

On Good and Evil

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It is out of fashion today to talk about evil. Our culture has drunk so deeply at the well of relativism that absolute pronouncements about good or evil seem out of date or even sinister, a code for theocracy or imperialism. The logic of this position means that you should never judge anyone else's actions, especially those of oppressed people outside of mainstream Western culture. One of my colleagues at the University even told me after 9-11 that we couldn't call those attacks evil because al-Qaeda had what they thought were good reasons for what they did.

On the surface, it would appear that the problem is defining Evil. From a Christian perspective, this may be the wrong question, however. It is just as important—and arguably far more important—to define the Good and its relationship to God.

This is a very old problem in philosophy. Plato, for example, has Socrates pose a question to Euthyphro: is a pious act loved by the gods because it is pious? Or is it pious because it is loved by the gods? In other words, what makes something pious? Is piety a quality that is independent of the gods that they just recognize, or is it whatever the gods arbitrarily decide it is?

In introductory philosophy of religion classes, essentially the same problem comes up, but in a different form: does God command things because they are good, or are the things that God commands good simply because He says they are? Is goodness a category independent of God that His commands measure up to, or is goodness simply whatever God says it is, so that God have dropped the “nots” out of the Ten Commandments if He had chosen to?

From a biblical perspective, the answer is neither. Historical Christianity teaches that God Himself is good, which means that goodness is defined in terms of His character. It is neither arbitrary nor a standard outside of Himself to which His commandments align. Rather, goodness is that which conforms to His character.

Understanding goodness is essential to understanding Evil, according to a very important strand of Christian thought brought over by St. Augustine of Hippo (among others) from the Greek Neo-Platonic philosophers. Augustine argued for an idea known as the privative nature of evil. This means that evil is privation—a lack of something—rather than an entity itself. Just as darkness is the absence of light, so Evil is the absence of Good. It is literally no thing; it is a vacuum, the void, nothingness.

This idea has a number of important implications for ethics. First, to understand what is good, we need to understand the character of God; anything that does not conform to that is evil. For example, God described His character to Moses in Ex. 34:6-7: “The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love to thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation.’”

This means, among other things:

- Because God is merciful, not showing mercy is evil. It's not just a matter of being "merciless" or cruel; simply withholding mercy is a negation of God's character and thus is evil.
- Because God is gracious, that is, He extends unmerited favor to others, failing to be gracious to others—especially those who do not deserve it—is evil.
- Because God is slow to anger, being short tempered and impatient is evil.
- Because God is full of steadfast love (Hebrew: *hesed*, meaning roughly compassion and selfless giving) and faithfulness, lack of compassion, selfishness, and infidelity are evil. This includes internal attitudes like greed, and actions like withholding help from those in need, adultery, treachery, betrayal, and refusing to live up to our commitments.
- Because God forgives all kinds of sins, being unforgiving is evil; in fact, in the Lord's Prayer, we pray that God would forgive us in the same way we forgive others. This amounts to praying God's judgment on ourselves if we are unforgiving or hold grudges.
- Because God judges the guilty, injustice, whether acquitting the guilty or condemning the innocent, is evil. This means that we cannot excuse people who commit evil acts (including ourselves, our group, our party, etc.) by denying that they are responsible for their own behavior.

Similarly, we can look at other characteristics of God and negate them to find a definition of evil: God is the creator, so wanton destruction, defacing, and desecration of property or of nature is evil; God is the source and sustainer of life, so taking life or failing to nurture and sustain life is evil; God is true, so lying, hypocrisy, deception, spin, intentionally misleading people, concealing information from people so they do what we want them to, fraud, gossip and slander are evil; and so on.

Another ethical implication of the privative nature of evil has to do with motives: no one does anything simply to do evil. The reason is simple: evil is no thing, a void, and so there is nothing there to be a motive for action. Instead, people always act in pursuit of a good, though it may be a twisted idea of the good or it may be pursued using wrong methods.

This is more difficult for most people to accept, but consider: a murderer may hunt down and kill someone out of vengeance for a perceived wrong; the motive is thus to obtain justice, a good, even though the idea of justice may be perverted and the method wrong. A thief steals because s/he wants some of the goods of this world—not a bad thing in itself, just pursued in the wrong way. Drug users and alcoholics often are trying to cover over pain in their lives.

Even Adolph Hitler was motivated by anger at the injustice of the Treaty of Versailles, fueled by patriotism and a desire to promote the interests of his people. These are not evil in themselves, but they were twisted by his anti-Semitism and racism, and thus produced truly horrific evil.

This is the answer to relativists and to my colleague who refused to label the 9-11 perpetrators as evil because they had a reason for what they did: so did Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and every serial killer, torturer, and rapist in history. It isn't enough that you are pursuing something you see as a positive end—everyone does that all the time, because there is nothing in evil to pursue. Rather, it is the perversion of the good that produces evil.

If we are going to act ethically, to lead a good life here and to prepare ourselves for eternity, we need to get to know God better and to deepen our understanding of His character and His nature. Only then will we be able to cut through the noise of our culture to discern good and evil and to grow in reflecting the goodness of God into our sad, hurting world.

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