

Good and Evil – a psychiatrist’s perspective

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Introduction

Good and Evil have characterised the best and worst in Homo sapiens since the species became socially evolved. The two words epitomise the ultimate judgments we make about human behaviour that upholds, or defiles civilization and the values we hold most dear.

How do we reach those uncompromising and absolute judgements? Mostly by way of what we call ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, a framework of beliefs that are culturally sanctioned and which, by adulthood, are woven seamlessly into our personalities. As children they are impressed upon us first by our parents, then by teachers and our great social institutions. We soon learn that some actions are praiseworthy and others blameworthy. Finally, the great majority of us reach a kind of end-point, when it seems we really do know what Good and Evil are!

What can a psychiatrist add to this age-old debate that has exercised the minds of so many great philosophers and theologians? For one thing, psychiatrists do frequently have to deal with behaviour that would popularly be called evil, yet they must not call it such, and better still must not think of it like that. Our profession aims to enable us not only to learn to tolerate deviant human behaviour but also to try to make sense of it from a psychological perspective, not least when so much of it appears at first sight to be inexplicably destructive.

Further, psychiatrists have the power to deprive an individual of his or her freedom when there is a serious risk of harm to self or other due to mental disorder. This is an ethical tightrope; whether someone is deemed mad or bad can be of the utmost significance, not just for the patient, but family, carers and the community. We have only to look at how psychiatry was abused in the former Soviet Union to see where it can lead.¹ There are occasions, however, when the psychiatrist must be prepared to act and to this extent, the psychiatrist can never be neutral, for he or she is on the side of life.

Psychiatric case notes

To put in context what I want to say, I’ll begin with a few brief case studies. Julie suffered from depression. Her childhood had been blighted by physical and sexual abuse. In adulthood, Julie’s relationships were chaotic; her behaviour swung from being painfully inhibited to outbursts of aggression and sexual provocation, especially when she had been drinking.

One day she came to the hospital with a carving knife and threatened to kill her psychiatrist. There was no doubt she meant it. She was disarmed and put in a secure unit. Her countenance was regal, and stony hard – not a shred of remorse. She said ‘They can lock me away for a hundred years, I don’t care’.

Julie’s actions are not hard to understand. The legacy of her terrible childhood had been to develop a borderline personality with impaired reality testing. When Julie was emotionally aroused, she would relive the scenes of her childhood, not as memories to be recalled but in the here-and-now, being replayed in life itself. In Julie’s mind, the psychiatrist had become confused with her father, what technically is called a delusional transference, and in that state Julie could undoubtedly have killed.

The case illustrates the value of finding meaning in what superficially might seem incomprehensible. While Julie's behaviour cannot be said to be good, neither does it make sense to call it evil.

I am reminded of another case some years ago in which a male patient walking down the corridor of a London hospital suddenly took out a knife he was carrying and stabbed a social worker, who collapsed and died. It turned out this patient was psychotic and hearing voices saying 'kill, kill' and so he did.

The psychiatric diagnosis was acute schizophrenia and although the causation of schizophrenia remains an enigma, we can regard the sufferer with compassion when there are so many other signs of a mind that is not in possession of itself. Far from exercising volition, the person is usually harassed mercilessly by voices and bizarre ideas that dominate the mental life. I think we are entitled to put aside the intent of Evil in such cases.

On the other hand, I remember many years ago visiting a man in prison who was on remand for a murder charge. He had found his wife at home with another man, who fled the house. My patient ran into the kitchen, selected a large knife and followed him into the street. The other man was trying to start his car. Unfortunately the driver's window was down, and he was stabbed in the chest. He got the car going but died at the wheel a few hundred yards down the road.

From the psychiatric point of view, if it could be shown that the stabbing had taken place while the balance of mind was disturbed, the charge might be reduced to manslaughter. But this prisoner was having none of it. He worked in a funfair and in this small community he had been publicly shamed. Now his pride had been restored to him. 'Doctor', he said, 'there's nothing wrong with me. If it happened again, I'd do it again!'

Although we cannot condone the killing, most of us would not call this man evil; we can have some empathic identification with his hurt and rage. He is not so different from us, perhaps more in degree than kind. But what about the following example?

A woman I will call Shirley came to see me having been referred because of repeated admissions to the surgical ward with abdominal pain, though no physical cause could be found. When she eventually confided her history, it transpired that she had been systematically abused as a child by neighbours. The husband and wife would ply her with sweets and then 'play games', which consisted of tying up the little girl and then forcing her to have sex with them. Not until Shirley was in her teens did she finally get away.

Shirley began making good progress in psychotherapy. Then she came to a session almost mute and shaking with fear. She had met this same man in the street, the first time in 10 years. He said just three words to her, 'come with me', and like a lamb to the slaughter she followed him home where he raped her again.

It is not uncommon to find that perpetrators continue to hold this power over their victims. The righteous anger I felt towards the man was very great - anger, incidentally, which the patient could not feel - and to use the word evil for his behaviour seems hardly out of place. Jesus, no less, said of children, '*...whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea*' (Matthew 18:4).

Yet I now recall a man sent to me by the courts convicted of multiple child sexual abuse. As you might guess, this man had an appalling childhood and had been regularly abused as a child, which he submitted to with confusion

and then in time learned to enjoy. He wanted me to know that he never did any harm to his young charges. 'They enjoy it, just like I did. It never did me any harm'. He couldn't really see what all the fuss was about. 'It's not as if I'm a bad person', he said. This man lived in a grossly impoverished mental world. All his emotions were centred on his compulsive paedophile activities, for the only relationships he could form were with children, tracking them down, grooming them and then seducing them, one after another.

Even a handful of cases such as these shows why a term like Evil, at first sight so seemingly self-evident, begins to break down into complex subsets of meaning once the motives become intelligible. It also explains why people who commit murder rarely see themselves as bad - the end is felt to justify the means. I remember the forensic psychotherapist Dr. Murray Cox telling me about one man he had been seeing in Broadmoor. When this patient was asked why he had killed, the answer came right back, 'I needed a life, so I took one'. This can be understood as a concrete, psychotic statement but it has a certain logic to it. Another serial killer would cut open the abdomens of his victims in order to put his hands into the warm viscera. For a few moments, he could feel what it is like to get close to another human being.

Sometimes we find a split in the psyche so that the same person who kills can go home and be a loving parent, husband or wife. Such dissociation may be partial, or complete as in multiple personality, made famous by Robert Louis Stevenson in 'The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde'.

I remember assessing one such patient for psychotherapy. Jean was desperate for help, since an alter personality would take over during 'absences' and create havoc. Jean had been told that this alter, named Sylvie, was very aggressive. Sylvie came through during the consultation and had only one thing to say to me, which she put very bluntly. If I tried to get psychotherapy for Jean, Sylvie would kill me, because she had no intention of being got rid of. I explained the problem to Jean, who was also concerned about the danger, and we agreed upon a supportive therapy to see whether Jean and Sylvie might learn to co-habit with less disruption.

Again, what might have looked like senseless violence turned out to have a motive - in this case the fear of being annihilated. To kill or be killed is one of the most basic of human survival reactions.

In the comfort and security that many of us enjoy, it is tempting to regard ourselves as beyond such primitive behaviour. In 1981 rioting broke out in the predominantly black neighbourhood of Brixton, London. At the time, I was living nearby and from my garden I could see the billowing smoke and flames. The air reverberated with angry shouts, screams and police sirens. On the radio, I heard that rioters were massing and might be coming down the road where I lived. In a split second, everything changed. I rushed about the house looking for a weapon to defend my home and young family. I found an axe and waited by the front door. Fortunately I waited in vain, since the rioters took a different route. But it was a great lesson to me. I had been accustomed to regarding myself as a tolerant, liberal-minded citizen and in a matter of minutes I had turned into an arch-racist who could readily have killed.

How easily we shed that hard-won capacity for dispassionate concern when we ourselves feel threatened! I once asked Murray Cox how he was able to work so empathically with child murderers when seeing them at Broadmoor, only a few miles from where Murray and his young family lived. He said to me with a smile, 'because there is a 15-foot wall between them and me!'

Psychiatrists inevitably have to deal with people who have become a law unto themselves, either because of mental illness or what is deemed to be 'personality disorder', the bane of every psychiatrist. The diagnosis of personality disorder can have prognostic value as well as suggesting particular therapeutic approaches. But such diagnoses are as much social and political as they are medical, for they set human conduct against moral judgements about what constitutes mature, civilised behaviour. We should remember that the 19th century definition of psychopathy was moral insanity. Psychiatry to this day still bears the burden of that definition. Many psychiatrists are appalled by the new draft mental health bill being currently debated in parliament that would compel people diagnosed with personality disorder who are considered potentially dangerous, yet who have committed no crime, to be treated and even detained against their will.

In concluding the first part of my discussion, I would propose the following:

1. That the concept of evil has no place in the assessment and treatment of mental disorder, including personality disorder
2. This is not to deny that evil exists and that evil people may have mental disorder
3. However, where mental disorder is diagnosed, it is not appropriate in the individual case to judge someone to be evil; the primary concern must be therapeutic, which precludes making moral judgements

Reflections on mass killing

Killing in war is legitimised and even rewarded. How different from the ultimate crime of murder, 'the unlawful premeditated killing of a human being by another' generally punishable by a life sentence or death! There is not much point in treating war as psychopathological, since in war the whole nation is identified with the norm of killing. None the less, the psychology of our extraordinary destructiveness as a species deserves to be examined.

It has been said that if you give a person a gun, that person may kill dozens, but if you give a person an ideology, that person will willingly kill millions.

The twentieth century has seen more bloodshed than in all the previous history of mankind. 8½ million people were killed in the First World War. In the Second World War, the loss of life was ten times greater.

'Only when the time comes when the race is no longer overshadowed by the consciousness of its own guilt, then it will find internal peace and external energy to cut down regardlessly and brutally the wild shoots and to pull up the weeds. Conscience is a Jewish invention. It is a blemish like circumcision'.

Mein Kampf: Adolf Hitler, quoted in McIntosh, W.²

In this sentiment we find a terrible perversion of the 'will to power'. Nietzsche may have proclaimed that 'God is dead', but the third Reich found in Hitler a new God. Psychoanalytically speaking, such manic omnipotence is based on the paranoid defences of splitting and projection. All that is most painful to recognise and own about the self is split off and projected into the other, in this case the Jews, who became the epitome of everything evil – what

psychoanalysis calls the 'bad object'. Then the 'true' German nation, now ridded of its contamination, could be experienced as virtuous, heroic and free from guilt.

Yet when the split is operating, every nation justifies its own actions as necessary. Take, for example, our own Sir Arthur Harris Travers, 'Bomber Harris', as he was known, who in 1942, ordered the firebombing of Cologne in response to the Blitz on London. It was the beginning of a strategy of carpet-bombing, which culminated in the destruction of Dresden in 1945 with the death that one night of over 135,000 civilians. Harris was subsequently decorated with the Knight Grand Cross of the Bath. In Germany to this day, many hold him accountable for war crimes against humanity.

Genocide

'We shut our eyes to the beginnings of evil because they are small, and in this weakness is contained the germ of our defeat'.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

The term genocide was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 and is defined as the crime of destroying, or committing conspiracy to destroy, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.

Examples of genocide in recent history include the massacre of 300,000 Chinese in Nanking by the Japanese in 1937, the death of over one million by the Gulag under Stalin's reign of terror, the murder of over 6 million in the Nazi Holocaust, a vast but unknown number of deaths during the chairmanship of Mao Zedung, the Nigerian-Biafran war of 1969, when deliberate starvation killed over one million, the slaughter of 300,000 Ugandans by Idi Amin during the 70s, the massacre of around three million Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge, the Iran-Iraq war in the 80s, which saw the use of nerve gas and in which one million died and the Rwandan civil war of 1994, with half a million deaths. More recently and closer to home, we have seen the Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian war, ethnic cleansing resulting in over 100,000 deaths with more than 3 million refugees.

The danger in talking about 'genocide' is that it allows decent folk to distance themselves from these 'crimes against humanity'. But where does war end and genocide begin? We in the West are implicated in still millions more deaths. Take the Korean War. By 1953, eight years after the partitioning of Korea by the United States and the USSR, the USA and 19 other nations, including Britain, was supposedly defending South Korea against communist North Korea. Three years on, the death toll had risen to 3 million and the war ended in stalemate. Vietnam was another casualty of ideology, with 2 million Vietnamese killed, a further 3 million wounded and with 12 million refugees.

Nor can we in the West wash our hands of the Arab-Israeli conflict. When the United Nations divided Palestine, which had been under the British mandate, into a Jewish state and an Arab state, the Arab-Israeli war that immediately followed in 1948 resulted in 750,000 Palestinian refugees.

Last and not least, what kind of moral responsibility should Britain take for the Indo-Pakistan crisis? This goes back to 1947, when the Raj was breaking down in the face of internal dissent. When Britain partitioned India, creating the Muslim state of Pakistan, both sides claimed Kashmir, as Mahatma Gandhi had predicted. Three wars have already been fought over Kashmir and another one could be nuclear.

I know these brief excursions into history may seem a long way from psychiatry, and perhaps they are. But I am attempting to show that the moral fine-tuning we indulge in, making distinctions between war, genocide, culpable homicide and legitimate self-defence, are as nothing compared with the disastrous psychology of a species that defines itself by means of nationhood and territorial greed, the consequence of which has been the death of over 100 million of its own kind in less than one century.

The endpoint of indifference

To habitually kill, or to be party to such killing, requires a total detachment from those being killed, as if an inferior species is being disposed of. Not only did the SS guards at Auschwitz rapidly become inured to extermination, but the Jewish Kapos, whose lives were being spared if they would clean up the gas chambers, had no choice but to do the same if they were not to go mad with horror. A chilling indifference sets in, being a state somewhere between life and death. T.S.Eliot writes:

*There are three conditions which often look alike
Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
Attachment to self and to things and to persons,
detachment
From self and from things and from persons; and growing
between them, indifference
Which resembles the others as death resembles life,
Being between two lives- unflowering, between
The live and the dead nettle.*

From Little Gidding: in 'Four Quartets' ³

Indifference is found when the psychopathology has become habitually and completely split off and disowned. Gita Sereny ⁴ interviewed Franz Stangl, who had been commandant at Treblinka, weekly for about a year. In the last interview, he admitted to some degree his responsibility for the mass murder of 900,000 Jews. Nineteen hours after this last interview, he died of a heart attack. Indifference had not only protected Stangl's mind, but also his body.⁵

Let us look at what lies behind this terrible mask of indifference, for even the most monstrous Nazi was once a child like any other.

The psychological origins of love and hate

There are various theories about how mind forms. My own view is that the infant is born with an innate capacity for responsiveness, for harmonious interchange and contentment. Provided its needs are met, the infant's incipient sense of wholeness is characterised by a delight in its own being. We see a happy child.

To be subject to the flesh also means to know suffering, as the Buddha pointed out, and from day one, the infant has to contend with bodily processes which will bring distress, even in the best of families. At such moments, the pristine psyche of the infant is overwhelmed by painful arousal and the intrinsic biology of the fight/flight reaction takes over. Since there is nowhere to fly, the fight mentality kicks in. Consequently, the breast-feeding scenario can be blissful, or torture, for the nipple can become in turn a love object and a hate object.

These two contrasting experiences, of joy, our spiritual birthright, and suffering, unwelcome companion to the embodied self, will be re-visited by the growing child over the coming years in a thousand different ways. Two very different outcomes are possible. When the child's caregivers sustain it with love, the capacity for joy becomes object-related; the child learns the meaning of love for others. At the same time, it discovers that anger is not a catastrophe, just a passing emotion. The capacity for healthy ambivalence develops, so that conflicting emotions can be contained and thought about without the uncontrollable impulse to action. The child learns to show empathy, as it imaginatively identifies with the feeling states of others and a growing capacity for generosity and gratitude reflect its pleasure in a sense of wholeness of self. (Incidentally, many people have trouble in saying 'I love you' because the words sound uncomfortably mawkish. If it is possible to say 'I love you, and I hate you', (for such is the nature of passion) and when this is received with understanding and acceptance, the expression of love feels a whole lot more real).

On the other hand, when a child is repeatedly overwhelmed by anger or fear, the effect is a shattering of the stability and coherence of its inner world. The child survives by encapsulating and splitting off these emotions from consciousness. When these emotions do break through, as they sooner or later will, they no longer feel they belong to the self. They can have a dreadful autonomy about them, as if they belong to someone else. Worse still, they are often deployed in a perverse attempt at restitution of the self, one that stands the wisdom of Jesus on its head. 'As ye *would* that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise' (Luke 7:31) becomes 'as others *have* done to you, now do the same to them'. Revenge is intoxicating, and the wounded self exults in triumph over the other. This is the psychology of hate.

By using terms like 'the Axis of Evil', it is possible to dehumanise the other, while letting it be known to anyone who will listen that one's self is innocent and good. It is the ultimate statement of otherness, of 'not me'. By refusing to acknowledge the terrorist as a fellow human being, we are spared the pain of seeing the world through his eyes.

There is a whole range of psychological defence mechanisms that bring about this detachment of self from other in the struggle for personal survival. They are ego-driven, ⁶ based either on fight, flight or passivity, and depending on the nature of the threat are designed to confer protection on self, family, clan, community and country.

Such ego-driven defences secure only a temporary reprieve because the pigeon always comes home to roost. Cause brings about effect and the effect becomes the next cause, as enshrined in the law of karma of the eastern religions. Attack inevitably leads to counter-attack and domination is followed by rebellion, a cycle that can go on forever, since the original grievance is soon supplanted by a whole host of further injustices.

Fortunately, the psychology of hate is more or less balanced by the psychology of love, or the human species would not have come this far. In contrast to the primitive defences of splitting and projection, there is a more benign outcome, by way of what has been called the depressive position,⁷ or the stage of concern.⁸ During childhood we develop the capacity to see that those we sometimes hate are also those we other times love. Then there is concern for the love object that has been under attack, a capacity for healthy guilt and remorse develops and with it, the desire to make reparation. More mature and resilient relationships can develop, based on trust and goodwill.

The conclusions I would draw from this second part of the discussion are that:

1. Evil is destructiveness that arises from the impact of pain, a retaliatory strike that has its roots in unconscious processes
2. Evil is the consequence of primitive defence mechanisms that are self-serving and ruthless
3. The pleasure in the act of Evil is based on triumph over the other
4. Overcoming Evil is our next evolutionary challenge, on which our survival as a species depends
5. This cannot be done by suppression, but only through the action of love, which transcends personal differences in the realisation that 'all is one'

Good and Evil as spiritual concepts

The major religions abstract Evil and Good from their circumstances and treat them conceptually, each opposing the other. That this should have happened is not surprising, since they are primordial archetypes that configure human consciousness. Eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is in the blueprint for Homo sapiens and our minds have been beautifully designed to put us through this most exhaustive test.

The faiths of East and West offer different ways of going about it. The Pauline view, which became the established Christian doctrine, is that God incarnated only in the person of Christ, and therefore only through Christ can Man be redeemed. As to the nature of Good and Evil, St. Augustine argued that since God must be good, the cause of evil has to be found in the free will of human beings, which entitles them if they so wish to turn away from God. Evil is therefore the absence of Good. How could God permit such a thing? Since it is in the nature of goodness to give of itself, says St. Augustine, and since God is infinite, this must include the possibility of self-negation.

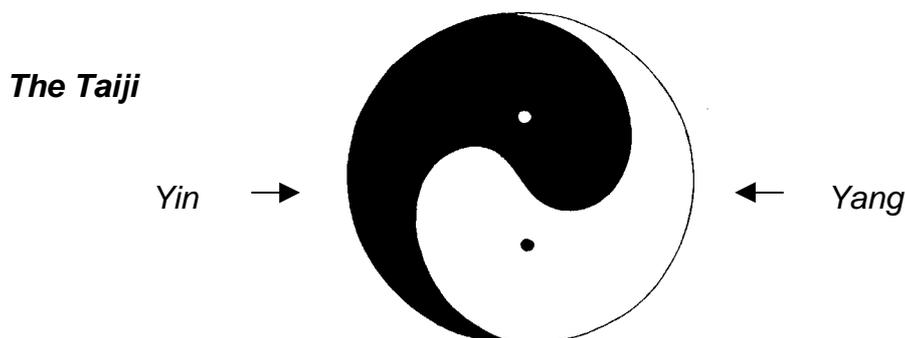
This conjures up a world divided against itself, battle lines drawn between the powers of light and darkness, one in which for there to be a heaven, there must also be a hell.

The early Christian Gnostics believed that Christ, the divine spirit, inhabited the body of the man Jesus and that the divine spirit also lies within every human soul. There is no need for Christ to atone for the sins of the world, nor for a physical resurrection, since the spirit is eternal. Christ as a great wisdom teacher serves to guide every human being who sets forth on his or her spiritual journey.

This is closer to the Buddhist view of karmic self-determination. It also held a powerful appeal for Carl Jung, who saw in the problem of Good and Evil the greatest opportunity for achieving wholeness of the self, to be attained through healing the split in the psyche. Jung⁹ called this process individuation. Transcending the narrow ego and discovering the totality of the greater Self, in its collective as well as personal meaning, holds the key to the transformation of human consciousness.

Jung drew notably on the ancient Chinese teachings of the Dao, in which the Universe, physical and spiritual, is maintained through a perfect balance of Yin and Yang.¹⁰ This is no ordinary duality, for Yin and Yang '...create, contain and restrain each other. Neither possesses any quality or identity save as the complement of the other'.¹¹ Such a duality holds true at every level, from the

balance of masculine and feminine elements in each person's psyche to the cosmic cycles of creation and destruction of the physical universe.



The circle that embraces Yin and Yang is the universal symbol for totality. In Sanskrit it is known as the mandala. In the Gnostic tradition too, God is represented by the circle that has no circumference and whose centre is everywhere.

In Jung's psycho-spiritual formulation, the transformation of the psyche can only be achieved through the acknowledgement and integration of opposites. The dark is as necessary to the light as the light is to the dark. Further, as the Taiji clearly shows, within Yang is to be found the seed of Yin and within the Yin, the seed of Yang - the dark is always in the light and the light in the dark. The Daoist view is that evil arises from an imbalance of Yin and Yang. When we transgress the natural balance and rhythm of Nature, the flow of energy or Qi, as it is known, is blocked and disharmony arises. 2,500 years ago, *Laozi*, the great Daoist sage remarked:

*A man is born gentle and weak
At his death he is hard and stiff.
Green plants are tender and filled with sap.
At their death they are withered and dry.*

*Therefore the stiff and unbending is the disciple of death.
The gentle and yielding is the disciple of life...*

*Laozi: Daodejing*¹²

The 'axis of evil' and the 'axis of good'

The striving of the human ego has been a driving force in the evolution of the species, enabling the development of will and personal identity. But the need to be top dog has necessitated a psychology based on splitting and projection, in which acknowledging our faults and failings could fatally undermine our self-idealisation. We might start to doubt ourselves instead of being bent on claiming first prize. What Jung called the Shadow has therefore to be split off and projected. Once out there, we can name it Evil, we can feel righteous, defend ourselves and be prepared to fight our corner, with guns and bombs if need be.

This kind of behaviour had its place in the history of civilization but now threatens to destroy the world. So how else might Evil be managed? Simply by learning to observe the Shadow within, knowing it for what it is, and acknowledging its existence there. Standing back from it means that one

doesn't have to identify with it; then one doesn't have to act it out either. On the contrary, when acknowledged, the Shadow is a great teacher, since it puts us all on a level. There is nothing new in this. Jesus said, '...why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye?' (Luke 7:42). Our endeavours are more likely to bear fruit when we stop telling others what is good for them and concentrate on setting a good example.

Jesus' exhortations are wonderfully counter-intuitive. 'Resist not evil, but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also'. 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you' (Matthew 5: 39,44). From the Gnostic perspective, we each become the Christ to the extent we genuinely find this humility and compassion within us.

Buddhists, for whom non-violence is a precept, undertake the spiritual practice of Tonglen, in which the anger, fear, pain and hatred of others is breathed in and love is breathed out and offered in return.¹³ All great spiritual teachings are based on such humility; they help us to see the same flaws in ourselves that reflect our common humanity. 'Like me, like me!' says the Buddhist under his breath when encountering the worst in the other.

It will be evident by now that I see the challenge of Evil as a necessary spur to the spiritual evolution of humankind. The emotions of childhood first awaken us to a duality in which love is the goodness and hatred is the evil. Before long, our ego instincts come to equate goodness with personal survival and evil with the threat to life. But if we stop there, in a world centred only on self-survival, we turn our backs on the spiritual universe, one that invites us to break free of the confines of the ego and find self in other. And if we do transcend, if only for a moment, the ego's preoccupation with itself, we find the most extraordinary thing, that awaiting us, beyond the duality of Good and Evil, is perfect peace.

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