

Opinion Editorial

By Michael Shermer

Topic: The Biological and Psychological Origins and Nature of Morality

As U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair scramble to revise their justifications for going to war against Iraq (we all knew that WMDs were only one component of the equation, right?), and as a former U.S. Secretary of Defense squints through the fog of war and wonders how history will judge our moral actions today, we would do well to reflect on the deeper meaning of good and evil.

I once had the opportunity to ask Thomas Keneally, author of *Schindler's List*, what he thought was the difference between Oskar Schindler, rescuer of Jews and hero of his story, and Amon Goeth, the Nazi commandant of the Plaszow concentration camp. His answer was revealing. Not much, he said. Had there been no war, Schindler and Goeth might have been drinking buddies and business partners, morally obtuse, perhaps, but relatively harmless. What a difference a war makes, and the moral choices that lead to good and evil.

Ever since 9/11, the discussion of good and evil has migrated out of departments of philosophy and theology and into our social and political discourse. Bush and Blair generously sprinkle their public orations with the terms, describing Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein as the embodiment of pure evil. I understand the political rhetoric, but when millions of people around the world celebrate 9/11 as a triumphant victory over what they perceive to be an evil America, we need to move beyond politics to arrive at a deeper understanding of good and evil.

The myth of good and evil is grounded in Christian theology and the belief that such forces exist independently of their carriers, either directing the course of history toward benevolent or nefarious ends, or within individuals driving them to perform good acts or evil deeds. As adjectival modifiers, good and evil well describe many acts and people. But as nouns, they imply autonomous existence, as in evil forces. In a scientific worldview, however, there is no such thing as good and evil as supernatural forces operating outside the realm of the known laws of nature and human behavior. Good and evil are human constructs. A shift between two tectonic plates that causes the earth to make a sudden movement is not inherently evil. It is the effects of the earthquake that we judge to be evil. Likewise, bacterial diseases are not intrinsically evil. By causing humans to sneeze, cough, vomit, and have diarrhea, bacteria are simply doing what evolution designed them to do to survive and propagate. As their human hosts, we may label the effects of a disease as evil, but the disease itself has no moral existence.

Humans, however, do have a moral existence. We evolved to be moral animals, but by no means always moral. Individuals in our evolutionary ancestral environment needed to be both cooperative and competitive, for example, depending on the context. Cooperation leads to more successful hunts, food sharing, and group protection from predators and enemies. Competition leads to more resources for oneself and family, and protection from other competitive individuals who are less inclined to cooperate, especially those from other groups. Social psychologists have well demonstrated how moral behavior is tractable, and that there is a range of potential for the expression of moral or immoral

behavior. Which direction any one of us takes in any given situation depends on a complex array of variables. A number of historical contingencies drove Oscar Schindler to bifurcate down a morally different path from Amon Goeth, even though he could just as easily have gone the other way. From there the cascading consequences of each decision took each of them down their alternately chosen tracks; the moral road not taken makes all the difference.

An obfuscating aspect of the myth is an asymmetry that exists in our moral observations about human nature. In our assessment of what people are really like we have a tendency to focus on evil acts and ignore the fact that most of the time, most people are gracious, considerate, and benevolent. For every act of violence or deception that appears on the nightly news, there are 10,000 acts of kindness that go publicly unnoticed. In fact, violence and deception make the news precisely because they are out of the ordinary. The purpose of this exercise in ethical debunking is to shift the focus from good and evil as metaphysical Platonic essences to quantifiable human behaviors that can be scientifically studied, causally understood, and ultimately modified. If pure evil exists, how can we hold people morally culpable? The deepest problem with the myth of good and evil is that it implies that if only we could rid the world of the evil, then good would triumph. As one who would know from his experience with the gulags of the Soviet Union (surely a den of evil if ever there were one), Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn explained why the myth is so perilous:

“If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

Eliminating the Osama bin Ladens and Saddam Husseins of the world will not put an end to evil, but debunking the myth and taking a more scientific approach to understanding good and evil will start us down the path of immoral extrication and moral enlightenment.

Michael Shermer is the Publisher of Skeptic magazine, a monthly columnist for Scientific American, and the author of the just released book, *The Science of Good and Evil* (Henry Holt/Times Books).