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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE NATURE OF EVIL: EVALUATING THE EVIL WITHIN US ALL

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the psychological facets of the nature of evil; particularly, the relationships between evil and the concepts of neurobiology, personality characteristics, and social environments are explored. The notions of what constitutes evil and what causes it are also discussed in order to synthesize and formulate an established definition of evil. Furthermore, the idea that all people have evil capabilities is analyzed in this paper. All in all, this paper is centered around the complex nature of evil and the factors that contribute to evil in the world.

Keywords

evil, neurobiology, personality, social circumstances, human nature

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

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The very basis of psychology revolves around the question of why people think or act in the way that they do. This question becomes even more enthralling when it is posed in reference as to why people think or act in an evil manner. Over the years, there have been various psychological explanations that aim to explain what causes a person to partake in evil acts. For instance, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud was of the belief that evil actions occur as a result of human beings being unable to express their true nature and their innate urges as a result of living in a society which imposes values and morals on its people (Freud, 1930). Other individuals, such as political philosopher Hannah Arendt, support the idea that evil is primarily banal; that is, that evil things can be done by ordinary people and without monstrous intent (Arendt, 1963). Similarly, Philip Zimbardo, the psychologist who is most well-known for conducting the infamous Stanford prison experiment, has his own perspective on understanding how ordinary people can do evil things, which he coined The Lucifer Effect (Zimbardo, 2007). Zimbardo (2007) described The Lucifer Effect as being when a good, ordinary person is shaped by situations and systems that then cause that person to step into a state of evil and subsequently engage in evil actions. Put differently, Zimbardo (2007) stated that “good people can be induced, seduced, and initiated into behaving in evil ways” (p. 211). Freud, Arendt, and Zimbardo are just three opinions involved in the debate; there are a multitude of perspectives regarding why a person acts in what can be deemed an evil way. Ultimately, there is no one specific cause or reason to explain why a person takes part in evil acts. The idea of evil is a complex one that involves many different components including an individual’s brain chemistry, personality, and social circumstances. Moreover, given the complex nature of evil, all people are capable of taking part in evil behaviors under certain conditions.

The Definition of Evil

There are numerous ways to define what constitutes something as evil, but at its core, “evil is a state of impaired functioning, being out of balance, and to do evil is to impair the functioning of others” (Peters, 2008, p. 685). In other words, when an evil act is being done, that action is hindering or harming (physically, psychologically, socially, etc.) a person’s ability to function. However, evil is not limited to the impairment inflicted upon a single other person. Evil can be applied to a much larger context. According to Peters (2008), “humans do evil when they impair the functioning of themselves, of other humans, of relations between them, of society, of other creatures, of ecosystems, and of the planet as a whole” (p. 686). Put simply, human evil is widespread, and can be found in a vast number of circumstances.

Kramer (2014) contends that “evil conduct is underlain by sadistic malice or heartlessness or extreme recklessness that is connected to severe harm in the absence of any significant extenuating circumstances” (p. 49). Kramer (2014) proposes the notion that, although all evil acts are wrong, not all acts that are seen as wrong are necessarily evil—extenuating circumstances can change the nature of an action, subsequently making that action become either evil or not.

Horne (2008) discusses various different interpretations of what is representative of evil, ultimately asserting that evil can be defined in relation to the characteristics of a person’s behaviors, rather than to the overall character of the person taking part in those behaviors. It can be said, then, that even average individuals who may not be considered evil in the stereotypical, mainstream sense of the word, still have the ability to take part in acts that are evil due to various biological, personality, and environmental factors. Ultimately, evil can be defined as the partaking in thoughts and/or behaviors that are severely harmful to oneself, others, and/or society.

Neurobiological Explanation of Evil

One theory of the source of evil lies in the neurobiological explanation. Luke (2016)'s research describes how thoughts and emotions are a psychological product of the human brain's biological processes. These neurobiological processes involve the interaction between neurons and the neurotransmitters that are produced as a result of the brain's chemical reactions. Additionally, the activity of neurotransmitters within specific brain regions, such as the amygdala, can be associated with emotional reactions like aggression (Stein, 2000). Considering that aggression is an emotional behavior that is typically associated with the partaking of violent acts and, based on this understanding regarding how neurotransmitters in the brain can contribute to aggression, it is suggested that there may be a neurological component to an individual becoming angry enough to spur the occurrence of an evil act. Stein (2000) further builds on the idea of aggression being dictated by functions of the brain, stating that current research supports the idea that decreased metabolic rates in a person's prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain that is most closely associated with executive/higher level functioning) is correlated to aggression. However, despite the neurological connections that can be drawn to aggression, it is important to note that not all evil behaviors are pre-cursed by anger, and biology does not solely explain why evil behaviors take place. After making the association between the metabolic rates in the prefrontal cortex to aggression, Stein (2000) goes on to state that psychosocial phenomena and biology are intertwined concepts; one tends to have an impact on the other. However, despite the knowledge of a relationship between psychosocial and biological circumstances, it is unclear whether psychosocial factors are responsible for triggering biological reactions or if biological factors trigger psychosocial responses. Regardless, it is evident that, in addition to biology, both social experiences and psychological personality traits also factor into the overall understanding of evil.

Evil as Personality

Evil Within Certain Personality Traits

One of the most prominent personality theories regarding evil is the Dark Triad of personality, which is composed of Machiavellianism, subclinical narcissism, and subclinical psychopathy (Paulhas & Williams, 2002). These particular elements of personality are all related in that they all, to a certain degree, involve behavior tendencies such as having a socially malevolent character, acting out aggressively, being emotionally distant and manipulative, and occupying time with the promotion of oneself (Paulhas & Williams, 2002). These aspects of personality that are associated with the Dark Triad are exemplary of traits that are associated with evil acts. Amiri (2017) discovered similar findings when researching the three personality elements of the Dark Triad, stating that "showing low levels of empathy, little ability or incentive to connect ones' own emotions with those of others, and paying attention to emotions facilitate social hostile strategies that have been formed in the shape of dark triad traits" (p. 140). Ultimately, these research results point to the fact that the characteristics associated with the Dark Triad result in producing a personality type that is deviant from the social norm and which can often result in an individual taking part in evil acts. Furthermore, although the Dark Triad personality traits often tend to be thought of as being related to more prominent examples of evil (such as with serial killers, for example), Paulhas and Williams (2002) postulate that individuals who possess personality traits consistent with the Dark Triad all have a shared source of disagreeableness. This, in turn, suggests that the core of the social destructive behaviors these individuals partake in is founded on an emotion that is quite banal. Everyone is capable of being or

becoming disagreeable with their social experiences, their environment, or life in general; this is a normal aspect of being in the world. Therefore, if all people are capable of disagreeableness, subsequently, all people are capable of engaging in socially destructive, or even evil, behaviors.

Evil Associated with Personality Disorders

An additional explanation for evil behaviors involves a psychological look into certain personality disorders. Antisocial personality disorder is commonly associated with sociopathy, and, subsequently, evil acts. Black (1999) contends that individuals with antisocial personality disorder (which is most commonly diagnosed in men) have the potential to act in an evil way due to them being primarily concerned with personal desires and wishes, without having an ability to reflect inward on their actions and choices. Black (1999) goes on to later say that individuals with antisocial personality disorder take whatever measures necessary, even if extreme, in order to reach their misguided goals. Based on this description of these traits that are characteristic of antisocial personality disorder, arguably, such individuals would be more prone to violence and to not being conscious of or simply not caring about the potential negative effects of their actions. Moreover, while women are not commonly diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder, the diagnosis of borderline personality disorder—which exemplifies the traits and behaviors of manipulation, sexual promiscuity, and impulsivity—is a disorder more frequently found in women and which can act similar to antisocial personality disorder in that this disorder can result in the individual taking part in potentially evil behaviors as well (Black, 1999). The differences in the rate of these diagnoses amongst men and women can likely be attributed to a variety of different factors, including biological differences in the genetic makeup of cisgender men and women, societal expectations and stigmas surrounding the ways in which aggression is expressed as a man or a woman (e.g., stereotypically, men tend to exhibit their aggression in a physical way, while women often exhibit their aggression verbally or socially), and/or clinician biases in making diagnoses (Beauchaine et al., 2009).

Relationship Between Social Circumstances and Evil

Evil as a Reaction to Negative Life Events

Beyond the idea of a theory of evil personality or the possession of a personality disorder, there are other life events that can result in a person's personality becoming altered in a negative manner. Nowinski (2004) presents the notion that an identity crisis could drive someone to embrace a destructive or violent identity, arguing that individuals who lose a sense of direction or purpose seek out a new path for themselves in order to try and bring a new sense of meaning to their lives—which can explain why some choose to redirect their life in order to adopt a more violent or evil lifestyle. Additionally, as was the case with the biological theory of evil, personality traits or disorders in and of themselves do not entirely explain why evil occurs. Stein (2000) asserts that while certain personality traits serve a plausible explanation for evil, there are particular environments that have the potential to foster the learning of evil tendencies such as sadism and that this learning can emerge once an individual is placed in a specific kind of context. Though a person's personality traits and disorder(s) play a considerable role where evil acts are concerned, specific social situations may also foster a learning of evil, which can then be triggered later in life.

Evil as a Product of Environment

A further theory to explain participation in evil behaviors involves the social circumstances of an individual. Building off the theory of antisocial personality disorder contributing to evil is the idea that the social environments in which individuals with this disorder live potentially worsen their antisocial impulses. For example, poverty and homelessness create situations in which actions that could be deemed antisocial would be more common, as resorting to criminal behavior can become one of the only ways for those individuals to survive in their current toxic environment (Black, 1999). Moreover, toxic home environments are often associated with various social risk factors such as parental instability, trauma, physical/mental/emotional abuse, etc. which can also act as precursors to the onset of personality disorders like antisocial personality disorder and borderline personality disorder (Linehan, 1993). Additionally, once in such a maladaptive living situation, opportunities for education and non-criminal careers become scarcer. It is difficult for those who have antisocial tendencies to have high education benchmarks or to remain financially stable compared to those not living in poverty (Black, 1999). Thus, the cycle of falling into lives of crime and resorting to maladaptive and potentially evil behaviors can continue for those individuals already possessing antisocial predispositions, seeing as how considerably difficult it can be for anyone (regardless of antisocial tendencies) to rise out of an economically disadvantaged and/or emotionally maladaptive environment.

Evil as Human Nature

Freud (1930) points out how civilization, itself, can result in a person becoming unhappy by causing that individual to repress their natural aggressive tendencies. Freud (1930) states that “if civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on man’s sexuality but on his aggressivity, we can understand better why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization” (p. 62). Freud implies humans have both sexual and aggressive urges that are not openly able to be expressed due to the structures of society. This, in turn, suggests that all human beings are capable of acting upon this innate aggression or evil, even though some choose to be unhappy by denying these aggressions in order to appease society. The idea that there is evil within all of us is not a concept that is solely supported by Freud. Shaw (2018) agrees with Freud’s idea of the potential for evil being in all people by expressing that:

Although there may be differences between the brains of those who do ‘bad’ things and those who don’t, acknowledging the similarities between us can be far more striking than aggressively highlighting the differences. It seems that for all of us, our brains make us capable of great harm. (p. 22)

This is to say that, while there may be some differences between what society considers evil people and non-evil people, we are all quite similar to one another in the sense that we are all capable of doing bad things. Just because a nominally normal person has not done something that can be considered evil doesn’t mean that they won’t, and it certainly doesn’t mean that they are incapable of doing so. Peters (2008) adds:

No matter what we do, human beings will retain the capacity for violence. This capacity is a part of our evolutionary heritage. But so are capacities for empathy and for love. It is these latter capacities that encourage us to try to do something to control the anger that harms ourselves and others. (p. 697)

All humans have the capacity to commit evil acts; it is simply in our nature. However, there are other emotions that attempt to work against our natural aggressive urges in order to balance us out.

Sometimes these feelings of empathy and love win out; sometimes aggression and violence do. Either way, all human beings are capable of being both good and evil—all the time.

Discussion

The complex and multifaceted nature of evil makes understanding evil and what causes it an elaborate task. Future research directions regarding this topic should evaluate evil within the context of a biopsychosocial lens (which involves the interaction between a person's neurobiology, personality, and social circumstances) in order to more clearly define and explain the relationship that these various aspects of psychology have with one another, as well as their relationship to the comprehensive understanding of the psychology of evil. Furthermore, additional components of evil could also be explored beyond the scope of biology, personality, and social situations, as there may be more factors that also play a significant role in the conception of evil. Developing a clearer and more in-depth understanding of what constitutes evil has the potential to provide additional insights and knowledge about brain chemistry, psychological disorders, personality theory, social psychology, and the overall nature of evil in the future.

Conclusion

The concept of evil is not a simple one. There are numerous explanations that can be offered to account for why people act in evil ways, and within these explanations, there is not one that is not correlated with the next. A person's neurobiology plays a role in a person participating in evil acts, but so does their personality. More than that, there are specific social situations that can trigger particular aspects of an individual's neurobiology or can bring out certain personality traits. All of these explanations are intertwined and interact with one another, and all of them play a part in making up the overall complex nature of evil—an evil which resides within each one of us.

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