

Frosh Discipling Team

Assignment #2: Comparing Views of Evil

Questioning the Secularist

Thanks so much for doing the last exercise. I feel like I'm getting to know you better as I read your responses. I'd like us to take it one step forward: Can you compare the following two views of evil, and tell me what you think about them? One is the Christian view, or at least part of it: I listed two quotations from Jesus. The other is a contemporary view put forward by Time magazine essayist Lance Morrow. Although they are not identical, they are not completely at odds, either. Can you tell me how you might talk to Mr. Lance Morrow if you had the chance? What would you tell him about Jesus' comments and his essay being both similar and different? And why does it matter? Of course, you can reference your personal story in assignment #1. Or you can say something else.

Quote #1

Christian: Human Nature Has Become Corrupted

Luke 11:13 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children...

Matthew 15:18 But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. ²⁰ These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.'

Quote #2

The Real Meaning of Evil

Lance Morrow, TIME magazine, Tuesday, Feb. 18, 2003

The word evil — brandished so often by George W. Bush and just as regularly scorned by those who oppose him — could use some serious parsing.

It is possible that neither side in the debate about evil quite knows what it is talking about. Philosophically and theologically, both are fighting the last war. They are talking about a world that no longer exists, or rather, they fail to see what evil lies in the world that now exists.

President Bush uses the word in an in-your-face, born-again manner that takes its resonance from a long Judeo-Christian tradition that sees radical evil embodied in heroically diabolical figures. This personalized evil is the kind that is insinuated by the sauntering Tempter in the first scene of the Book of Job, when God and Satan speculate like racing touts about whether Job can go a mile and a quarter on a muddy track. In Bush's usage, evil has the perverse prestige of Milton's defiant Lucifer. Evil emanates, implicitly, from a devilish intelligence with horns and a tail, an absolutely malevolent personality, God's rival in the cosmos, condemned to lose the fight (eventually) but powerful in the world.

Bush's critics, hearing the word, go ironic. They put evil in quotes and think of Dana Carvey's Church Lady: "Well, isn't that special, Saddam? Who's your little friend? Could it be Satan!?!??" They mock Bush for what they see as a primitive, frightening and atavistic use of a medieval term that should probably be banished from civilized discourse in a multicultural world.

Evil, these critics say, is in any case such an elusive term that it can only cause mischief in human affairs and has a way of evaporating — or turning into something else as time passes. Toward the end of World War I, when labor unions threatened strikes in England, Minister of Munitions Winston Churchill sternly blamed "evil and subterranean influences," meaning, he said, "pacifism, defeatism and Bolshevism." Of course, the real evils of World War I, which slaughtered an entire generation of Europe's young men, were obdurate military stupidity, the effectiveness of newly industrialized war and a monstrous official indifference to the value of human life. (A neglected dimension of evil, by the way, is stupidity.)

But even if it's elusive and even if the term is used brainlessly, evil is still there — a mystery, a black hole into which reason and sunshine vanish but nonetheless ... there. Talk to the children with chopped-off hands in Sierra Leone. It is as fatuous to deny the existence of evil as it is to toss the word around irresponsibly. The children of the Enlightenment sometimes have an inadequate understanding of the possibilities of the Endarkenment. The question is how evil exists, how it works.

Go back 40 years to the controversy that surrounded Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, a study of the Adolf Eichmann trial, in which she coined the famous phrase "the banality of evil." Arendt did not seem satisfied with the term and afterward wrote in a letter to a friend (the great scholar of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem), "It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never 'radical,' that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface." This was what W.H. Auden meant: "Evil is unspectacular and always human,/And shares our bed and eats at our own table." The normality of evil.

The truth about evil that needs attention now is its shallow, deadly, fungus quality. Nice people — especially in a tiny, multicultural world in which different civilizations inhabit different centuries — are often moved to evil deeds, like blowing up the Other. Don't bother demonizing people as being inherently evil (as Satan is evil). That's not how it works. Opportunistic evil passes like an electric current through the world and through people, or wanders like an infection that takes up residence in individuals or cultures from time to time.

Distance once helped dampen the effects of human wickedness, and weapons once had limited range. But evil has burst into a new dimension. The globalization, democratization and miniaturization of the instruments of destruction (nuclear weapons or their diabolical chemical-biological stepbrothers) mean a quantum leap in the delivery systems of evil. This levels the playing field — and the level field has fungus on it. Every tinhorn with a chemistry set becomes a potential world-historical force with more discretionary destructive power at hand than the great old monsters, from Caligula to Stalin, ever had. In the new dimension, micro-evil (the dark impulse to rape or murder, say) and macro-evil (the urge to genocide) achieve an ominous reunion in any bid for the apocalyptic gesture. That's the real evil that is going around.