

Good and Evil Debate  
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Good and Evil are biblical terms that make the secular among us uncomfortable. Most human behavior lies somewhere in the spectrum between absolute good and absolute evil. There are exceptions, of course, people who are "wired" differently. There are a very few who cannot feel physical pain, which makes it impossible for them to imagine what pain is. (Such people make perfect torturers, if given the opportunity and are not taught differently.)

There are others wired on the Downs Syndrome who are trusting, affectionate, and kind. Those who have it need and receive loving support.

Where good and evil are most debated is in criminal law. Human societies have wrestled with attempts to encourage behavior that benefits the community and discourage or punish actions that create pain and disorder. We continue to wrestle.

Warfare is a most common human condition in which good and evil struggle. As civilizations have emerged from anarchy and savagery, we have tried to eliminate war (we have failed to do so) or at least surround war with norms of restraint (we fail here also). The only way to punish violators of these norms is to go to war and defeat them, as we did in World War II.

The combatants began with one side violating these mitigating norms, compelling the other side to war against them. The Nazis and Japanese had reverted to the oldest bad human behavior: doing whatever it took to win quickly. The allies (western democracies) tried to observe the norms, but by the end of the conflict, they were doing what the enemy had done (bombing civilian cities).

But in winning, they heeded their "better angels" and were not as punitive as the enemy would have been. They devised new rules to be followed in warfare, trying to enforce them with an International Court of Justice. The Nuremberg Trials were the only time so far that punishments were meted out to the worst of the worst, the Nazi and Japanese monsters who tortured and murdered millions.

Civilization did not end warfare after World War II. There were numerous wars of independence from colonial power, wars in which larger countries with mixed populations fell apart in savage civil wars (Yugoslavia and India), and aggressors who occupied neighboring countries because they could (the USSR). Such aggression violated the norms of the post-war tribunals (UN), but there was no mechanism to punish this behavior without risking nuclear war. The Russians got away with it until it collapsed from its internal failures.

The values of civilized behavior are as yet voluntary. They cannot be enforced by law because there is no global law and organized enforcement (as we did when Iraq invaded Kuwait) depends upon our leadership. The Security Council in the UN has given veto power to five member states: the US, Russia, France, China, and the UK. This thwarts united action.

As a historian, I have never seen a cause for war in which the aggressors were totally evil. There were arms races and both sides feared the others. However, once at war, the Nazis and Japanese violated all global norms of warfare. They waged no-holds-barred violence against civilians and were punished after their defeat.

Yet the Russians were among the winners, but they aggressively occupied and absorbed most of Eastern Europe. Nuclear weapons forced a standoff that ended only when the USSR collapsed.

Out of the collapsed Soviet Empire came a totally evil player, Vladimir Putin. Without provocation, he created a vicious war against Chechnya, a Russian colony that wanted independence. He invaded Georgia, a former colony that was then independent, and annexed a chunk of it. He invaded neighboring Ukraine and annexed the Crimea. He has invaded Ukraine again, committing multiple war crimes. However, Ukraine has surprised the world with a leader whose good compares with Putin's evil.

The Security Council cannot arrest Putin; Russia has veto power. The US and EU cannot go directly into war either in fear of a nuclear response. We will see Putin punished only when his own people decide to hand him over or take him out. Don't count this out.

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