

## Where is the Evil? A Comparison

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Compare the following two views of evil. One is the Christian view, or at least the central aspect of it. 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. How are they similar and different? Why is it important to have an accurate diagnosis of evil and human nature?

### Option #1: There is evil within our human nature

<sup>1</sup> Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, <sup>2</sup> ‘Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread’ ... <sup>10</sup> After Jesus called the crowd to him, he said to them, ‘Hear and understand. <sup>11</sup> It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man’ ... <sup>17</sup> Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? <sup>18</sup> But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. <sup>19</sup> For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. <sup>20</sup> These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.’ (Matthew 15:1 – 20)

### Option #2: Evil is a convergence of external circumstances

“The Real Meaning of Evil”

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.

## Questions

1. What's the big deal with washing hands?
  - a. The Pharisees thought that you're internally clean by default, but external things make you unclean. In what ways do we tend to make external criteria the definition of being clean or unclean? Good and evil?
  - b. Note: The Mosaic Law never asked the Jews to wash before every meal. That comes from the Pharisees' innovation. They looked at Jerusalem and the Temple and said, 'It's corrupt because it's been occupied by the Romans. So all the hyper cleanliness that the priests would have done in the Temple, we're going to do out here.'
2. In our society, the heart is regarded as the source of love. How might Jesus comment on that idea? What is Jesus' point about the heart and uncleanness?
  - a. The heart is the source of defilement
  - b. The heart is the source of words. Notice the theme of speech running through this passage: what proceeds out of the mouth (v.11), the things that proceed out of the mouth (v.18).
  - c. The basic conflict here between Jesus and the Pharisees is the direction of defilement. Does it come from the outside? Or from the inside?
3. Why is it easy to not see uncleanness in our own hearts?
  - a. Because it's fun to accuse others or complain, and everyone does it.
  - b. Because friendships are often built on saying something negative about other people: slander, gossip. It's as if you're building a coalition and someone else is made to be a common enemy.
  - c. Application: Count how many times negative thoughts or words, especially about other people, come into our minds or pass through our lips.
  - d. Jesus wants us to regard that evil part of our hearts to be the common enemy.
4. What's Jesus' point about the Jewish Law in v.19? Notice that he lists part or all of the Ten Commandments, depending on how we interpret 'evil thoughts'. If 'evil thoughts' have to do with sin against God, then the others (murder, adultery, etc.) are the sins against other people. The order is the same general order as in the Ten Commandments.
  - a. Standards and laws are not a basis for making yourself feel good or comparing yourself to other people.
  - b. They are mirrors to show us something inside ourselves: Our hearts need transformation.

## EXTRA MATERIAL:

### **Christian view of humanity**

'The fall of man. Man was created in the image of God. The disobedience of our forefathers darkened that image of God in man, and therefore, having lost his communion with God, man was separated from the source of life and perfection. As a result of this fall, man came under the dominion of sin and death. However, the fall of man did not entirely destroy the image of God within him, and thus, even in the life of sin, the love of God still acts within the human being, creating in his soul a nostalgia for the life for which our All-Good God created him. And this nostalgia is the source of the human need and search for God and the holy. From a psychological standpoint, we may say that man is ill, suffering because of his alienation from the ontological road which God set out for him. The symptoms of his illness are sin and his inclination towards things—with the aid of the Devil and the evil spirits, who resent the image of God which persists even in sinful men and women—that damage his soul and which even more greatly darken the image of God within him.' (In Honor of St. Gregory Palamas: A Sermon Delivered by Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna in the Lecture Hall at Synod Headquarters, Kolonos (Athens), Greece, on the Second Sunday of Great Lent, the Feast Day of St. Gregory Palamas. Found at [http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/phronema/ac\\_stgregorypalamas.aspx](http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/phronema/ac_stgregorypalamas.aspx))

Comparison: Comparing ourselves to others

“It’s terrible,” I told him. “Two and a half million people, dead. In one village they interviewed about fifty of so women. All of them had been raped, most of them numerous times.”

Tony shook his head. “That is amazing. It is so difficult to process how things like that can happen.”

“I know. I can’t get my mind around it. I keep wondering how people could do things like that.”

“Do you think you could do something like that, Don?” Tony looked at me pretty seriously. I honestly couldn’t believe he was asking the question.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Are you capable of murder or rape or any of the stuff that is taking place over there?”

“No.”

“So you are not capable of any of those things?” he asked again. He packed his pipe and looked at me to confirm my answer.

“No, I couldn’t,” I told him. “What are you getting at?”

“I just want to know what makes those guys over there any different from you and me. They are human. We are human. Why are we any better than them, you know?”

Tony had me on this one. If I answered his question by saying yes, I could commit those atrocities, that would make me evil, but if I answered no, it would suggest I believed I am better evolved than some of the men in the Congo. And then I would have some explaining to do.

(Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, Thomas Nelson Publishers: Nashville, 2003, p.16 – 17)