

On good and evil

One of the problems with our capacity to fantasise is not that we don't use it often, but rather it sneaks into our actual collection of beliefs about the reality around us. This is particularly true of various dichotomies, and none more so than in the case of the most dangerous one of all: 'good' versus 'evil'.

To begin with the concept of reality itself: what is reality? It has been fashionable lately to consider that there is no such actual 'stuff'; it is all 'relative'. That is, your reality is not quite the same as mine, and Joe's reality is different again. All right, there is a subjective reality in the sense of common experiences among humans, colour, sound, smell, etc., and Joe may have feelings when he sees the colour yellow which you and I don't share. There is a subjective reality for all sentient creatures, humans and cockroaches alike. It covers our sensations, individually and in groups. However, there is a significant, controlling reality which limits what we can experience, or even imagine, and that is true for all humans, all cockroaches and all other sentient creatures. It comprises our sense organs, the round earth we live on, the laws of physics, chemistry and biology, and much else. In other words, MOST of reality is objective. There are subjective and objective realities, but one is bounded by the other.

The problems mostly arise out of traditional beliefs, and this is certainly true in the case of good and evil. Zoroastrianism, the Persian religion, envisaged a perpetual war between these two 'forces' and this war idea appears to have been inherited through Judaism into Christianity and Islam. This notion works very well in fiction, and, particularly now with all the wars being waged, it is easy to believe as something real. To take one example, the states known as Israel and Palestine were created back in 1948. For the Israelis, as we now know them, the Nazi atrocities had resulted in the deaths of six million, but more than that, they remain a perpetual reminder of Jewish insecurity. Not to have a homeland that one can defend is now an existential threat. And where existence is threatened, almost any measures will be

taken to protect oneself. Thus, there is a flow-on effect: bad treatment by the Nazis leads to bad treatment by the Israelis against the Palestinians. So it goes. The people you treat badly become a problem. Of course, you are 'good' and they are 'evil' because they won't accept your terms. Some of them will become terrorists, so you will need a counter-terrorist army. (Terrorists always belong to the other side, never yours.)

The African-Americans are another example of what typically happens. They were slaves, but the real problems began when they were liberated, so no longer 'belonged' to anybody but themselves. They were now dangerous, like wild animals let out of their cages to roam just anywhere. Of course, some had to be lynched from time to time to keep the others in order, and there were plenty of white Americans ready and willing to do just that. After all, weren't they 'subhuman' and 'evil'? (There is a paradox here - you can't be 'evil' as a human if you are subhuman.)

Treat people badly and you come to see them as bad - any other interpretation would make you feel uncomfortable. But how do we demonise people in the first place? There are several steps we can take:

Keep your distance. Don't make any meaningful contact.

Get what you need to know about them by hearsay and rumour.

Find out as many bad things as you can about them.

Associate with people who don't like them; avoid those who do.

Write things about them which you know aren't totally true, or which can't be verified. (It's all for a good cause.)

And so on. You can extend the list indefinitely.

But what about psychopaths? Aren't they bad? Aren't they evil?

My point is that categorising people is not helpful - not to you, and certainly not to them. By all means warn others about so-and-so. There is a spectrum, with altruism at one end and personal greed/ selfishness at the other. Among evolution-

ary psychologists there are those who wonder how an 'unselfish' gene could survive, but this is to miss the point. For almost all of our existence we have lived in tribes with perhaps 30 to 300 members. It is within these tribes that we have survived all kinds of problems, including ice ages, scarcity of food, and attacks by wild animals. Only the tribe could survive, with individuals sharing knowledge and abilities. And the tribe most likely to survive would be the one with members prepared to risk or even give their lives for the sake of the others. Hence altruism not merely survives but often thrives: it is an evolutionary advantage, just as good discipline and high morale is an advantage for any military.

During the first world war there was a curious incident at Christmas time in the year 1914. The two opposing armies climbed out of their trenches and met in no man's land, where they exchanged gifts, wished each other well, and played a game of football. The generals, when they heard about it, were furious. How dare they fraternise with the enemy! Why, it would make war impossible, and then where would we be?

Oh dear, they were ignorant of the first rule on my list: keep your distance. It's the only way to keep that myth of good versus evil alive. Or maybe we don't need it any longer. In ancient times 'good' applied to anything that gave nourishment, or enhanced survival in some way. 'Evil' applied to anything that threatened life. There was no war between them: that came much later, in Persia, with Zoroastrianism, and was inherited by Judaism, and later Christianity and Islam. And of course when there is a war there is the need to fight, to hate, to kill things. Or perhaps we could transcend ourselves from all this, and look with compassion at the mess we have gotten ourselves into. There may not be very much more time for us to come to our senses.