

## Psychiatry and the Concept of Evil

*Sick in heart or sick in mind?*

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“A devil, a born devil, on whose nature  
Nurture can never stick; on whom my pains,  
Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost . . .”  
Shakespeare: *The Tempest*,  
Act IV, Scene 1 (1.198)

The Editor's initiative in seeking this Editorial was inspired no doubt by a number of recent cases and events in which the behaviour of those concerned seems to have defied rational explanation, and the power of 'evil' has been invoked in order to provide one. Perhaps the most compelling was that of the trial for murder of two ten-year-old boys for the murder of the infant James Bulger.

In brief, these two small boys abducted their victim from a shopping precinct (where he had for a very few crucial moments evaded the vigilant eye of his mother), taken him some two or three miles to a lonely spot near a railway, killed him with a horrifying degree of ferocity, and then placed his body on a railway line. To add to the horror of the event, it transpired at the trial at Preston Crown Court that a number of adults may have seen the two boys with the unhappy and allegedly struggling infant, but had not felt it appropriate to intervene.

Fortunately, the killing of small children by other comparatively small children is a rare event in the UK, but when it does occur it seems to defy explanation and arouse much anxiety. At the time of the trial and for some time afterwards there were utterances from senior and for the most part well respected commentators which did not always serve to enlighten. For example, senior politicians appeared to cast the established church in the role of scapegoat: it had failed to provide moral guidance. Mental health professionals endeavoured to explain the two boys' behaviour in terms of family background and psychopathology coupled with possible neurological impairment. The police, on the other hand, "keeping for the most part a very professional distance, invoked the concept of evil" (Prins, 1993a, p. 188). A statement imputed to the trial judge suggested that he thought the viewing of 'video-nasties' might have been a cause – a topic of much current interest and debate. Much less attention was devoted at the trial to determining to what extent such small children could distinguish between right and wrong (ethical awareness).

### Children a special case?

The Bulger case shows that however difficult it is to understand the evil behaviour of adults, it is much more difficult to acknowledge and understand it in small children. The defences we build against the recognition of adult atrocity upon adult seem to fall apart in cases involving children as assailants and we are faced with a reality too fearful to contemplate. But surely the capacity for acts of cruelty and violence in quite small children is always latent, though, for the most part, happily remains beneath the surface of conscious activity.

Child psychoanalysts inform us (particularly if they are of the Kleinian school) that even quite small infants are capable of murderous (evil) feelings. The late Donald Winnicott spent much of his professional life trying to elucidate and explain the pathways of the civilising process in infancy and childhood. In addition, any experienced infant teacher can describe some of the evil deeds that occur in a school playground unless vigilance is maintained.

It is difficult for us to realise that children may not be as 'innocent' as we like to think. Consider, for example, the recent furore when a health educationalist tried to answer questions posed by primary school children about such practices as oral sex (as reported in *The Independent*, 23 March 1994, pp. 1 and 3). It may be that the somewhat unedifying rush to offer explanation following the conviction of the two young killers of James Bulger can be provided in part by this need to put out of our minds the possibility of the worst evils of adult behaviour being perpetrated by those we have so comfortably assumed to be 'innocents'.

### Adult evil deeds

Even the evil deeds perpetrated by adults defy imagination and explanation. One recalls the comment of the bewildered and distressed Governor of Strangeways Prison after the riots in that institution that 'evil' forces must have been at work (*The Independent*, 9 May 1990, p. 1).

More recently, events (as yet untried and untested in a court of law) in Gloucester have led news commentators to also espouse the notion of evil in somewhat global terms. Maxwell, writing in *The*

*Independent*, stated that “Gloucester surely needs to examine how it became host to such unrestrained evil” (11 March 1994, p. 11). To be fair, the focus of her piece was concerned with the manner in which citizens could just disappear from view in England in the late 20th century. But, if the good citizens of Gloucester were set the task of answering her question, we might well ponder how they would set about it and who they would call upon to assist them – psychiatrists, theologians, sociologists, philosophers, mystics? Campbell, writing slightly later in the same newspaper, suggests that we need people like Myra Hindley “in exile because she sanctions the murderousness in our own heads” (23 March 1994, p. 12). In the same article she describes how the mother of one of Brady and Hindley’s victims has resorted to casting the latter in the role of a witch, and is engaged in constructing a doll image and sticking it with pins. And, writing about the existence, or otherwise, of satanic child sexual abuse, Brian Appleyard makes a similar point, that “The further we remove the evil from us, the more we can say evil is out there” (*The Independent*, 27 April 1994, p. 19).

It is not difficult to call to mind the evil behaviour of other persons who have become notorious in the recent annals of crime – Sutcliffe, Nilsen, Dahmer, Chikatilo, Allitt, and much more recently Robert Black, to name but a few. Does their evil lie within them, or are they ‘contaminated’ by some force external to themselves?

#### The nature of evil

The nature of evil has preoccupied, and continues to preoccupy, philosophers, theologians and others. Predominant concern seems to centre around whether evil exists as a separate force – ‘out there’ – or whether it can only exist, as George Gifford suggested in the 16th century, “in the hearts of men” (*A Dialogue on Witches and Witchcraft*). Its existence as a malign force is best illustrated in the phenomenon of demonic possession (see Sargant, 1973; Prins, 1990). Midgley, a moral philosopher, states that “the notion of evil as a possible force, totally separate from good has been attractive because it looks realistic,” (Midgley, 1985, p. 45).<sup>1</sup> However, Peck would not altogether agree with such a conceptualisation. For him, “Human evil is too

important for a one-sided understanding . . . and it is too large a reality to be grasped within a single frame of reference” (Peck, 1988, p. 39). He considers that “evil . . . is that force residing either inside or outside of human beings that seeks to kill life and liveliness” (p. 43). In this quote he seems to be hedging his bets concerning the intrinsic or extrinsic nature of evil. In a slightly later work he described evil in somewhat different terms, “as the exercise of political power – that is, the imposition of one’s will upon others by overt or covert coercion” (Peck, 1989, p. 279). He proposes three models of evil:

- (a) non-dualistic – as exemplified in Hinduism and Buddhism – evil as the other side of the coin
- (b) evil as distinct from good, but also of God’s making
- (c) diabolic dualism, evil not created by God, but as a power beyond His control (Peck, 1988).

In whatever fashion we *conceptualise* evil, the pages of history are replete with examples of evil *actions* taken in the ‘best interests’ of others; those believed to be ‘different’, ‘outcasts’, ‘unbelievers’ (infidels), ‘witches’, or inferior in some way (e.g. Jews, homosexuals, or the mentally impaired).

Perhaps the most evil aspect of all such activities is the manner in which rational justification has been sought for such behaviour. For the purpose of this editorial, evil is being equated somewhat arbitrarily with serious criminal wrong-doing, notably that involving the infliction of persistent, gratuitous personal violence, and consideration is now given to what contribution psychiatry can make, if any, to its assessment and management.

#### The assessment of evil

One of British psychiatry’s founding fathers – Henry Maudsley – was optimistic in his espousal of psychiatry’s claims to intervene in the broader affairs of men and women.

“Medical science of the future will have a great deal to say . . . respecting the highest concerns of man’s nature and the conduct of his life [and] . . . will enter a domain which has hitherto been given up exclusively to the moral philosopher and the preacher.” (*Introductory Lecture to Medical Students*, quoted in Wootton, 1980, p. 525)

One wonders what response Maudsley would have made to Peck’s statement that

“Evil is a moral judgment. I am proposing that it can also be a scientific judgment. But making this judgment scientifically will not remove it from the moral sphere

1. Midgley offers a useful review of the topic from a moral philosopher’s perspective. Peck (1988, 1989), combining the roles of pastor and psychiatrist, offers guidance at a more practical level. The theological perspective provided by Hick (1985) is highly regarded. Peterson (1992) has brought together a very interesting collection of papers, with contributions from theology, philosophy, and literature. All five books afford useful guidance for those wishing to pursue the subject further.

. . . whether we call a man evil on the basis of personal opinion or on the basis of a standardised psychological test, we are passing a moral judgment on him either way." (Peck, 1988, p. 255)

Maybe they would both agree that psychiatrists can help to make the kind of distinctions suggested by Aristotle between "people of weak will, who do wrong against their real wishes and intentions, and vicious people, who do wrong contentedly and with conviction" (quoted by Midgley, 1985, p. 59).

#### A modest contribution

Midgley (1985, p. 60) suggests that there is a widespread belief "that the devoted work of doctors (psychiatrists), can, given time and resources, deal with every evil". Such a view is not espoused by the majority of psychiatrists, although they may find themselves drawn into situations (e.g. in the criminal, and indeed, the civil courts) where this does seem to be an expectation. Perhaps, if and when they are drawn into such encounters, they should heed the note of caution sounded by Fromm in his classic study of human evil and destructiveness. Writing of the evils perpetrated by Hitler, he states

"clinical analysis must not be used to obscure the *moral* problem of evil . . . just as there are evil and benign 'sane' men, there are evil madmen and benign madmen. Evilness must be seen for what it is, and moral judgment is not suspended by clinical diagnosis." (Fromm, 1977, p. 573)

He also goes on to assert a need for compassionate understanding: "As long as one believes that the evil man wears horns, one will not discover an evil man" (p. 573). Perhaps there are lessons to be drawn from such a statement in relation to the ambivalence of mental health and allied professionals concerning their dealings with the psychopathically disordered (Prins, 1993*b*). This need for objective and yet compassionate understanding (dispassionate compassion) is reiterated by Peck, who suggests "that while (evil) people are still to be feared they are also to be pitied . . . they are the most frightened of human beings" (Peck, 1988, p. 67).

Although psychiatrists (or 'alienists', as they were then called) do not begin to feature prominently in the workings of the criminal courts until the 19th century, since that time the pages of forensic psychiatric history are replete with accounts of unedifying encounters between lawyers, judges, and psychiatrists. In recent times the cases of Sutcliffe in the UK and Hinckley in the USA are likely to be the

best remembered. Gunn, in response to a paper by Fenwick (1993) in the *BJP*, suggests that psychiatrists should resist the implication

"that matters of responsibility are matters for the psychiatrist . . . Questions of responsibility, culpability and imputability (including mitigation) are matters for courts, lawyers and juries. They are moral and philosophical matters. They have nothing to do with science and medicine." (Gunn, 1994, p. 416).

Gunn sees the doctor's role in these matters as limited to providing the courts with adequate professional information upon which to base their moral judgements. In an earlier contribution, he suggested that part of the role confusion arises because

"Semantic confusion exists about wickedness and insanity which are sometimes thought to be mutually exclusive and sometimes synonymous . . . The faulty reasoning may also be along these lines: If terrible deeds are carried out they are clearly 'bad', or 'wicked' or 'evil'. Yet, if they are bad they cannot be mad; if the deeds are not mad they cannot originate from mental disorder." (Gunn, 1991, p. 23; cf. Fromm, 1977).

The essence of Gunn's sensible caution was encapsulated some 20 years earlier in the typically trenchant comments of a neurologist – the late Professor Henry Miller – when he stated that

"a psychiatrist is a person who treats 'disease with mental symptoms', not one who appears to transform the normally abrasive relations between men into a tedium of stultifying harmony." (Miller, 1970, pp. 526–527).

#### Conclusion – some positive functions for psychiatry

One of the most useful functions for psychiatry may be to acknowledge with a little more rigour the problems involved in being required to make 'moral' as distinct from 'medical' (psychiatric) judgements. The collusive activity (the term is not used in any pejorative sense) that takes place in courts from time to time in order to help sentencers make difficult decisions needs a degree of resistance that is sometimes hard to achieve. This may be seen as a negative function; are there some that are more positive?

Child psychiatrists can make a contribution to our understanding of evil in small children by emphasising the vagaries of the developmental process and that childhood innocence is not quite as manifest as we like to think (see also Canter,

1994). Adult psychiatrists can alert us to the fact that, in assessing evil, some people should be held responsible for their 'evil' actions, even though mental disorder may be present. Writing on the effects of news broadcasting, the psychologist Rowe suggested that

"often the interpretations of the news we are given are presented to us as good news when in fact, what we are being given are lies and half-truths designed to gratify one of our basest needs. This is the need to avoid responsibility for what we do. We don't want to accept the fact that our actions have consequences . . . we want to say it's not our fault. It's the fault of our stars or our genes." (Rowe, 1994, p. 160; see also Gale, 1994)

In those difficult cases that are at the 'boundaries' of psychiatry, such as demonic possession, the psychiatrist may offer considerable help with differential diagnosis – perhaps as a member of a multidisciplinary team which includes clergy and lay members. Sims reminds us that conventional psychiatric and other disorders may well exist alongside demonic phenomena. He suggests that

"A Satanist who contracts pneumonia following the celebration of a wintry Sabbath requires antibiotics; the symptoms of psychotic depression will demand appropriate treatment with antidepressant drugs or electroconvulsive therapy." (Sims, 1986, pp. 179–180)

If evil in its various manifestations is inevitable, perhaps psychiatrists can help, if not to eradicate it, then to engage in damage limitation exercises through their assessment and diagnostic skills, and, where appropriate, through treatment/management. They should, however, be extremely cautious about becoming involved in dubious and unprofessional psychiatric activity at the behest of the state – as for example in prescribing antipsychotic medication to render prisoners fit for execution; a firm stance here is surely required (see Stone, 1994). The contribution to damage limitation is particularly important in relation to attempts to deal with the psychopathically disordered, and a balanced, positive perspective from psychiatry would be most welcome here.

Maybe psychiatrists can help all of those who work in the mad/bad divide to understand more about our false constructs and the need to cast out and disown our own personal devils. Recourse to literature may also assist us in the process of gaining empathic understanding of evil deeds and evil persons. Golding's *Lord of the Flies* provides insight into

murderous deeds committed by 'innocents', and the manner in which evil is projected away from ourselves and located elsewhere is graphically illustrated in such works as Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (see Prins, 1992).

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