

INTRODUCTION

guidelines around the house, which spanned one week. We were sleepless most nights when this also turned out I committed to a failing and I feel like I did this product with my best and I regret it ever in my life's creation. I am a better person now for doing this, realize and self-improvement being—until you do it again—concentrated and the mistakes we all know. Good intentions can do a lot of good in many cases, but how often will not endear us to others? You do a bad thing, and the ones watching you turn down our own intentions. O.K. and I had the no-nonsense feedback and I digested this message, took and now nearly 10 years later still listen to the old adage when it comes down to maintaining your own integrity, has taught me how you should always go by your own principles, listen to your gut, and do what you feel is right—no exceptions—and when you do it and it can be negative but after a time, because you'll appreciate and acknowledge that you've done well.

Today our nation saw evil.

—PRES. GEORGE W. BUSH, SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

Sure we did. What happened that day was not simply misfortune, or life's inevitable downside, or the blind working out of probabilities. We all believe that it was an event different in kind, not just degree, from the world's everyday woes. It was more than merely bad, or even very, very bad. The earth moved, if slightly, beneath our feet.

It was evil.

Evil! Like a zombie back from the grave, it arose—a word many of us had long ago relegated to Sunday sermons, video games, and horror flicks. Even as it fell from our lips, it gave off a quaint, tinny sound, seemingly so out of place in an age that worships science and business and . . . maybe golf.

But of course it is not out of place. Evil is not old-fashioned, was never gone, and—depending on your

religious bent—will never go away. Far from being exotic, it's among the most common elements of everyday life. Just consider how many toddlers were suffering though their private family hells when the planes hit on that Tuesday morning in September. How many grandmas were losing their savings to the nice man on the phone. How many hearts and bones were being broken. How many secret deals were being sealed with a smirk.

The 2001 World Trade Center attacks must qualify on any reasonable scale as not only evil but monstrous evil. But the more important fact is that such mind-numbing catastrophes can distract us from everyday evil that permeates our lives, and from the links between vast eruptions of wickedness and the chronic, low-level moral disorders that together pose greater challenges to our modest efforts to live well. For some reason—or for a lot of reasons—we've been conditioned to think that evil is a mysterious force that emanates from some higher (supernatural) or deeper (biological) source than we are capable of comprehending, and that trying to comprehend it is a task best left to the experts.

But consider the state of today's world: this is the work of experts?

Maybe we should rethink this. Maybe it should not take a vast catastrophe like September 11 to jolt us into dusting off the e-word. Nor should it require politicians, imams, or televangelists to inform us how to react. In

fact, we all wrestle every day with what philosophers have for centuries called “the Problem of Evil.” Every one of us. We can deny it, but it will surface. And we ignore it at our peril. “In keeping silent about evil,” Aleksander Solzhenitsyn warned, “in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousandfold in the future.”

Like Plato, Augustine, Kant, and others among history's celebrity thinkers, we practice the ancient arts of metaphysical speculation and ethical disputation every damn day. We deliver ad-lib homilies to the kids, balance family against work, stomach the daily horrors in the headlines, stagger through years of guilt, choose to be merciful, flail away at the thousand choices we make as we rush along.

Then we lay head on pillow and wonder how we did.

Some people conduct their inquiries into topics like evil with compound words crafted into elaborate conceptual edifices. Some grunt, some curse. Some pray, some cry, some flee, some fight. But we cannot *not* think about evil.

True, a lot of reasonable people wince at the word because of its unsavory past. The word *evil* has a sordid history as a weapon of politics and religion, and even today it seems that those who brandish it most vigorously are the intolerant and the paranoid. But is it wise to surrender this word to those who flaunt it? Instead,

maybe we should step back, sit down, and ponder evil without ranting, chanting, or rushing for the exits. God may be dead or may have departed without leaving a forwarding address; our divisions may seem to deepen. But even amid this runaway moral pluralism, most of us can readily agree that evil exists and that it seems as robust as ever.

If we can agree on that, maybe we can agree on more. Maybe we could try to get a closer look at exactly what we call "evil." Drag it out of its comfortable darkness and hold it up to the light. Maybe we could reintroduce evil to rational conversation, in the coffee line and at the dinner table. Who knows, it might at least help us get through the next terror, or through tomorrow's thousand decisions.

This little book is offered with that in mind.

It's also worth noting what this book is not. It is not an apology for wicked deeds or doers; it does not trivialize human suffering for laughs; it is not a vehicle for ridiculing anyone's spiritual beliefs; it is not an endorsement of the occult or the paranormal or, God help us, of satanism.

If anything, this is a quest. A quick search for possible answers to impossible questions. Why, as Harold Kushner famously wrote, do bad things happen to good people? Why, if evil deeds are hateful, are the consequences of evil sometimes—well—not all bad? Without evil, some thinkers insist, there could not be goodness.

Without evil, our literature would be stripped of conflict; instead of Shakespeare we'd have what—travelogues? Our music would be likewise impoverished. Goodbye, "Whipping Post," hello, "On Wisconsin!" Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote that without evil life would be "an endless church service; it would be holy, but tedious." We'd be terminally humorless—for what fine quip is not first dipped in malice before being flung?

Some say that without evil, without the heart-breaking price it exacts in fear, suffering, and grief, humans could never truly taste freedom.

Finally, why does evil excite us so? Everyone feels its silky lure. Most of us—maybe just that one time—have blown a Commandment, lost our way, gone too far in the blurry hours after midnight. And no wonder: Evil seduces with promises of passion and excess—of transcendence over the merely physical and rational and present. It *guarantees* perfection, as the serpent did to Eve, which is why the figures of Dracula and de Sade and Hitler and Manson not only terrify and enrage but also beckon. "Evil" may sound like an echo from a bygone, candlelit era. Yet it can still send shivers down a modern spine—shivers of fear, shivers of delight.

We should admit that we love evil too much to give it up.

—GANDHI

One

WHERE DO
WE START?



*I am the Lord, and there is none else.
I form the light, and create darkness:
I make peace, and create evil:
I the Lord do all these things.*

—ISAIAH 45:6-7

*The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary;
men alone are quite capable of every wickedness.*

—JOSEPH CONRAD

The unique and supreme voluptuousness of love lies in the certainty of committing evil. And men and women know from birth that in evil is found all sensual delight.

—CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

No reason. No conscience. No understanding. Not even the most rudimentary sense of life or death, good or evil, right or wrong . . . what was living behind that boy's eyes was, purely and simply, evil.

—PSYCHIATRIST DESCRIBING THE YOUNG
MICHAEL MYERS, IN THE FILM HALLOWEEN

We begin, as we must, with humility and reverence. Not to mention a wee nervousness. Despite five thousand years of recorded human wrongdoing, despite all that our prophets and presidents and scholars and poets and undead homicidal maniacs have told us, the origin and definition of evil remain impossible to pin down.

This is no mere historical curiosity. This is more than clever wordplay by duelling theologians. This is actually where we've ended up after centuries of seeking answers to no less a question than—as Socrates put it—"how we are to live." Socrates believed he knew the answer, and it got him the hemlock. So, on the other hand, did the Marquis de Sade and Josef Stalin and serial killer Ted Bundy—who once described the moment of murder

thus: "You feel the last bit of breath leaving their body. You're looking into their eyes. A person in that situation is God!"

They all knew the answer. Inconveniently, their answers were all different.

And when it comes to evil, so are ours. True, we've long had Satan, who emerged in the New Testament as supreme cosmic villain. But while a majority of Americans still profess belief in the Prince of Darkness, for most of us he's lost his luster as a one-stop answer to questions about evil. The more closely we examine evil, in fact, the more it splinters. We've all heard "Thou shall not kill." So killing is evil? Certainly. Well, usually. Can the word *evil* be applied to a tornado that swoops down upon a grade school and leaves it a sea of bloody, broken wreckage? Our hearts cry out yes! But how can the weather be evil? It's hard to imagine a greater evil than a tiny child crushed by a car, but is it still evil if the driver didn't mean to do it?

Is it evil for a lawyer to help a guilty criminal evade punishment? For a coyote to have your cat for lunch? For CEOs to plunder corporations while balancing on the knife-edge boundaries of the law? For wealthy people to wax richer while their neighbors struggle in poverty? For a human to kill animals for sport or to perform painful experiments on our first cousin, the chimp?

Such devilishly difficult questions. A reasonable

approach to answering them might start with the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which notes that the word *evil* descends from ancient Teutonic words meaning "too much" or "over the limit." Yet the worthy *OED*'s first definition is "the opposite of Good." This is not much help; the opposite of a good cigar is not an evil one. At the other extreme is the widely cited 1964 comment by former U.S. Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart. It's tough to define hard-core pornography, the justice said, "but I know it when I see it."

In fact, it seems we find ourselves without much of a common vocabulary for collectively addressing life's greatest challenge. Evil has always been a topic of discussion on Sundays in America, but over the past two centuries the word has largely faded from common use. It's made a partial comeback with recent concerns over terrorism, but this confused furor, too, only underscores how unprepared we are to wrestle with the concept. As Andrew Delbanco put it in *The Death of Satan*, "We have no language for connecting our inner lives with the horrors that pass before our eyes in the outer world."

The old certainties still thunder forth regularly from podiums and the pulpits. But listen closely, and you'll hear evil denounced or lamented—or brandished against others—but seldom explained. Meanwhile, we inhabit a society morally confused and sharply divided over fundamental questions of right and wrong, as it is

about race, poverty, abortion, homosexuality, immigration, capital punishment—to name just a few.

But despite our moral fragmentation, despite what Delbanco calls "this crisis of incompetence before evil," most of us will immediately agree that evil remains brutally real—as real today as in the time of Job or Torquemada or Vlad the Impaler. The twentieth century is commonly called the bloodiest in history. From Cambodia to Rwanda to Bosnia to the latest local headlines, our fellow humans seem capable of committing literally any outrage, of hurling themselves into unbounded savagery or treachery. How? Why? As we charge off into the third millennium, we're still being stalked by fifty centuries' worth of the same terrible questions.

Questions that must have arisen in response to *Homo sapiens'* earliest experiences of pain and loss. The clay tablets of the Sumerians, who lived five thousand years ago in what is now Iraq, and who are generally credited with the invention of writing, contain laments that seem eerily familiar to us today:

*My companion says not a true word to me,
My friend gives the lie to my righteous word,
The man of deceit has conspired against me.*

Evil, in fact, may have commanded our attention before good. Historian Paul Carus says, "There seems to be no exception to the rule that fear is always

the first incentive to religious worship . . . a powerful evil deity looms up as the most important personage in the remotest past of almost every faith."

In recent centuries we've championed such explanations for wickedness as superstition, ignorance, illness, childhood trauma, social conditioning, and defective genes. But humans' earliest sense of evil was hardly so elaborate; it was likely associated simply with physical survival in a fearsome world. A catalogue of those early evils by Jungian analyst Marie-Louise von Franz included "hunger, cold, fire, landslides and avalanches, snowstorms, drowning, storms at sea, being lost in the forest, the big enemy animals, the ice bear in the north, the lion or crocodile in Africa, etc." Contemporary philosopher Amelie Rorty says our earliest notions of evil involved "abominations—acts that, like incest, cannibalism, patricide, and fratricide—elicit horror and disgust." French philosopher Paul Ricoeur says primitive humans associated evil with the idea of "defilement," a condition that itself had to be countered with some ritual of purification—all of which sounds a lot like the beginnings of humankind's primary answer to misfortune: organized religion.

At some point we began to pray to supernatural spirits to ease their anger at our apparent sins and to protest our innocence. The Egyptian Book of the Dead, dating from perhaps 2500 B.C.E., portrays newly dead souls seeking a favorable judgment from the gods by

intoning long lists of the things they did *not* do, from, "I have not done falsehood against men" to, "I have not built a dam on flowing water."

As the world adopted religions with divinely inspired rules, Rorty notes, evil evolved into a sense of disobedience. Evil became sin. But why do we sin? Many cultures, especially in the Middle East but also in the West, decided early on that promoting evil is the vile work of one or more supernatural beings. The Egyptians had Seth, the lord of the desert whom the Greeks later equated with Typhon, whence the word *typhoon*. Zoroaster, the widely influential Iranian religious leader of the sixth century B.C.E., is generally credited with identifying the first being of pure evil, Angra Mainyu. The Babylonians had the nocturnal female demon Lilitu; the Israelites had Azazel and Beelzebub, among others; the ancient Germans, Loki, sire of the wolf; the Christians, Satan; and the Muslims, Iblis.

Today we have . . . Hannibal Lecter?

This celebrity-villain approach remains humans' most popular way to explain where evil comes from. Of course it's not universal: Millions of us follow creeds, chiefly Hinduism and Buddhism, that either pack the stage with villains or dismiss them all as B-list poseurs. More about that in the next chapter.

But the leaders of the young Christian church also developed another approach to defining evil, this one by focusing on what it's *not*. This ended with the surprising

conclusion that evil does not exist. You read that right. Plato and his later interpreters had defined evil as falling so low on the scale of existence that it registers as a negative, as "nonbeing." This idea fit well with the Christians' urgent need to explain how evil could exist in a world created by a single, all-loving God. Augustine, the fifth-century North African thinker who so powerfully shaped Christian doctrine, concluded that evil cannot exist—cannot have "being"—in such a cosmos, but must be seen only as the absence of good, or *privatio boni*. To skeptics, this adroit explanation might sound more worthy of Bill Clinton than of a Church Father, but it helped form the foundation of Christian dogma. One especially florid expression of it came from a Syrian monk commonly referred to by the remarkable name of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Around 500 he wrote: "[Evil is] a lack, a deficiency, a weakness, a disproportion, an error, purposeless, unlovely, lifeless, unwise, unreasonable, imperfect, unreal, causeless, indeterminate, sterile, inert, powerless, disordered, incongruous, indefinite, dark, unsubstantial, and never in itself possessed of any existence whatever."

You get the idea. Over the centuries, the Christian Church gradually consolidated its power and its doctrines concerning evil and settled in to battle Satan for the souls of humankind. It also battled Islam, which arose in seventh-century Arabia, even though Islam also

preaches the story of Adam and Eve and blames evil on Satan, or Iblis, an angel cast down because of pride. Then, as Mark Larrimore of Princeton writes, came three tectonic historical shifts that wrought monumental changes in our view of evil. First was the Renaissance, usually dated from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, during which humans' focus moved from the afterlife to the life of this world. Evil and suffering, Larrimore says, were less easily explained away with references to cosmic mysteries, because "most people today are unimpressed by the insignificance of this life in comparison with eternity."

Second was the Enlightenment, the eighteenth-century philosophical movement that questioned reigning values and beliefs—notably including Adam's fall and original sin. That, Larrimore notes, undermined the long-standing Christian (Though not Muslim) doctrine that humans *deserved* to suffer in this world because they were already tainted by evil at birth. This naturally raised the question: if we don't *have* to suffer, why are we suffering?

We're still wrestling with that one.

Third, Larrimore suggests, came the impact of modern medicine and its dramatic reduction of pain and loss. "The problem of evil became acute," he says, "... once suffering no longer seemed a necessary part of life, but exceptional."

Exceptional, but not gone. Rationalism and science may have led us out of the dank gloom of superstition, but they also shredded the Christian West's once broad and stable beliefs in the origins of evil—then stopped there. They've certainly not banished evil and ushered in utopia, as Karl Marx and other infectious dreamers confidently predicted they would. So where are we left? Evil undeniably thrives, while science denies us any cosmic explanation to salve our wounds or guide us to shelter. This is progress?

Much of the fault appears to be our own. As science nicely explains away so many of our traditional terrors, we cling ever more tightly to others—what's up with those crop circles, anyway?—and discover later-model demons who ride UFOs instead of broomsticks. We seem almost to want evil lurking in our cognitive shadows like a storybook vampire avoiding the sun; content to glimpse it out of the corner of our eye, we seldom try to see its face.

Even Hollywood, so often condemned as the enemy of righteous, God-fearing society, turns out to be a major ally. From Dracula to Darth Vader, horror flicks have only reinforced our deep-rooted belief in evil as a mysterious force unleashed by the violation of some code that ultimately derives from the divine. True, *Bride of Chucky* is no *Paradise Lost*, but the underlying moral lessons are the same. The French poet Charles Baudelaire famously

remarked that the Devil's greatest trick was to convince us he doesn't exist. Hollywood, *au contraire*, toils faithfully to assure us that he does.

Why? Because Hollywood knows that evil attracts us, even in little doses. Sociologist Jack Katz quotes a shoplifter: "Once outside the door I thought Wow! I pulled it off, I faced danger and I pulled it off. I was smiling so much and I felt at that moment like there was nothing I couldn't do."

Most of us can at least imagine the thrill of violating a law or a taboo. Usually, of course, we're thinking about minor transgressions that we amiably label "vices," rather than extreme cases in which we've "thirsted after the bliss of the knife," as Friedrich Nietzsche put it. Augustine himself lamented how, at age sixteen, he and some other kids stole pears from a neighbor's tree just to do it. "Foul was the evil, and I loved it," he wrote. "I loved to go down to death. I loved my fault, not that for which I did the fault, but I loved my fault itself."

Now that's guilt. True believers like Augustine easily explain our liking for evil as arising from the foul doings of Satan or his henchmen. Nonbelievers have to explain why we set up moral rules—against theft, adultery, tailgating—that we then lust to break. One popular answer is to locate the problem in biological rules that some scientists believe directly underlie our moral ones. Evolutionary psychologists, as we'll see in chapter 4,

contend that our traditionally defined “evils” are little more than manifestations of embedded human survival urges like lust, greed, and aggression.

To confuse things even more, there’s our long-standing recognition that, well, evil isn’t all bad.

Plotinus, a highly influential Neoplatonist philosopher of the third century, noted: “Vice itself has many useful sides: it brings about much that is beautiful, in artistic creations for example, and it stirs us to thoughtful living, not allowing us to drowse in security.” Other thinkers old and new have linked man’s rebellious instincts to the precious goal of freedom: “This first fact of disobedience,” psychoanalyst Erich Fromm wrote, “is man’s first step toward freedom.” French Renaissance essayist Michel de Montaigne went further: “Whoever would take away the knowledge and sense of evil, would, at the same time, eradicate the sense of pleasure, and, in short, annihilate man himself.”

Georg Friedrich Hegel, the influential nineteenth-century German philosopher, went even further, linking evil to the emergence of human consciousness and individuality from the primitive soup of animal instincts: “Evil lies in consciousness: for the [animals] are neither evil nor good. . . . Consciousness occasions the separation of the ego, in its boundless freedom as arbitrary choice, from the pure essence of the will.”

Theories about why evil attracts as well as repels us have filled many volumes and will be touched upon

throughout this one. Surely most of us avert our eyes, and our rationality, from evil because we’ve been taught to do so, and warned that staring too long at the dark side is highly dangerous—a lesson embodied in the Greek myth of Medusa. But the see-no-evil approach hasn’t worked very well. Worse, it may even hinder us from understanding evil by confusing two critically different senses of the word:

In the first sense, *evil* simply means the extremely bad things that happen, from war to crime to Reality TV. Surely we can all agree—OK, not the Buddhists—that empirical evil is an authentic part of everyday life.

In the second sense, the word is defined according to the myth or ideology that a group or society adopts, cherishes, and mercilessly defends. It is here that religion enters, rationality is trumped by revelation, and agreement disintegrates.

Lust, cruelty, greed—examples of evil in the first sense have been constants of human existence from Cain to Al Capone. But the ways in which we address them—our ideologies of evil—have undergone staggering transformations. Listen, for one small example, to this judgment pronounced by a court in Avignon, France, in 1542, during the European witch frenzy that dispatched thousands to unspeakable torture and death:

Taught by [Beelzebub], you . . . did murder many new-born children, and with the help of that old serpent Satan you did

afflict mankind with curses, loss of milk, the wasting sickness, and other most grave diseases. And with your own children... you did with those magic spells suffocate, pierce and kill, and finally you dug them up secretly by night from the cemetery, where they were buried, and so carried them to... the Prince of Devils sitting upon his throne.

What universe was that? Most historians now tell us that the widespread and terrifying “evil” of witchcraft was fictional (though the evil done in response was surely real). The ideology, in other words, overcame and shaped the reality. Now compare that passage to the dry machine-prose prized by today’s popular—and also fictional—cop and court shows, where even the most savage and grotesque crimes are rendered in clipped “forensic” language that strips evil of its mystery and even its horror. At least the latter is modeled on real evil.

But that doesn’t seem to matter. The sixteenth-century passage openly reflects our deeply embedded human belief in what philosopher Paul Ricoeur called the “substance-force of evil”: Early peoples, according to Ricoeur, thought of evil as “a quasi-material something that infects as a sort of filth, that harms by invisible properties, and that nevertheless works in the manner of a force in the field of our undividedly psychic and corporeal existence.” And despite the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and our modern penchant for

Dragnet-speak, this ideology of evil still thrives. From pastors to ethical pundits like William Bennett to every teenage Marilyn Manson fan, many or most modern Americans still think of evil as a mysterious, malicious force. It appears as a sly, shadowy presence, a demonic spell, the ineffable workings of a cosmic balance wheel, something crouching out there just beyond the light of the campfires.

These are breathtaking visions. This is precisely what demands the elaborate, ritualistic death that always befalls the obvious slut and the wiseass guy in teenage slasher flicks; and dammit, we’re glad it does. But is this how real evil happens? Uh, no, notes philosopher Nel Noddings:

[Encountering real evil,] we feel none of the excitement conveyed by stories of devils, witches, demons, spells and possession. Evil does not have a stomach-turning stench, nor does it signal its presence with palpable cold and darkness. We do not fall into it, haplessly, nor does it entrap [possess] us.

That doesn’t make for much of a nightmare, on Elm Street or anywhere else. But face it: few of us have actually encountered, say, a hobgoblin. And when evil things befall us—an assault, a betrayal by a friend, a crippling financial loss, the death of a loved one—spooky special effects are seldom involved. As we’ll see in chapter 5, philosopher Hannah Arendt famously

spoke of “the banality of evil.” And Noddings cites French political activist Simone Weil’s description of actual evil as “gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring.”

So which is it? Is evil best understood as a dark supernatural force emanating from unknowable mysteries lost in the primeval mists of history? Or is it just a collective name for the ugly, bad stuff that . . . happens? How best can we choose among Sunday-school evil and Hollywood evil and textbook evil and psychic-fair evil and fairy-tale evil and crime-scene evil and even talk-show evil? (“She’s sleeping with his gay brother!”)

Nobody yet has successfully disposed of this centuries-old issue in a few pages, or even in a lot of pages. But perhaps we can come up with a bare working definition. Wisdom suggests a minimalist approach.

In general, scholars tend to cite four choices for the source of evil: 1) humans through their actions, 2) the natural condition of the universe, 3) supernatural demons, 4) a god or gods. Let’s review a few approaches, plain and fancy:

- Plato, who called God’s world “the fairest of creations,” did not blame the Creator for evil.

Instead, he seemed to see evil as the result of naturally occurring human feelings, like love, fear, and anger, that have grown out of control and “conquered” a person.

- For something completely different, consider the

fifth-century Indian teacher Siddhartha Gotama, the Buddha, who taught that evil is an illusion (the good news) because all of existence is suffering (the bad news) caused by our erroneous belief in our individual identities.

- Augustine, arguably history’s most influential Christian theologian, taught that evil is the act of turning away from God, “for when the will abandons what is above itself, and turns to what is lower, it becomes evil—not because that is evil to which it turns, but because the turning itself is wicked.”
- In the fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer provides the classic medieval definition of evil as sin, based on the original sin we inherited from Adam through the “vile and corrupt matter” of the flesh. Chaucer cites the Seven Deadly Sins: pride, “the general root of all evils”; envy; anger; melancholia (sloth); avarice—“the eagerness of the heart to have earthly things”; gluttony; and lechery.
- In *Paradise Lost*, seventeenth-century English poet John Milton further enshrined the dominant Christian teaching that it was Satan’s sin of pride that gave rise to evil—or to “Misery, uncreated till the crime of thy Rebellion.”
- In contrast, French Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau—who believed humans

originally existed as “noble savages” in a “state of nature”—saw evil as the corruption of this natural purity. “God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil.”

- Writing about Shakespeare’s classic villain Iago in 1818, Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously noted the “motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity. . . . A being next to Devil—only not quite Devil.”
- For Karl Marx, the Devil as well as the Lord was merely in the way. Evil arises from the unjust power relationships imposed upon human beings by history—relationships that will inevitably be swept away.
- Friedrich Nietzsche, the controversial nineteenth-century scholar and philosopher who described himself as “philosophizing with a hammer,” denounced conventional notions of evil as repressive tools of the “slave morality” of Christianity, which he said caused suffering by opposing humans’ natural, noble instincts towards power, freedom, pleasure, and achievement.
- Sigmund Freud associated evil with Thanatos, the “death instinct,” the natural seat of aggression in humans and the counterweight to Eros, the drive towards sex, life, and love. “Those who love fairytales,” he wrote, “do not like it when people speak of the innate tendencies in mankind towards aggression, destruction, and, in addition, cruelty.”

- Carl Jung associated human evil with the Shadow, the dark side of an individual’s personality—the side that promotes anger, lust, and deceit. We unconsciously “project” the Shadow, with all its hateful, threatening qualities, onto others—whom we then see as evil.
- Erich Fromm wrote that evil as well as good human passions “can be understood only as a person’s attempt to make sense of his life and transcend banal, merely life-sustaining existence.”
- Contemporary historian Jeffrey Burton Russell says, “Evil is meaningless, senseless destruction. . . . The essence of evil is abuse of a sentient being, a being that can feel pain.”
- Contemporary psychiatrist and author M. Scott Peck believes “evil can be defined as a specific form of mental illness.” It might, he says, be best compared to a condition called “ambulatory schizophrenia,” and it is marked by “consistent, destructive, scapegoating behavior”; intolerance of criticism; exaggerated concern with a public image of respectability; and “intellectual deviousness.”

Quite a mix. Now what?

First, let’s agree that evil does indeed exist. Meaning that bad things do happen to good people. This is no joke: a good argument can be made that evil does

not exist—and not only by Buddhists. This argument maintains that the label “evil” is so subjective as to be meaningless, except as a way for some people—usually political or religious leaders—to slander some and control others.

But the extreme savagery of human behavior does seem to cry out for special attention. Why should we not call such behavior “evil,” so long as we take care not to then rush thoughtlessly into a jihad or another sequel to *Hellraiser*? We may not agree on which impulses or actions are evil, but we can agree that evil does exist.

Second, let’s limit evil to acts performed by humans. The massive earthquake that leveled western Indian cities in February 2001, burying thousands alive, caused immense suffering to innocent people. Was it evil? For centuries many people regarded such occurrences as evil; the Old Testament is packed with storms and plagues dispatched as punishment by a wrathful Yahweh. Philosopher Susan Neiman, in *Evil in Modern Thought*, notes the devastating psychic impact of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake on Europe. But science has severely undermined this view. Earthquakes, hurricanes, and other destructive natural events are now typically set aside by philosophers as “nonmoral” or “natural” evil because they don’t violate moral codes or feature anybody to blame. Let’s do likewise.

Third, let’s limit our discussion to intentional acts. Many evildoers justify their actions with some variation

of “the devil made me do it,” and we commonly punish destructive acts even if the actor—say, a drunk driver who causes a fatal accident—didn’t intend to hurt anyone. Arendt, as we shall see, created a haunting portrait of real evil occurring without real villains, and this is a vision we will confront. But throughout history it’s been the intentional evildoer, the Iago, who poses the most troubling questions.

Fourth, remember the title of Rabbi Kushner’s best-seller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*? Now consider the converse: some people do ask for it. They deserve to be assaulted, or ripped off, or tricked, or abandoned, or otherwise harmed. Few of us, for example, would condemn the Germans who vainly sought to assassinate Hitler—or a police sting that tricks felons into capture. The victims of true evil must be people who don’t deserve it.

Fifth, let’s agree that evil is an impulse or act whose results are more than just bad, or even *very* bad. Philosophers seeking universal definitions may include as “evil” anything that interferes even slightly with humans’ universal desire to lead happy lives. But this leaves us laymen with a definition too broad to be of practical use. For us, evil’s effects must be profound, widespread, long-lasting, or all three. Cutting ahead in line is bad, as are littering, auto theft, and slander; but if we deem these evil, what do we call genocide?

Sixth, we must quiet our minds a moment and place

hands on hearts. Most of us feel an almost physical blow at hearing of, say, "ethnic cleansing" or the sexual abuse of a child. It seizes us. This wave of awe, nausea, and horror cannot be ignored in identifying evil, which manifests itself to the viscera as well as to the mind. In an important, if not absolute, sense, we do "know it when we see it."

Seventh, evil acts worthy of the name victimize others besides their obvious victims; they injure us all. Consider the looting of a corporation, the torture of a prisoner. Such acts seem more than just crimes; they are assaults upon our ethical order, eroding the possibility of trust and shaking our faith in human goodness.

Finally, let's keep it simple. It's tempting to conjure up elaborate, airtight definitions—we've already waded through a few—but it's a bit early in our inquiry for such heroics. Instead, borrowing from philosopher John Kekes and others, let's start with the basics: [evil is an intentional human act that causes extreme harm to innocents and attacks our basic moral order.]

Hardly poetic. Not scary. And wait—where does God come in? That's what we'll look at next. Meanwhile, if you're feeling a little unsatisfied, a little let down, remember you're in good company: At least five thousand years' worth.

Two

LAZARUS! COME OUT!



Whoever admits that anything living is evil must either believe that God is malignantly capable of creating evil, or else believe that God has made many mistakes.

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

God therefore neither wills evil to be done, nor wills it not to be done, but wills to permit evil to be done; and this is a good.

—THOMAS AQUINAS