

The Mystery of Evil

September 27, 2009

Reading *The Science of Good and Evil*, M. Shermer

The myth of pure evil is the belief that evil exists separately from individuals, or that evil exists within people as something like what we traditionally think of as an evil ‘force’, driving them to perform evil acts. If pure evil exists, however, then how can we hold people morally culpable for their actions? Evil is intimately linked to the problem of free will and determinism: if we do not have complete free will in our actions, how can we be held morally accountable? Further (and even more distressing), if evil does exist, then will we always be plagued by violence, war, genocide, crime, rape and other evils?

Reading *Ambiguity*, Don Crosby

Events of nature are evil, in my view, when they cause suffering, deprivation, or death to sentient beings. They are intrinsically bad from the perspectives of these beings, no matter how they may be seen from other perspectives. And it is not just effects of major natural disasters that we are entitled to brand as evil. Each victim of starvation, thirst, freezing, drowning, burning, predation, and the like experiences a kind of evil, no matter how routine or natural in a larger perspective those experiences are said to be. When experienced by human beings, effects of the destructive forces of nature are regarded as something undeniably painful, horrible, regrettable --- something rightfully termed evil because of the great harm of these effects upon themselves, upon those whom they love, or upon other humans. They also qualify as evil in environmentally sensitive human perspective when they wreak havoc on ecosystems and nonhuman life forms.

A Story for the Day Robin Gray

A meeting of the Council on Evil had been convened.

Tiamat, Suppressor of Chaos, Goddess of Babylon, She Who Begat The First Beings, took her rightful place at the head of the table. Scaly creatures like dragons or porpoises gone awry dripped and oozed from her loins. Bits of flesh clung to her. She who gave life was in the midst of the eternal war with her creatures, and a thirst for wholesale destruction played in the shadows of her eyes.

Next to enter was Oya, she who traveled from the African continent on the strength of her howling winds. Tiamat, she who calmed the surface of the vast oceans, greeted this goddess of the Niger River with the indulgence of a mother. Oya, shook the room with a cyclone, threatened a hurricane, and settled into an annoyed silence.

Then, Kali, dark and fearsome, the Creator and Destroyer sacred to Hindus, dripping with the blood of her victims fairly danced into place. The three goddesses exchanged exultant looks. The necklace of skulls Kali wore brought them each a separate joy.

Satan arrived, followed closely by the Devil, and somewhere between them a figure that might be called Lucifer could be identified. This trinity trailed wretchedness and misery with them. That put the Devil in a jolly mood, and he approached the goddesses with a smile. “Say, did you hear the one about the Christians who were confronted by Jesus? Whole pack of ‘em out in a field with a fence down the middle. Jesus tells them it’s time to choose – go to heaven with him, or to hell with Satan. He calls everybody over to one side of the fence, leaving Satan on the other side. Well, when they get ready to leave one man is sitting on the fence. Jesus (you know how he is) goes back and asks the man what he’s doing. The fellow answers, “I haven’t made up my mind, I’m going to stay here on the fence.” So, Satan turns to his buddies, smiles, and says, “I own the fence.”

Hurricane force winds, ocean storms, and the cries of the dying filled the room. The goddesses were not amused by devilish stories. A sudden stillness descended in the instant Ahura Mazda strode through the doorway. Wasting no time, the god of the Zoroastrians, intoned, “The Council on Evil is in session.”

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The first order of business before them was settling a dispute between Tiamat and Oya. Each claimed to be more ancient than the other, and both claimed the right to inhabit the human psyche with fear. Outside the council room, waves rose and took hundreds of lives every time Tiamat grew angry, and falling trees smashed homes and hopes when Oya felt her ire growing. Frustrated, the council tabled any decision in the matter to a future meeting.

Satan next brought his grievance against the Devil. Properly speaking, Satan explained, his role derived from Jewish beliefs that Satan simply stood as an accuser, pointing out to God the sins and failings of human beings. He couldn't see why he should have to be associated the concept of a Devil (with horns and a tail, no less) who tricks people into evil deeds. Satan wanted a better 'branding' agreement, and separate and distinct definitions of Satan and the Devil to be more broadly disseminated on earth. In response, the very Devil threw out a can of 'deviled ham' bearing his likeness, a power tool named Red Devil, and a CD from a punk band with the same name. He pointed out that Satan would have passed into obscurity without his constant attention to the brand. The devil demanded an apology and three trillion dollars in damages.

Satan took a deep breath launched a lengthy verbal argument on his history and provenance. "Satan need not be perceived as a fallen angel," he said, pulling out the Qu'ran, "but perhaps more properly should be considered a 'jinn' as in the Islamic tradition."

Ahura Mazda shook his head, muttered something about how it was his role to consummate the final battle between good and evil, not decide between two evils...and promptly fell asleep.

Kali had stood silently through all the discussion, the fighting, the dying, the squabbling, and even the laughter. Lifting all four of her arms, she called the Council on Evil to attention. Holding out a sword and a severed head in two arms, she beckoned gently to the council with her other arms. Then she sang in the words of one of her devotees:

O Kali, my Mother full of Bliss! ...

In Thy delirious joy Thou dancest, clapping Thy hands together!

Thou art the Mover of all that move,

and we are but Thy helpless toys...

(Ramakrishna Paramhans)

A gentle breeze rose with Oya. Tiamat crooned to her creation. Satan dropped his books, the Devil reared back on cloven hooves, Lucifer grabbed his tail, and they all danced in a circle around the sleeping Ahura Mazda. When, at last, he awoke he joined the dance, and they are dancing still.

Reflections: The Mystery of Evil

Robin Gray

The dance of good and evil continues to circle through the evening news.

Susan Atkins died this week from brain cancer. Many years ago, she'd admitted to holding down the pregnant Sharon Tate and stabbing her 16 times as one horrific act in the Manson killing spree. She remembered telling Sharon Tate she had no mercy on her. Two years after the murders she was a born again Christian who worked from jail to help teens. As her illness progressed, in 2008, she sought 'compassionate release' from prison. It was denied.

It was announced this week that an AIDS vaccine, created from two failed products, has been shown to be effective in preventing HIV infection. "The trial was sponsored by the U.S. government and conducted by the Thai Ministry of Public Health. It cut the risk of infection by 31.2 percent among 16,402 volunteers over three years. The results were a triumph for supporters, who went ahead with the giant trial despite criticism it was unethical or a waste of money because the vaccine was widely

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expected to have no effect...The AIDS virus infects an estimated 33 million people globally and has killed 25 million since it was identified in the 1980s.”

Is AIDS evil? Does it have agency or volition? Is a government that supports research on 16,000 human beings evil, courageous, or short-sighted. Does evil emerge when a world power conducts research on 16,000 people who are citizens of another nation? Does evil become like a vapor when the trials yield life-saving vaccines?

Was Susan Atkins evil? Did whatever was good in her post-Manson life outweigh, or ameliorate, the evil she perpetrated on others? Was she a evil agent of her own design or the puppet of another? Did her continued incarceration in the face of a request for ‘compassionate release’ balance her own lack of mercy for Sharon Tate? The Tate family claimed she never offered remorse for her actions, would we account her as more or less evil in that event?

Evil is wrapped in the shrouds of mystery. Over century upon century, humans have asked themselves, “Does evil exist?” In Babylonia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and America the answer has often been ‘yes, evil exists’ and, religions have been called upon to describe the scope and powers of that evil. They’ve been asked to help humans surmount that evil, and to create a place in our minds where evil no longer exists, or at the very least it is transformed.

In some times and places, evil has been understood to be a part of the natural order, with creation and destruction held in check by a goddess or god. Tiamat and Kali are goddesses who create life and destroy it. Their powers are found to be greater than human, yet they stride a path in a very human realm protecting and slaying the very ones they protect. They personify the evils of the natural world, much in the way Don Crosby describes them: *When experienced by human beings, effects of the destructive forces of nature are regarded as something undeniably painful, horrible, regrettable --- something rightfully termed evil because of the great harm of these effects upon themselves, upon those whom they love, or upon other humans.*

Yet, there is balance. Creativity and Destruction in one powerful goddess or god. There is a certain pleasing symmetry in that world view. The destructive side of the equation can almost be lifted above the category of evil. Almost. We can’t escape the fact that the dance of destruction will bring an end to us all, and that ‘evil’ prospect will hang over us all our days.

Oya brings us an example of another development in the good/creation, evil/destruction equation. Her hurricanes and tornados blow, trees fall, lives are taken. In the calm, new trees sprout and the cycle of life begins again. Destruction with Oya is essential to re-creation. That takes the edge off of evil, gives it a good purpose beyond our pain and suffering. For some, this is enough of the mystery of evil for one lifetime.

In the Ancient Near East, Satan (the accuser) strode about in the human realm, calling Job to account for his easy faith wrapped around himself in easy times. Fat cattle. A righteous family. Food and comfort to spare. “Sic ‘em,” Satan said, and the God of the Israelites (ever the anthropomorphized being himself) took the challenge. Job held fast to his God. The evils of life did not unthroned his faith, and in that instance the accuser, Satan, had to be satisfied.

But human beings in general were not satisfied. They found themselves slipping down the rabbit hole of doubt. They envied the wealthy and despised the poor. They heard the prophets and followed them not.

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They had great intentions, a few opportunities to pursue the good, and terrible follow-through. Evil was abroad in the land, and somebody was to blame. Satan became a colorless figure, slipping in and out of human lives with the power to insert evil wherever good left an opening. Then, red and licked with flame, the Devil appeared ready to devour the spoils.

Mouths agape like the screamer Edvard Munch painted, the cry spills out of an evildoers mouth, "It's not my fault."

In the centuries long dialogue of religious seeking, the answer sometimes comes: "It may not be your fault, but, it is your responsibility."

Judaism calls believers to account in the days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In Judaism it is assumed that we are all capable of sinning against God and one another, and an annual ritual for clearing the slate is necessary and welcome. An observant Jew first makes accounting of sins against God, but, also sins against human beings. In both instances Jews offer a sincere apology, search their hearts for ways the sin can be avoided in the future, and asks forgiveness of the offended party. God, the Jew is told, forgives the truly repentant. Humans might be a little harder to convince. If forgiveness is not extended at a first request, the offender is enjoined to ask twice more, several days apart, and in different places to give the offended time to reconsider and to offer forgiveness. Of course, anyone who is asked to forgive, should offer the same latitude of forgiveness that one expects from God.

In these few words, I have only skimmed the surface of all the meaning that Yom Kippur carries for Jews as individuals and a people. But, even here it is possible to see that unless we follow the mystery of evil into our own lives we cannot unravel some of its thorniest knots.

You have not committed murders or heinous crimes. You did not design the vaccine study carried out in Thailand. Still, you can be called to account for what you have done. Perhaps you shouldn't wait for Yom Kippur, but, should take every opportunity to reflect on your transgressions and to seek forgiveness in the arena where offense was given. Yet, Yom Kippur is here and so are you, and there is no time like the present to see if there are places where a little evil, a little hard-heartedness has crept into your life. Perhaps this very evening will be a good time to take responsibility for an offense you have given in the last little while.

The pageant of life presented in religious myth and story invites us all to consider how the hem of the myth touches our own lives. A few moments with the Green Sanctuary Committee this morning can prompt us to remember that like the goddesses Kali and Tiamat we are nature creating and destroying itself. Sometimes we may be swept along in forces larger than ourselves, and sometimes we can see our role and responsibility with a clarity that leads to action. A moment's pause may allow us to remember with Oya that evil is sometimes tinged with good even though our orderly minds revolt against such confusing conclusions. With Satan can we become our own accuser, never shrinking from the evil that is part of our lives? Can we refuse to cast the blame for evil onto the devil, but, accept that portion which is truly our own? Can we wonder if maybe we live on both sides of the fence? Can we look to the great hopes of Ahura Mazda, knowing that we each want to be the one who brings the good to victory, and acknowledge that life is never that simple? Can we imagine that we may always be deciding between two evils; always faced with the mystery of evil, within and without.