

Do We Know What Makes People Evil?  
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What could make a nice Middle-Class Norwegian murder 74 people because he hated his government? Or make an American Baptist college student convert to Islam and murder soldiers at an Arkansas recruitment center? Or a 19-year-old slaughter innocents at a Garlic Festival? Does human evil come from our genes (nature) or from our upbringing (nurture)? The debate is unresolved.

Genetic advocates can show that certain things in brain chemistry can create impulsiveness, hot temper, and sometimes inability to empathize with the pains of others. There are even a very few born with no pain sensations themselves, thereby making them excellent torturers. They have no understanding of how pain feels. And, of course, there are some born with inadequate or damaged mental capability to become responsible adult citizens.

Those who believe that no matter what the genetic makeup, the most important determinant of human character is child rearing-especially from birth to about five. Christianity weighs in on the nurture idea in the belief that people who have done bad things can be remorseful and that they can change their behavior and reform themselves. They don't see evil as hard-wired. Religion is posited on the notion that we choose between good and evil---the ancient belief in "free will"---a notion that prevails in Western law as well. Brain science today is questioning this assumption.

All of us who have had children know that babies do not come into the world as blank slates. But we also know that none of them are born evil either. Some are more nervous, some placid; some defiant, and some cooperative. Some love being cuddled and others do not. But with careful breeding, we hope, we can usually modify genetic inclinations with behavioral training---the ultimate job of parents---and their civilization.

Most human beings who live in a law-and-order civilization usually behave decently. But they can become evil when the civilization undergoes the stresses of war or poisonous ideology. In this case, because of bad circumstances, a criminal is created who might never have been one.

Some third-generation descendants of Nazi Germany's worst monsters are now finding out about their grandparents---and their responses depend upon their belief in nature vs. nurture. Most seem to realize that they are not like their grandfathers, nor are their children. But one, Hermann Goering's granddaughter Bettina, had herself sterilized at 30 because she feared bringing another monster into the world.

Would the worst Nazis have ever done the things they did had they lived anywhere other than Germany when political collapse converged with a hideous ideology and medieval fantasy of a super race? I suspect not.

Would Osama bin Laden have become the mass murderer and ideologue that he became had he not been reared and indoctrinated by a poisonous form of Islam? And even with that indoctrination, would he have become the Pied Piper that he became without the Cold War struggle between the US and USSR? Without our ill-conceived war in Afghanistan, believing the Soviets were worse than the "holy warriors," we created the conditions in which an otherwise irrelevant religious fanatic with money became a world terror leader.

However, even when conditions are right, evil is still a voluntary choice---sometimes beginning as ambition to get ahead---and each evil act makes the next one easier. Shakespeare showed us how this works in his play Macbeth, in which a decent military officer succumbs to a temptation that transforms him from a loyal soldier into a monster with a deadened conscience. Choice plays a role here, but so does chance. Chance provides opportunities that we must either resist or accept, risking our everlasting descent into evil.

We can watch evil acts growing worse with practice. Evil is triumphant in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, when Islamist suicide bombers deliberately attack hospitals and funerals for those they just murdered. Where is public outcry? Are they growing too used to these horrors to be indignant?

Society and genetics play powerful roles, but we still make choices. Nature and nurture are not separate.

673 words

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