

The Profile of Evil

Some manifestations of evil are so horrific that we shudder even to think about them. We are easily misled, consequently, to imagine that evil is some positively demonic force or fearsome power that craves to inflict great suffering and destruction upon us. Evil is typically personified as some supernatural being and/or legion of beings and/or host of dark angels bent on terror and our ruination. I find this inconceivable.

So where does evil come from? It derives from the fact that the projected good of any particular organism often conflicts with the good of other organisms. The cancer cell is an obvious example. Its good is to multiply so as to impede and/or destroy the functioning of other cells, the end result being the debilitation and often death of the host individual. Similarly, the good of a tick or mosquito is often incompatible with the good of a human being. Even at the inorganic level, the processes of nature often conflict with the good of the earth's current inhabitants. Earthquakes, volcanoes, tornadoes, floods, and fires are ready examples.

It is said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. My claim is that people, pursuing what they take to be their own good, or some larger good of which they are a part, often act in ways that are extraordinarily harmful, cruel, and destructive. A robber may think that stealing someone else's money will solve financial problems or provide the means to purchase happiness. A torturer may suppose that he is inflicting due punishment, extracting needed information, or even saving a soul. A murderer may think that she is making the world more bearable or just, thus better, by removing her victim. People often have profoundly limited and distorted perceptions of the good. But I suspect it is very rarely the case that they perceive and intend nothing good regarding their actions.

The worst manifestations of evil are probably those about which we are most self-deceived: wars fought for causes supposedly necessary and just; the self-righteous killing, maiming, torturing, and punishment of presumed enemies; the deprivations children suffer in the name of ideology and budget-balancing; environmental degradation for short-term economy, profit, or personal indulgence.

Exalting a Master Race? Defending the Fatherland? Stomping out Communism? Fighting the war on terror to make us all safe? National security seemingly demands and justifies all. Good intentions, perhaps. But hell on earth!

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