

Some Thoughts About Evil and Evildoers

In a previous column I wrote about losing sight of good and evil. I wish now to characterize evil.

Some see evil as an active force, like a demonic power. Some see evil as an absence of good, a profound deprivation. I see evil as a tragic consequence of the disharmonies of existence. Many things are mutually obstructive. Think of evil in terms of conflicts of interests: one person's meat is another's poison.

For example, the aggressive cancer cell, though not evil in and of itself, is evil insofar as it grows and spreads in ways that have destructive consequences for the host body it inhabits. It flourishes at the expense of other life.

Likewise, the ambitious entrepreneur is not evil simply for exploiting knowledge and talent to make money, or for ego-reward. But the pursuit of wealth and power is evil if it manipulates or exploits other people, or if it realizes self-gains at an expense exceeding any corresponding benefits to others.

We think of some people as evildoers because of their hostility, their menace, their apparent malevolence – serial killers, sexual predators, torturers, and such. These are often not nice people. There are also people, not always nice but not menacing either, whose evil deeds follow from their deficient awareness of their responsibility for their actions. Adolf Eichmann was a functionary in Nazi Germany, not necessarily a monster, but nonetheless complicit in monstrous deeds by his conformity to the regime, by merely “following orders.” And then there are people who consciously “mean well” but possess such a skewed, constricted, or distorted view of reality that even their best intentions pave the way to hellish conditions for others.

The monster, the conformist, and the well-meaning evildoer are each likely to think of their actions as justified, as consistent with their own self-interests and probably even the interests of others. Yet each is capable of enormous harm. And the magnitude of that harm probably corresponds more to the power each possesses vis-a-vis others than to the degree to which we might think of them as bad people.

The greatest evildoers are not necessarily the “worst” people among us, but those perversely heedless individuals who, enabled by their particular circumstances, act with severely defective awareness and sensibility in ways that make them responsible for inflicting needless and untold pain and suffering on their fellow human beings and the world they inhabit.

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