹⁰

In the case of this veteran, no one was hurt by the re-enactment. All too often though, the re-enactment can lead to the perpetuation and expansion of evil through harm to others, self-destructiveness, and re-victimization. In a re-enactment the traumatized person can play the role of either the victim or victimizer. There seem to be significant sex differences about the choice of role, differences that hold for all primates.¹¹ Males tend to identify with the aggressor and take the role of victimizing others. Females often become involved with abusive males but fail to protect themselves or their offspring against danger.

Van der Kolk cites many examples of re-enactment leading to further evil. One study showed that of 14 juveniles condemned to death for murder in the United States in 1987, 12 had been brutally physically abused, and five had been sodomized by relatives. Another study found that over 40 per cent of a sample of abused children engaged in self-destructive behavior such as head-banging, biting, burning, and cutting. Other studies show a high incidence of

⁹ Fonagy, P. (1999). Male perpetrators of violence against women: An attachment theory perspective. *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, 1, 7 – 27.

¹⁰ van der Kolk, B. A. (1989) The compulsion to repeat the trauma: re-enactment, revictimization, and masochism. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*. 12 (2) 389-411.

¹¹ van der Kolk, B. A. (1989) The compulsion to repeat the trauma: re-enactment, revictimization, and masochism. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*. 12 (2) 389-411.

revictimization, with female victims of rape more likely to be raped and female victims of childhood sexual abuse at high risk of becoming prostitutes.¹²

War of course produces trauma in combatants and non-combatants alike. Military doctors called combatant trauma “shell shock” in the First World War and “PTSD” (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) in the Viet Nam War, but the underlying phenomenon remains the same. It’s likely that the drive trauma creates for re-enactment can help propel whole societies toward more war. Trauma specialist Peter Levine says in his book *Waking the Tiger*, “Lasting peace among warring peoples cannot be accomplished without first healing the traumas of previous terrorism, violence, and horror on a mass scale.”¹³

Freud thought that the aim of compulsive repetition was to gain mastery and eventual resolution of the original trauma. There seems to be no clinical evidence however for this purported “benefit” of the repetition. In fact, repetition seems only to cause further harm. What brings about healing is rather a carefully moderated “renegotiation” of the traumatic event, in which the energy bound up by the trauma is allowed to be discharged safely by the body in the context of a supportive environment.

The “Evil” Person

In an attempt to understand the roots of evil, psychoanalyst Alice Miller studied the childhood histories of “evil” people, most notably Adolf Hitler. She found that despite many dissimilarities, everyone she studied shared a background of severe mistreatment and humiliation, “not only in isolated instances but on a regular basis. From earliest childhood, they grew up in a climate of cruelty.”¹⁴

Adolf’s father, Alois, beat the boy mercilessly every day. Miller points out that the normal reaction to such treatment would be extreme rage, but that the authoritarian environment in the Hitler household forced young Adolph to suppress his rage. Miller says that she has never come across persecutors who weren’t themselves victims in their childhood, though most of them don’t know it because their feelings are repressed. The rage and despair is not consciously felt, but is stored up in the body, in the limbic brain, to be unleashed later in merciless acts of revenge on society. This does not mean that every victim becomes a persecutor but that every persecutor was a victim in childhood.¹⁵

¹² van der Kolk, B. A. (1989) The compulsion to repeat the trauma: re-enactment, revictimization, and masochism. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*. 12 (2) 389-411.

¹³ Levine, Peter A. (1997). *Waking the tiger: Healing trauma*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books. 222.

¹⁴ Miller, Alice. (1983). *For your own good: Hidden cruelty in child-rearing and the roots of violence*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. 240.

¹⁵ www.vachss.com/guest_dispatches/alice_miller2.html

Miller's findings are confirmed by more recent studies of bullying in schools. These studies show that bullies often come from homes in which physical punishment is used, children are taught to strike out physically as a way to handle problems, and parental involvement and warmth are frequently lacking. It turns out that many bullies are also victims of bullying and many victims of bullying are also bullies. Research on serial murderers shows that many of them suffered prolonged abuse and mistreatment as children.¹⁶

Victims of torture are not unlike victims of bullying. Ayman al-Zawahiri, who many believe is the real brains behind Al-Qaeda, is reported to have said that torture in prison turns many people into fanatics who have an overwhelming desire for revenge.¹⁷

Alice Miller also asked herself why so many "normal citizens" were willing to participate in Nazi atrocities. She looked at the child rearing practices in vogue in Germany at the time the war generation had been children. What she found was a "poisonous pedagogy" that encouraged parents to spank babies whenever they cried, and to use intimidation, humiliation, and corporal punishment to control young children. This kind of upbringing, Miller says, produced Eichmann, Himmler, and many others full of unconscious rage and a stunted sense of compassion for others.

Let's be very clear here. Miller's findings do not mean that the world should not have fought to stop Hitler and his followers. They do mean that simply killing a Hitler, or the followers of a Hitler, won't get at the root cause of evil.

Miller also found many instances of children who were abused but grew into productive citizens rather than criminals. What differentiated these children was that invariably each had had a relationship with what she calls a "helping witness". This person was a sibling, a teacher, a neighbor, or just somebody who liked or even loved them, though unable to protect them from abuse. Yet these relationships gave the child a notion of trust and love. This saved them from descending into the pit.

Cognitive Neglect

When deprived of secure attachment or when traumatized, children can develop deficits in the ability to think. Studies with both humans and animals show that those who suffer neglect often do not fully develop the areas of the brain that can inhibit and regulate behavior and that can infer mental states in others, a skill related to empathy. Neglected animals have lower synaptic

¹⁶ Baumeister, Roy F. (1997). *Evil: Inside human cruelty and violence*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company. 49.

¹⁷ Wright, Lawrence. (2002). The man behind bin laden. *The New Yorker*, September 16, 56-85.

density and lighter-weight brains than those reared in enriched environments.¹⁸ Alice Miller cites a study of abandoned and severely maltreated children that showed the areas of their brains responsible for the management of their emotions to be twenty to thirty percent smaller than in other children of the same age.¹⁹ Such cognitive deficits can contribute substantially to impulsive and reactive violence.

Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi in their book *A General Theory of Crime*, propose that most crimes are the result of a lack of inner discipline and restraint.²⁰ They show that criminals tend to differ from ordinary citizens in that the criminals show a lack of self-control in many areas of their lives, both legal and illegal. For most people, most of the time, our inner greed, ambition, and egotism are held in check by self-control and social expectations. If these restraints are removed, evil actions can spew forth. Psychologist Roy Baumeister points out in his book *Evil: Inside Human Cruelty and Violence* that regardless of the *root* causes of violence, the *immediate* cause is often a breakdown of self-control.²¹ Therefore, any cognitive problems that reduce a person's ability for self-control can contribute to violence and evil. One way evil is passed down through families is that children learn by observing the modeling of their parents that it is OK to lose control. Evil perpetuates evil.

Bruce Perry, M.D., Ph.D., an internationally recognized authority in child trauma, gives a striking example of the role of cognitive development on violence. "In the year 1340 in Amsterdam, the murder rate was in excess of 150 murders per 100,000 people. Two hundred years later the murder rate was below 5 per 100,000. Clearly this is not a 'genetic' phenomenon. The genetics of the population of Amsterdam likely did not change much in two hundred years. This marked decrease in the incidence of murderous violence likely is due to the development of a higher percentage of individuals in that society having better developed cortices—more capable of abstract cognition, and, thus more capable of modulation of aggressive and violent impulses."²²

Given this hypothesis, it is an ominous statistic that the subcontinent of Asia is home to 45 percent of the world's illiterate. Correspondent Kaplan says,

¹⁸ Perry, B.D. (1997). Incubated in terror: Neurodevelopmental factors in the 'cycle of violence',. In: J. Osofsky (Ed.), *Children, youth and violence: The search for solutions* (pp. 124-148). New York: Guilford Press.

¹⁹ www.vachss.com/guest_dispatches/alice_miller2.html

²⁰ Gottfredson, M. R. & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A general theory of crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

²¹ Baumeister, Roy F. (1997). *Evil: Inside human cruelty and violence*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company. 14.

²² Perry, B.D. (1997). Incubated in terror: Neurodevelopmental factors in the 'cycle of violence',. In: J. Osofsky (Ed.), *Children, youth and violence: The search for solutions* (pp. 124-148). New York: Guilford Press,

"I can see few priorities for the United States higher than pressuring governments in the region to improve primary education."²³

Trauma is passed on not only in family histories but in national histories. Consider the case of Liberia, a nation founded by ex-slaves from the United States. Liberia was created to provide an asylum of dignity, respect, and liberty for those who had been oppressed. Yet the rulers of the new country began ruling as they had been ruled: with oppression. Many observers say that this exclusionist society set the tone for the corruption and civil war that has blemished Liberia's recent history.²⁴

Modeling

We all hold in our minds models about how the world works and about how we should act. We hold these mental models in the form of images of what the ideal world or ideal behavior should be, and images of actual situations and actual behavior by people who are our "role models." Even as very young children we begin to make sense of the world by building mental models or "schemas" and then using these models to incorporate or assimilate new experiences. Mental models function both as filters through which we see the world and as templates for our own actions.

An experiment by psychologist Albert Bandura vividly demonstrates the power of models. In this experiment a nursery school child is playing quietly. In another part of the playroom an adult stands up and begins punching and kicking an inflatable punching doll which has a weighted bottom so it always bounds back up. The adult keeps punching and kicking for nearly ten minutes, all the while yelling things like "Sock him in the nose....Hit him down....Kick him!" Then another adult leads the child away to a new playroom filled with many lovely toys. The child resumes playing happily. In only a few moments however the experimenter returns and explains that she has decided to save these fine toys "for the other children." She takes the frustrated child to another playroom containing only a few poor toys--and an inflatable punching doll. What does the child do after it is left alone?

Compared with children who had not seen the punching and kicking, children who had observed the behavior modeled by the adult were much more likely to attack the doll. Furthermore these children usually copied the adult's exact words and actions.

Multiply this punching doll experiment by millions and you get the modeling effect of violence in the media. Hundreds of studies over the past 40

²³ Kaplan, Robert D. (2000). The lawless frontier. *The Atlantic online*. September, www.theatlantic.com/issues/2000/09/kaplan.htm

²⁴ Harman, Danna. (2002). Liberia: From oasis of freedom to ongoing civil war. *The Christian Science Monitor*. June 12, 2002. 7.

years show conclusively that viewing violence on television increases aggressive and antisocial behavior. Depictions of violence in the media mislead people into thinking that violence is an acceptable, effective, and common way to solve problems. Modeling of bad behaviors implies both endorsement by an authority figure and social acceptance of the behavior, both of which have been shown to be powerful methods for influencing behavior.²⁵

Field studies by Leonard Eron, Professor of Psychology at the University of Illinois and expert in the effects of media violence, found that children who watched a lot of televised violence when they were in elementary school tended to show higher levels of aggressive behavior as teenagers and were more likely to be arrested and prosecuted for criminal acts as adults. Testifying before the Senate in 1999, Eron said that the best estimate of many analyses is that 10% of all youth violence can be attributed to the modeling of violence on television.²⁶

Television can also reinforce the cognitive problems created by trauma. Studies of the physiological and neurological effects of television, conducted by Fred and Merrelyn Emery at the Australian National University in Canberra, show that television viewing reduces the capacity of the human brain to pay attention and reduces cognition to low levels thus thwarting learning.²⁷

The media are not alone in toxic modeling. A recent study of 3 – 6 year olds in Northern Ireland by the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council found influences from the family, the local community, and the school. The study also found that as early as the age of six, 15% of the children were making sectarian and/or prejudiced statements about the other side (Catholic or Protestant).²⁸

Evil from the Malignant Combination of Trauma and Modeling

Modeling and trauma can combine to create a toxic incubator of evil. In the culture of the United States, young boys are at high risk for trouble. William S. Pollack, Ph.D., Director of the Centers for Men and Young Men and Assistant

²⁵ Cialdini, Robert B. (2001). *Influence: Science and practice*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

²⁶ Eron, Leonard D. (1999). *Effects of television violence on children*. Testimony before Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation Regarding Safe Harbor Hours in TV Programming, Senator Ernest Hollings, Chair. May 18. See also: www.4children.org/news/1-97/toxl.htm

²⁷ Emery, Fred & Emery, Merrelyn. (1975). *A choice of futures: to enlighten or inform*. Canberra: Centre for Continuing Education, Australian National University. See also: Emery, Merrelyn. (1985). *The social and neurophysiological effects of television and their implications for marketing practice*. Doctoral dissertation. Australian National University. Canberra.

²⁸ Connolly, P. Smith, A. & Kelly, B. (2002). *Too young to notice? The cultural and political awareness of 3-6 year olds in northern ireland*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Community Relations Council.

Clinical Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School has written about this problem in *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. He points out that boys are up to three times more likely than girls to be the victim of a violent crime and between four to six times more likely to commit suicide. Pollack says that there are two principal causes for the problems of boys in our society: the use of shaming as a way of shaping the behavior of boys (modeling and trauma) and the trauma of emotional separation of boys from their mothers at an unnecessarily early age.²⁹

In *Children, Youth and Violence: The Search for Solutions*, Doctor Bruce Perry calls the combination of trauma and modeling a “malignant combination of experiences”. He says this combination produces the most dangerous people in the world. Traumatic experiences include lack of critical early life nurturing, chaotic and cognitively impoverished environments, pervasive physical threat and persisting fear, all of which can produce attachment problems. The toxic modeling is: “watching the strongest, most violent in the home get what he wants, and seeing the same aggressive violent use of power idealized on television and at the movies. These violent offenders have been incubated in terror, waiting to be old enough to get ‘one of those guns’, waiting to be the one who controls, the one who takes, the one who hits, the one who can ‘make the fear, not take the fear.’”³⁰

Shadow, Projection, and Inflation

Though attachment problems, trauma, and modeling are critical contributors to evil, they don't begin to account for all the evil in the world. Not all abused become abusers; not all traumatized become traumatizers. Many of us are fortunate enough to have avoided trauma and to have the capacity to empathize with others. Yet most of us want to eliminate evil; and this may be our undoing.

Why is it that of all the creatures on the earth human beings are the only ones to wage war, commit genocide, and build weapons of mass destruction? Social psychologist Ernest Becker raised this question and then proposed an insightful answer in his book *Escape from Evil*.³¹

Becker's answer begins with recognizing that of all creatures, human beings seem to be the only ones who are conscious enough to be aware of their own mortality. This awareness gives rise to an anxiety that most people would rather not feel. So people cope by essentially choosing sides. They choose to

²⁹ Pollack, William. (1998). *Real boys: Rescuing our sons from the myths of boyhood*. New York: Random House. xxi, 11.

³⁰ Perry, B.D. (1997). Incubated in terror: Neurodevelopmental factors in the ‘cycle of violence’. In: J. Osofsky (Ed.), *Children, youth and violence: The search for solutions* (pp. 124-148). New York: Guilford Press.

³¹ Becker, Ernest. (1975). *Escape from evil*. New York: The Free Press.

align themselves with the side of life rather than of death. We could call this alignment an “immortality project.”

People align themselves with the side of life by seeking anything that promises to sustain their own lives, such as power or money. Alignment with power can have two faces: malignant power over others, as the power created by the writers of computer viruses, or the power to help, as in the power vested in the skills of a physician. Likewise, alignment with money can result in exploitation or philanthropy.

People also seek to align themselves with the side of life by seeking alignment with things that endure beyond a single individual's lifetime. These can include making a “lasting” contribution to a field of art or knowledge. These can also include involvement with religious movements or specific cultures. These large enduring things in some way assure the perpetuation of the significance of the people associated with them, a kind of immortality.

From this point of view, a threat to a person's culture, religion, or “lasting contributions” is also a threat to that person's own immortality project. The immortality project must be defended at all costs. This is the reason that some conflicts in the world can become so intractable. It's not just my country or tribe that is being threatened but the very significance of my own life. Becker says, “This is what makes war irrational: each person has the same hidden problem, and as antagonists obsessively work their cross purposes, the result is truly demonic.”³²

People also try to align themselves with the side of life by aligning themselves with what is “good.” This is because life is associated with “good” as opposed to death, which is “bad.” Becker argues that this alignment with good is a major cause of evil. To follow his reasoning it's necessary to take a little digression to understand the psychological concepts of shadow, projection, and inflation.

The psychological shadow is the dark complement of the consciously expressed personality. It represents those personal qualities and characteristics that are unacceptable to the conscious ego. To borrow poet Robert Bly's apt image, the shadow is like a sack that you drag behind you everywhere you go and into which you toss all the aspects of yourself that you are ashamed of and don't want to look at.³³ The psychological shadow is much like the normal human shadow: everybody has one; when you face toward the light you can't see your own shadow; and sometimes everybody else but you can see it.

Oftentimes these disowned contents of the psychological shadow are “projected” onto someone else, much as a movie projector sends images onto a blank screen. Then we see “out there” what is really “in here”. Typically the person we choose to project onto is not entirely innocent. He or she has some

³² Becker, Ernest. (1975). *Escape from evil*. New York: The Free Press. 109.

³³ Bly, Robert. (1988). *A little book on the human shadow*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

“hooks” on which we can hang our projections. If we’re ashamed of our own anger, we find a slightly irritated person and view her as totally enraged. That’s how projection of the shadow works.

Sometimes no “hooks” are needed. In a study of emotionally disturbed boys, researchers classified the boys along a continuum based on how much they displayed inappropriate aggression. Then the researchers showed each boy a series of photographs of people engaged in a variety of social situations and asked the boy what was going on in the photo. The most aggressive boys tended to see hostility and aggression in even the most innocuous photos.³⁴

One of the classical psychological studies of violence, Hans Toch’s *Violent Men*, looked at police who deal with violent criminals and at the criminals themselves. Toch found that both groups tended to see themselves as well-meaning, innocent people who had to cope with arbitrary, provocative behavior by the other group.³⁵

In shadow projection our own unacknowledged anger, hatred, jealousy, selfishness or lust are falsely experienced as qualities possessed by another person or group. This usually results in viewing the other person or group as morally “lower” than ourselves. Michael Daniels of John Moores University in Liverpool explains that when the “evil” shadow is projected onto others, “these people will be defined and experienced as our moral enemy and we will thereby feel consciously justified in the harm that we might cause them, which is cleverly interpreted by the ego as *deserved harm*. In this way evil (undeserved harm) is seen as good (deserved harm). Such is the moral double-talk that projection can produce.”³⁶

Inflation

Ever since the time of Aristotle, dramatic tragedy has shown how a person may be destroyed precisely because of attempting to be perfect. In classical terms, this tragic flaw of prideful self-concept was called hubris. The modern psychological term is *inflation*, which gives the apt image of a balloon that has size but not much substance.

Another way to understand inflation is to see it as an unconscious pattern of mythic dimensions that takes over and starts directing a person’s life. A person under the influence of inflation tends to view herself as “destined” to achieve a certain righteous end. The person is often unable to reflect on her experiences, thoughts, and behaviors, seeing her life rather as part of a pre-ordained pattern. As I am writing this, a sniper has killed eight people in the

³⁴ Baumeister, Roy F. (1997). *Evil: Inside human cruelty and violence*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company. 43-44.

³⁵ Baumeister, Roy F. (1997). *Evil: Inside human cruelty and violence*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company. 91.

³⁶ Daniels, Michael. (2001). Towards a transpersonal psychology of evil. *Transpersonal Psychology Review* 5(1), 15-27.

Washington, DC area. He left the following message at the scene of one of his shootings: "Dear Policeman. I am God."³⁷

A less extreme, but still dangerous, version of inflation is egotism or high but unstable self-esteem. An egotist believes himself or herself to be the absolute center of the universe around which all else revolves. Egotism leads people to value their own personal wealth, power, fame, body, possessions, and so on, above all else in the world.

"Are You Talking to Me?"

Research by Michael Kernis and others shows that people who have high but unstable self-esteem are especially prone to violent hostility.³⁸ They often seek out or deliberately provoke challenges to their egos, such as by getting into arguments in bars or insisting on deferential treatment by policemen. As soon as anyone shows any disrespect, questions them, or offends them in any way, they respond with violence.³⁹

People who have inflated self-esteem tend to receive a lot of feedback that threatens their self-image, simply because there is such a discrepancy between their image and reality. It is these people who tend to become dangerous in their attempts to ward off the threats to their self-image.

Such people often overestimate the degree to which the other person's actions are meant as insults. Psychologist Roy Baumeister says: "This hypersensitivity to insults also makes it possible to understand what might otherwise appear to be senseless violence. A man who beats up his girlfriend or stabs a stranger in a bar might seem a malicious villain to observers. In his own eyes, however, he is merely defending himself against an attack. Many violent people believe that their actions were justified by the offensive acts of the person who became their victim."⁴⁰

High but unstable self-esteem often accompanies major attachment problems. One expert who has studied people with antisocial personality disorders describes them as having a "narcissistic and grossly inflated view of their self-worth and importance."⁴¹ They are a small minority of the population

³⁷ Campbell, Kim. (2002). As sniper hunt grows, role of media blurs. *The Christian Science Monitor*. October 10. 4.

³⁸ Baumeister, Roy F. (1997). *Evil: Inside human cruelty and violence*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company. 148-149.

³⁹ Baumeister, Roy F. (1997). *Evil: Inside human cruelty and violence*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company. 149.

⁴⁰ Baumeister, Roy F. (1997). *Evil: Inside human cruelty and violence*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company. 45.

⁴¹ Baumeister, Roy F. (1997). *Evil: Inside human cruelty and violence*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company. 138.

but commit a disproportionately large share of the crimes, especially violent crimes (by one estimate about half of the crimes in the United States and Canada).⁴²

Threatened egotism is particularly susceptible to violence when the ego is threatened in the presence of some audience, as often happens on the world's political stage.

People with inflated self esteem find it easy to see themselves as being on the side of "good." Becker's argument is that in the process of taking the side of life and of good, we project our shadow onto an enemy. Then we try to kill it.

Psychologist Baumeister reached a similar conclusion: a major cause of evil in the world is the idealistic attempt to do good. Some examples include the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Thirty Years' War in Europe in which Catholic and Protestant troops devastated much of Germany in attempting to wipe out the "evil" version of the Christian faith represented by the other side, murders committed to prevent the "evil" of abortion, and the Stalinist and Maoist purges in Russia and China. He points out that "studies of repressive governments repeatedly find that they perceive themselves as virtuous, idealistic, well-meaning groups who are driven to desperately violent measures to defend themselves against the overwhelmingly dangerous forces of evil."⁴³

In many ways the Nazis were idealists. The Nazi SS was composed of the elite, the noblest of the population, yet they committed the most horrible deeds. The Nazis wanted to transform their society to make it perfect. They wanted to root out the elements that they considered "evil". Yet they almost never considered their own actions as evil, perhaps at worst an unfortunate necessity in carrying out a noble enterprise.⁴⁴

The Nazis projected filth and evil onto the Jewish people and then tried to establish a "pure" state by eliminating the Jews. One of the professed motivations of racist lynchings in our own history was to maintain the "purity" of the white race. Many animal species, including coyotes, wolves, and prairie dogs have been irrationally persecuted by humans in the name of eliminating "varmints" and "filth" and "disease-carriers." Enemies are "dirty."

Historically nations have been aroused to war by the depiction of the enemy as pure evil. In cases of reciprocal violence, such as war, each side tends to see itself as the innocent victim and the other as the evil attacker.

⁴² Baumeister, Roy F. (1997). *Evil: Inside human cruelty and violence*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company. 137-138.

⁴³ Baumeister, Roy F. (1997). *Evil: Inside human cruelty and violence*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company.

⁴⁴ Baumeister, Roy F. (1997). *Evil: Inside human cruelty and violence*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company. 34, 38.

How does this relate to our present situation? We've heard President Bush frame the war on terrorism as a war of "Good against Evil." This is irrational and dangerous. No one person, let alone a nation, can be all "good." Let the one who is without sin launch the first missile. Tellingly, Osama Bin Laden also frames the issue as one of Good against Evil: "These events have divided the whole world into two sides. The side of believers and the side of infidels, may God keep you away from them."⁴⁵ Ayman al-Zawahiri said of his terrorist activities in Egypt, "we had to fight the government, which was against God's Sharia and supported God's enemies."⁴⁶ Each side sees nothing but evil in the other.

In our name President Bush has asked the question, "Why do they hate us?" In our name he has answered, "They hate our freedoms...our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other." This answer reveals the undeniable and praiseworthy "light" of the United States of America. But it does not confront what we do not want to face: that our economy sucks the life blood out of much of the world in a disproportionate use of resources, that we refuse to work with other countries in trying to solve global warming or banning land mines, that our tax dollars have been spent spreading defoliants and depleted uranium over many areas of the world, that we helped kill over a million people in the Viet Nam war, that our country imprisons a greater percentage of its population than any other country on earth, that we are the world's biggest arms merchant, that the most powerful economy in the world has somehow allowed the impoverishment of so many, that our media push violence as a solution to problems, that we have trained and equipped death squads and bullied many countries, that we apparently funded and trained Osama Bin Laden himself.

This is not to exonerate the other parties in our conflicts. Neither is it to say that we should tolerate terrorist attacks. It is simply to say that we also have some work to do. This work is not easy. It takes a certain amount of maturity. When I counsel people who are in conflict I suggest they apply the "80/20 rule": 80% of what the other person says about you may have no basis in fact, but probably 20% does have some basis. We need to take a look at the 20%. When we ask, "Why do they hate us?" we cannot get the answer by listening only to ourselves. Sometimes it's helpful to get the perspective of a neutral third party, someone standing beside us who can yet see our shadow while we are mesmerized, moth-like, by our own light.

Nelson Mandela, former President of South Africa and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, has offered us a third-party perspective. In a recent interview in *Newsweek* he says:

⁴⁵ As Reported by USATODAY.com on Sunday, October 7, 2001

⁴⁶ Wright, Lawrence. (2002). The man behind bin laden. *The New Yorker*, September 16, 56-85.

The United States has made serious mistakes in the conduct of its foreign affairs, which have had unfortunate repercussions long after the decisions were taken. Unqualified support of the Shah of Iran led directly to the Islamic revolution of 1979. Then the United States chose to arm and finance the [Islamic] mujahedin in Afghanistan instead of supporting and encouraging the moderate wing of the government of Afghanistan. That is what led to the Taliban in Afghanistan. But the most catastrophic action of the United States was to sabotage the decision that was painstakingly stitched together by the United Nations regarding the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. If you look at those matters, you will come to the conclusion that the attitude of the United States of America is a threat to world peace.⁴⁷

If we as a nation do not do our own “shadow” work, we will simply respond to violence with more of the same, thereby modeling violent behavior and creating trauma and attachment problems. We ourselves will perpetuate evil.

Once a person has decided that some other is evil, the decision helps justify behaviors that tend to belittle or punish the other. Such behaviors are precisely the behaviors that justify the other person in seeing the first person as evil. This reciprocal projection and dehumanization usually leads to a downward spiral.

Patterns of violence often do grow worse over time. The typical pattern for marital violence and violence among strangers is for minor insults and slights to escalate more or less slowly to physical attacks and violent aggression.⁴⁸

One of the reasons violence tends to spiral downward is that there is typically a huge discrepancy between the importance of the act to the perpetrator and to the victim. Baumeister calls this the *magnitude gap*.⁴⁹ For example, rape is a life-changing event for a woman, while it may be only a few moments of excitement and limited satisfaction to the rapist. Whether an SS officer murdered 25 or 30 Jews in a given day was a matter of additional work for the SS officer, but a matter of life and death for the 5 additional Jews.

The magnitude gap functions in a way that makes evil worsen over time. In a pattern of revenge, as occurs in terrorism and occupation, the roles of victim and perpetrator are constantly being reversed. The perpetrator (A) may think he has harmed the victim (B) only at a level of, say, one damage point. The victim (B) however feels harmed at a level of ten points. To exact tit-for-tat revenge, B

⁴⁷ *Newsweek*, September 10, 2002. Also:
<http://www.msnbc.com/news/806174.asp?0bl=-0&cp1=1#BODY>

⁴⁸ Baumeister, Roy F. (1997). *Evil: Inside human cruelty and violence*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company. 283.

⁴⁹ Baumeister, Roy F. (1997). *Evil: Inside human cruelty and violence*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company. 18.

perpetrates harm on A at a level of ten, which from B's point of view may seem only fair, but from A's point of view may feel like harm at a level of 100. This of course seems totally out of proportion and requires further revenge as A and B switch roles again.

Becker's analysis offers a way to understand the instances of genocide and mass murder in human history. He suggests, chillingly, that one way to gain the illusion of *psychological* power over death is to exert *physical* control over life and death. He points out that the killings at the Nazi concentration camps increased dramatically toward the end of the war, when the Nazi's began to have a sense that they might actually lose. Mass slaughter gave the illusion of heroic triumph over death/evil.

The School Playground

Attachment problems, trauma, modeling, and the heroic desire to triumph over evil can reinforce each other to perpetuate evil. There are, unfortunately, plenty of examples of this toxic reinforcement on the world stage today. There are also plenty of examples closer to home.

The following incident happened on the playground of a local public elementary school. Yesterday at recess a boy began dropping gravel over a wall onto the heads of some children below. The children asked him to stop. He refused. One thing led to another and soon two groups of boys were hurling fistfuls of gravel at each other. Fortunately no one was blinded by the time a teacher arrived to put a stop to the battle.

Several of the boys who had asked the first boy to stop were good kids who seldom got into trouble. Yet they wound up retaliating and soon became enmeshed in a major battle with the potential for someone getting seriously hurt. All the kids in this school have had some training in conflict resolution techniques. Competent and concerned teachers were available for help. What happened here?

The boy who started it all seems to meet many of the criteria for a child with attachment problems: no close friends, no remorse at hurting others, denial of any culpability. With little impulse control and no empathy he began tormenting some other boys. The modeling given by our society guides boys toward solving problems through violence. The boys who retaliated were trying to rid themselves of this "evil", first by using words and then with fistfuls of stones. They were drawn into a war just as surely as good citizens are drawn into a war to destroy the evil enemy. I can imagine some innocent kid walking by getting hit with some stones from the "good" boys, getting angry and siding with the "evil" boy in order to get rid of the "evil" boys who had thrown stones at him.

On a larger scale, the interaction of the components of the axis of evil can lead to things like the Columbine massacre and the war in the Middle East.

Systemic Evil

The axis of evil, especially the heroic desire to eliminate evil, often produces systemic evil.

Many studies in the field of conflict resolution show that some conflicts are caused not by the people involved but by the system or social structure within which they are obliged to operate. Even if you were to insert two saints into such a system the saints would soon end up in conflict with each other. Such a conflict may harm others. The harm may be an unintended consequence. We could call the consequence simply “bad” if the people in the system are unaware that their behavior produces the consequence. If however the people in the system persist in their behavior despite awareness of the bad consequences, or persist in denying the bad consequences despite clear evidence, we would be justified in considering the perpetrators to be complicit in an evil of the system, or systemic evil.

Some people may find themselves participating in systemic evil despite their better judgment. For example, it's clear that mass use of private automobiles is destroying the atmosphere, thereby harming ourselves, our neighbors, and future generations. It has been estimated that we would need nine additional planets' worth of atmosphere to absorb the greenhouse gasses produced if all the world's people pumped pollution aloft at the North American rate.”⁵⁰ Yet despite this awareness many people find it impossible to forgo the automobile when our infrastructure and land use patterns makes it so easy to drive and so difficult to walk or use public transportation. In our society, living simply is complicated.

An important example of systemic evil is the so-called “tragedy of the commons.” The “tragedy of the commons” expresses the idea that when everyone has access to a resource, say pasturage, then everyone will seek to maximize their own take, resulting in the depletion of the resource. Classic examples of this include depleted fisheries resulting from over-fishing and polluted air resulting from minimally regulated emissions from combustion, landfills, and industrial processes. The tragedy of the commons becomes the evil of the commons when those who would maximize their own take do so with the conscious understanding that their actions will deplete the commons and thereby harm others.

In Becker's terms, people who maximize their own take are maximizing the “side of life” narrowly understood as their own welfare. They act to eliminate the “evil” of their own impoverishment. They ignore the fundamental fact of our human interrelatedness, a fact attested to by spiritual traditions throughout

⁵⁰ Ryan, John C., & Durning Alan Thien. (1997). *Stuff: The secret life of everyday things*. Seattle: Northwest Environment Watch. 67. See also their article in *The Futurist*, March, 1998. p. 28.

history.⁵¹ This narrow view is possible only if one is ignorant or is defending against awareness with psychological denial and/or if one has basic attachment problems.

Scholar and poet Gary Snyder points out that in pre-modern times the commons did not devolve into tragedy because “the commons was a social institution which, historically, was never without rules and did not allow unlimited access.”⁵² In other words, the tragedy of the commons comes into existence only when the relevant relationships are missing or defective. Missing or defective relationships point to attachment problems with other people, with the environment, or with both.

The Force of Social Psychology in Systemic Evil

If Hitler had asked you, would you have executed a stranger? Most of us would like to think we would have said “no.” Yet a classic experiment by Stanley Milgram suggests that given certain social circumstances, nearly two-thirds of us would comply with this evil request. Milgram’s experiment involved subjects (“teachers”) who were instructed by an authority figure (the experimenter in a white lab coat) to deliver electric shocks of increasing intensity to a confederate (“learner”) who would scream in feigned pain and beg for release as the shocks reached high voltages. The majority of the subjects continued to deliver apparently painful and potentially lethal shocks, even when the “learner” had mentioned having a heart condition.⁵³

Milgram found that certain social psychological conditions supported obedience to evil authority. People were more likely to comply when the person giving the orders was close at hand and perceived to be a legitimate authority figure, when the authority figure was supported by a prestigious institution, when there were no role models for defiance of authority and when the victim was depersonalized or at a distance. (The first three of these conditions speak to the power of modeling. The last has to do with a capacity for empathy: an attachment issue.) If these conditions are present in a social system, they create the potential for systemic evil.

Another classic experiment shows clearly how much a social system can shape our behavior for good or evil. In the Stanford Prison Experiment a group of ordinary college students was divided at random into “prisoners” and “guards”. The “guards” kept watch over the “prisoners” at a simulated prison set up in the basement of Stanford’s psychology department building. Experimenter Philip Zimbardo had to end this two-week study after only six days, because in that

⁵¹ Hoffman, Chris. (2000). *The hoop and the tree: A compass for finding a deeper relationship with all life*. San Francisco: Council Oak Books.

⁵² Snyder, Gary. (1990). *The practice of the wild*. San Francisco: North Point Press. 35.

⁵³ Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to authority: An experimental view*. New York: Harper & Row.

brief period the social situation had begun to turn the “guards” into sadistic mental torturers, while the “prisoners” either broke down or succumbed “in cowed and mindless obedience.”⁵⁴⁻⁵⁵

The key learning from both these experiments is that ordinary people—you or I—under certain social circumstances can be turned into perpetrators of evil. Here are some of the social dynamics and beliefs that may contribute:⁵⁶

- *Social norms* such as ignoring the starving beggar in the street
- *Customs* such as female circumcision or murder of female offspring at birth
- *Values* of male sexual conquest or of personal success at any cost
- *Beliefs* such as the “just world” view that victims of circumstance have deserved their fate
- *Myths* of racial or ethnic superiority
- *Religious doctrines* such as that women or black people have no soul
- *Political ideologies* that are fascist, despotic or that permit slavery.

Our social circumstances can either inhibit evil or reinforce our acquiring evil as a habit. If evil behaviors bring some sort of rewards, albeit meager, the behaviors will be reinforced. After enough reinforcement, the behaviors become part of a person’s self-concept, for example: “I am a person who gets what I want through violence.” In his book *The Roots of Evil*, Ervin Staub shows that patterns of evil behavior often begin with relatively minor harmful acts such as name-calling or ostracism. When these behaviors bring satisfaction to the perpetrators, further and more extreme acts of harm becomes more likely. Staub suggests that one of the most effective ways we can work to prevent great evil is by speaking or acting against the smaller evils that precede it.⁵⁷⁻⁵⁸

So, What is “Evil”?

⁵⁴ Haney, C., Banks, W.C., & Zimbardo, P. G. (1973). Interpersonal dynamics in simulated prison. *International Journal of Criminology & Penology*, 1, 69-97. See also: Zimbardo, P.G. (1999). *Stanford Prison Experiment Slide Show* [On-line]. Available <http://www.prisonexp.org>. And: Zimbardo, P. (2002). *The psychology of evil* [On-line] Available http://www.psichi.org/content/publications/eye/volume/vol_5/5_1/zimbardo.asp.

⁵⁵ Zimbardo, P.G., Haney, C., Banks, W.C., & Jaffe, D. (1973, April 8). The mind is a formidable jailer: A Pirandellian prison. *The New York Times Magazine*, 122, 38-60.

⁵⁶ Daniels, Michael. (2001). Towards a transpersonal psychology of evil. *Transpersonal Psychology Review* 5(1), 15-27.

⁵⁷ Staub, E. (1989). *The roots of evil: The origins of genocide and other group violence*. Cambridge, New York & Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁸ Daniels, Michael. (2001). Towards a transpersonal psychology of evil. *Transpersonal Psychology Review*, 5(1), 15-27.

In some ways evil is quite human, and quite understandable. It has deep roots in our mental processes and social conditions. This has been proven by a huge amount of research. There are undoubtedly other factors at work. We know for example that all over the world the bulk of violence is perpetrated by young adult males. Yet understanding the malignant combination of attachment problems, trauma, modeling, shadow, projection, inflation and social influences can help us see evil in a new light. Gene Knudsen Hoffman, therapist and international peace worker says, "an enemy is one whose story we have not heard."

Instead of an inflated heroic effort to destroy evil, we can work on relationships through prevention of child abuse, support for the development of attachment skills, especially in the first three years of life, parenting skills training, and relationship skills training (including relationships with the natural world). We can work to ensure that every child feels part of a loving community, and receives education in diversity skills and tolerance for ambiguity. We can encourage positive role models in the media and from our civic and business leaders. As a nation and as individuals we can reclaim our shadow projections. Of course such approaches are not replacements for firm action against an imminent threat. They are ways to reduce the potential for evil over the long haul.

Understanding the maleficent seven psychological factors gives us the opportunity to make wiser political and social decisions. We must always work to thwart evil actions. Force will sometimes still be necessary. But if we want to deal with the root causes of evil, we cannot rely on warfare or violence. Any money or lives expended there would simply be squandered. What's worse, we would end up creating more of the evil we sought to destroy.