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What the newspapers won't tell you!

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Philosophy

EVIL EXPLAINED

It's not all that complicated: Evil is lying to yourself.

BY GLENN CAMPBELL

After a year and a half of research in the halls of the court system and a lifetime of experience in the field, Family Court Chronicles finally has the answer to one of life's most challenging questions: What is evil?

It is not a substance, an action or an outcome, but a frame of mind.

Premeditated murder is not evil. It is a *result* of evil. The Holocaust was not evil, at least by our definition, but evil was present in many of the minds that planned and committed it. Events and inanimate objects cannot be evil; only people can, and they don't have to do anything heinous for the evil to exist.

Evil, we contend, is a physiological phenomenon in the brain—a specific pattern of neurological activity that can be detected by modern technology.

Although we have no supporting data, we believe that emerging brain scan technologies, such as functional MRI, should be able to detect evil as it occurs. However, a far simpler device is



already available for this task: the lie detector.

Lies are not evil, per se. There are many different reasons to misrepresent the truth, some of them noble and necessary. Evil consists of a specific kind of deception: lying to oneself.

It may sound absurd to define evil as something so simple, but once you

start lying to yourself and defending those lies with more lies, then murder and genocide aren't that far off.

Evil happens when one part of the brain professes a truth that the rest of the brain doesn't truly believe. This creates an internal conflict or disjunction that has to be defended, often with aggressive overt acts.

Evil can be detected just like other lies: by hooking the subject up to a polygraph machine and asking a series of questions. Actually, the read-out from the machine isn't too important, only the subject's obvious reactions to the test.

If someone is lying to themselves and you ask the right questions, pretty soon they are going to squirm. They are going to get angry. They may object to the whole line of questioning. They may demand that the test be stopped *this minute*. They might even rip off the equipment and storm away.

When this happens in response to apparently innocuous questions, then you know you have found it. Evil.

Most people think there should be a special category of evil for especially heinous acts, like killing a lot of people or starting a war, as opposed to the simple treacheries we encounter every day that aren't even illegal. We say that it is all the same evil, just empowered by the world in different ways.

Take that quintessential evil dude, Adolph Hitler. Hook him up to the machine, and of course he is going to get upset and flustered, especially when you ask him about the Jews. As long as he can't control the questions, then he'll soon be fuming, making counter-charges and spouting angry nationalist rhetoric that wouldn't sway any jury.

However, his evil, in its physiological expression, is not much different from any kid who has been caught stealing cookies and refuses to admit it. Hitler's evil is just more entrenched, reinforced over time by so many emotional investments and defective patterns of thinking that it can't realistically be changed.

Evil is a big cover-up, like Watergate, that becomes harder and harder to retreat from the more you have invested in it. For a person without the courage, maturity or self-esteem to accept his initial error, one simple lie can become, over time, a whole entrenched pattern of internal lies and external treachery that only outside force can stop.

It all starts with a defense of ego. To protect his self-esteem, the subject needs to believe something—for example, that the world is flat. The outside evidence, however, may not support his position,

and if he isn't strong enough to accept the news, then he will pursue the only alternative: trying to crush the evidence or any messenger who seems to carry it.

Criticism wouldn't bother him except that part of him knows it could be true, and this feeling is unbearable. His position is so weak internally that it cannot be left undefended externally.

If someone seems to insult you, even if only by their existence, then you may feel compelled to punch them in the jaw or otherwise disable their message by unfair means. Furthermore, once you commit this aggressive act, it becomes an emotional investment that must be defended. ("If I did it, then it can't be wrong.") The pressure to justify the past encourages similar actions in the future.

If someone murders another, with no acknowledged regret, then you better catch him soon, because a second murder is much more likely than the first. To protect the ego, one reprehensible act must naturally be followed by another and another, in an escalating pattern. Otherwise, the subject would have to accept responsibility for, and somehow repent from, the first despicable act.

Once this threshold of evil has been crossed, then true empathy tends to be wiped out, to be replaced by narcissism. A narcissist cannot see the feelings of others, only a self-serving reflection of what he wants those feelings to be.

No one believes he is evil, at least on the surface. Every little Hitler is going to claim that he is merely taking reasonable steps to protect himself from evil, or that he is doing some sort of noble service for mankind. Even a career pedophile believes this—that he is somehow helping his victims—and when a person's thinking gets that skewed and detached from the real feelings of others, there is very little hope for recovery.

Not all evil is permanent, however, and you don't have to look very far to find it. Evil is inside each of us, or at least has been in the past. At one point or another, we have all taken aggressive public positions we don't really believe. What separates us, the transient evil-doer, from the Hitlers and Saddams, is that we eventually recognize our hypocrisy and find a way to stop. Our core ego is strong enough that we can accept and correct our

own mistakes, at least when they become too obvious to ignore.

Criminal justice, unfortunately, is often out of step with true evil. It can only respond to overt acts, not patterns in the brain—and probably rightly so. People can't be arrested for having evil thoughts, only for committing acts that are labeled as evil on the surface.

But two people committing the same prohibited act do not necessarily possess the same quality of evil in the brain. For some, it is entrenched and can't realistically be changed. These people need to be locked up—not necessarily as a moral rebuke but simply out of pragmatism. Evil, in many cases, is a dangerous and infectious disease that we don't have the means to treat.

For others, the evil is transient and may no longer be present at the time of sentencing. These people can respond to compassion but may be turned evil by excessive punishment. American criminal justice, in its current medieval incarnation, has few mechanisms to distinguish between the entrenched and transient.

Occasionally, after conviction, a subject may be submitted to psychological evaluation to determine his risk to society. This is much more likely to happen in juvenile court than adult criminal court. In adult court, the results may not make a lot of difference, especially with mandatory sentencing that can't legally consider such things, but in juvenile court, psychology is still acknowledged. This is the last chance for compassion and realistic treatment before the adult system has its way.

Whether evil becomes entrenched or briefly passes depends a lot on how society responds to overt acts. A kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar, who is then too harshly punished for it, is likely not to be reformed but to be forced underground to preserve his self-esteem. He will be nursing a secret cookie grudge that is going to emerge elsewhere.

Punishment can never make the same change to evil as true repentance, which is a much more subtle and fragile phenomenon. You are never going to beat evil out of a person; you can only give it an opportunity to exit on its own.

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