



See no evil, hear no evil

By Cindy Sutter

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The Holocaust, slavery, the killing fields of Cambodia, the genocide in Rwanda, Darfur.

When people define evil, they often point to heinous acts on a large scale that dwarf the tame-sounding dictionary definition of "morally bad or wrong."

But is it evil only if the bad acts are writ large? What about the casual betrayal of a lover or the cold machinations of a back-stabbing coworker? Are all humans capable of great evil under certain circumstances or are some possessed of an exceptional moral compass?

In this season, where evil gets its due in the form of red devils with pitchforks, campy movie trailers and blood-squirting grim reaper masks, here's a quick look at a few of the many views about what brings out the worst in us.

The devil made me do it

In the Christian tradition, Satan embodies evil. But depending on the flavor of Christianity a person practices, Satan may be perceived as symbolic, or as a literal being that causes ill in the world.

Miguel De La Torre, professor of social ethics at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, says Satan was not a major figure in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament.

"He was portrayed as more of a trickster ... not as this personification of evil. That doesn't occur until the New Testament and takes off in medieval Christianity," says De La Torre, who is writing a book about the historical Satan. "In the New Testament, Satan is the source of illness and bad fortune."

That belief, he adds, allowed the concept of Satan to be used as a political tool.

"Quickly it moves into the (belief that) the faith of those who are not Christians become demons. If I can go ahead and decry the other as worshipping evil, I can unleash a tremendous degree of evil to suppress evil."

De La Torre says that the rise of science that occurred with the Enlightenment caused a shift in the perception of Satan. He was less frequently seen as an actual being and more as the impulse of the individual.

"We began to look at the Satan within us," he says.

The evil in everyone

One of the most disturbing manifestations of evil is the idea that every person is capable of depraved and despicable acts.

Two well-known, but controversial, experiments were designed to test this idea. The first, from Stanley Milgram at Yale, took place in 1961 and was published in *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, in 1963. In the study, which was billed as a memory study, subjects were told to teach word pairs to a learner (in reality an actor) in another room by delivering electric shocks, although no shocks were actually used. As the learner made mistakes, the subjects were told to increase the shock level, even as the learner screamed and the subject was told that the learner had a heart condition. Those who questioned the study, were told by a researcher wearing a white lab coat to continue. More than 60 percent delivered the highest shock, 450 volts.

The second experiment, known as the Stanford Prison Experiment, was conducted by Philip Zimbardo in 1971. A book, released this year, "The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil," discussed the experiment, which divided subjects into prisoners and guards. When the prisoners rebelled, and the guards asked Zimbardo what to do, he replied, "It's your prison," although he told them not to use physical violence.

The experiment, which had originally been designed to run for two weeks, was discontinued after five days, because the guards began to use extreme punishments, such as stripping prisoners naked, depriving them of food, putting hoods on them and even using sexual humiliation.

Zimbardo argues that the study, which got renewed attention when the abuses of Abu Ghraib in Iraq were uncovered, shows that conditions such as boredom and ill-defined authority can lead to abuse.

Both experiments have been criticized on ethical grounds. And a May 2007 study published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, replicated part of the Stanford Prison Experiment by recruiting subjects for a study of prison life, using the text of the original recruiting ad. The study found that volunteers scored higher on measures of aggressiveness, authoritarianism, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and social dominance and lower on empathy and altruism. No direct conclusions can be drawn, but the study raises the possibility that the original experiment's subjects volunteers could have been drawn to the idea of a prison study and more predisposed to abuse than the general population was.

Born to be bad

Could evil be with us in our genes?

Barbara Oakley, an associate professor of engineering at Oakland University in Rochester, Mich., argues just that in her new book, "Evil Genes: Why Rome Fell, Hitler Rose, Enron Failed, and My Sister Stole My Mother's Boyfriend."

Oakley, a bioengineer, says she became interested in the subject partly because of the behavior of her sister, who flitted in and out of the family, only returning to ask for money. When in her 50s, Oakley's sister actually did steal the boyfriend of their 80-something mother. Oakley also met KGB agents while working on a Russian trawler, whom she calls "self-selected sinister," as well as other malevolent characters during the course of her career.

While watching Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic on television denying a massacre, she began to see a narcissistic pattern in their behaviors. In the book, she looks at the latest science linking various genes to brain structures and behaviors and concludes that certain gene combinations can predispose a

person to manipulative behavior that could be described as evil.

She does not believe that genes alone cause bad behavior. Instead, genetic predispositions react with environmental factors. Oakley says her book, with its tongue-in-cheek title, is an attempt to bring balance to the prevailing idea that environment is the only cause of immoral behavior.

"What I'm trying to get across is that people think we'll fix society and that will fix everybody. No, because genetics play a role, it's not quite as easy as that," she says.

In fact, some "evil" combinations genes may actually serve a function, she argues. For example, some genes may combine to allow a person to understand how to read people well and understand their motivations. Others appear to allow conditioning by fear of consequences. That quality is a key component to developing a conscience. If the good reader of people develops a conscience, he might be a highly effective leader. On the other hand, if the same person had a deficiency in conscience, he might be a master manipulator or a psychopath. Either way, in evolutionary terms, the efficient understanding of people might allow him to pass along his genes, whether through an honorable alliance or an unfaithful relationship.

It's also impossible to predict how genes might combine.

"You can have two really terrific parents, but from the luck of the draw, they might be having one set of genes that doesn't play well with the other, psychologically speaking. You could end up with a child with psychopathic traits," Oakley says.

Karma

Some Eastern societies have a less dualistic view of good and evil.

"... It's not evil, it's the negative consequence of negative action, which is karma," says Jacob Kinnard, associate professor of comparative religious thought at Iliff School of Theology.

That doesn't mean that individuals can't choose to be good or positive, but they may be affected by the complex workings of karma, he says.

There's even a further twist.

"But then in a religion like Hinduism, it gets more complicated, because there are a gazillion gods doing what they do," he says. "Sometimes they do things that we would perceive as bad."

Avoiding evil

The age-old human question: What to do to keep evil at bay? Milgram of the Yale electric shock study has published advice for keeping a check on your own capacity evil. Key point: Question authority.

Oakley says being aware of evil in the world can help people set boundaries for themselves. When it comes to accurately judging someone who might be manipulating you, she has an interesting piece of advice: Listen to gossip.

"The first thing people will tell you is that gossip is really bad," she says. "Gossip can be extremely helpful. Often it's the only way you can really get to know if someone is untrustworthy and willing to

step on people's backs is by hearing stories they don't want you to hear."

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