

“Big Evil” and little evil – 6th October 2013

Is it black or is it white? Is it dark or is it light? Is it safe or is it dangerous? The earliest most primitive visual distinctions that a newborn can make are between dark and light and as those who study visual perception have shown, even where dark and light shade gently off into each other, we draw an imaginary line between them to make a clear contrast. Our brains need clear distinctions. Clear outlines make for clear perceptions and they make for the confidence that goes with definite outlines and unmistakable identities. As a species, we do not like shades of grey and blurred identities. So we prefer to divide our world into like and dislike, into good and evil – even when the divide is not clearly there.

St Paul writing (Romans 7)

“We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me; that is my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s Law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in the sinful nature I am a slave to the law of sin.”

Our modern clichéd thinking about ‘evil’ is mostly about genocide, paedophilia, human trafficking, drug-dealing and domestic violence,

perhaps with the occasional child neglecter, such as we recently saw with horror go through the law courts in England. Each of these is the focus of a campaign against it on its own but, unless we are President Reagan or Mrs Thatcher or some other right wing Republican or a left-over opponent of casino capitalism, we do not usually try to link them all up into some general 'Empire of Evil'. It is true that many of the same people who run human trafficking also run the drugs supply AND prostitution AND 'illegal' as opposed to 'legal' arms dealing along with the occasional side line in illegal gambling and the corruption and bribery of politicians and police, right to the very highest levels. There are small empires of evil but the old idea, prominent in earlier times in Scotland, that there is a Satan or 'Auld Nick' is mostly dead or the subject of pleasant jokes unless, of course, you happen to be a fundamentalist Christian or Islamic and believe that there are Satanic covens systematically abusing children – which there almost certainly are not.

The idea that there evil powers at work in our existence goes back a long way, probably earlier than even the Zoroastrians who believed that what they called 'the Great Lie', the power of darkness (black and white again?) fought the light daily across the skies. The idea of a struggle between good and evil persists across all the major cultures of the world and seems to be almost as innate in human nature as the tendency to divide the perceived world into distinct segments and classes, e.g. black and white. The idea of a personification of good and evil also has a vigorous persistence, cropping up from time to time in one culture after another and we can never be sure that the idea will not dominate again and people will persecuted and even put to death again for fear of the evil power of which they are supposed to be agents. The price of freedom truly is eternal vigilance.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that evil personified as the devil or as Satan is ingrained in Judaism and Islam as well as in Christianity. In a close parallel to the Hebrew myth, the Islamic story is that, in a fit of jealousy and pride, Satan refused to submit to Allah but is allowed to roam through men's and women's minds luring them into disobedience and rebellion against God's law until in the final days he is condemned for ever into the fiery lake of Hell. Picturesquely and vividly, Satan is known to the Muslims as the 'Whisperer' who plants unworthy thoughts in the ear.

Given the almost complete absence of evil as any kind of unified force in Hinduism, it may be a little surprising to find a unified evil force in the very Buddhism which sprang from Hinduism. But the Lord Buddha held daily conversations with Mara, the evil one, his tempter and distractor with visions of beautiful women. Even Hinduism is not exempt from dividing existence and imaginary beings into the good ones and the evil ones and from tales of combat and rivalry between opposing forces. So the tendency in human thinking to identify contrasts looks like an innate idea such as the European idealist philosophers thought was the source of all knowledge.

Satan in early Hebrew is more of a political figure than a tempter of the flesh, although he can be that too. He is the angel who rebels against the stable hegemony of God and one cannot help but see in this depiction the hand of a dominant priesthood always in favour of stability, law and order and conservatism. He is seen as the adversary or the accuser and it may well have been Satan that Jacob struggled with when he spent such a restless night at Bethel. But above all Satan is seen as one who overvalues himself in comparison with the real powers, as being possessed with an overweening self-confidence and a sense of

what today we might call entitlement, an expectation that he is more important than anyone else and should be flattered, served and deferred to. In later Hebrew literature Satan is the mischievous angel who points out to God when God praised his loyalty that of course Job would be loyal because God had given him everything a man could wish for. With God's permission, Satan then went on to take everything away piece by piece and test if Job would still remain loyal to God. By the time of the minor prophets such as Daniel, Zacharias, Ezekiel, etc. and leading up to the time of Jesus, Satan is fully established in the minds of the faithful as a powerful force to be feared in opposition to God.

In the Christian Gospels the belief in Satan as a powerful external force which might invade humans is fully alive and he is clearly a supernatural entity who is the personification of evil and the enemy of God and Mankind. In the synoptic gospels the temptation of Christ gives the devil a starring role (e.g. in Mathew 4, 1-11; Mark 1, 12-13; Luke 4, 1-13) and Jesus is accused by the Pharisees of using power from the devil to cast out demons. There is also the strange and fascinating episode of the cursing of the fig tree which seems to demonstrate a destructive power possessed by Jesus.

By the time of the apostles and in the first couple of centuries of the Common Era, the Hebrew ideas of Satan, external and invasive, had been fully absorbed into the predominantly Greek culture of the Eastern Mediterranean where he was better known as the devil.

Some of the Epistles of the New Testament feature the machinations of the devil and Paul certainly exorcised Satan in the name of Jesus Christ from one man so the Christ of the cosmos can be called in as the stronger power of good to defeat evil. But the main interest in spiritual

combat passes on, with St Paul, to the inner conflict between what he calls 'the flesh' and what he calls 'the spirit'. Evil becomes as much internal as external; or even more internal than external. Paul's use of the word 'spirit' seems to be much more as part of a Greek set of ideas derived from Plato and Aristotle rather than a continuation of the Hebrew tradition of evil in the rebellious angel but he also sees a power called Satan as working within the person as in Ephesians 2:2 – "Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the power that now worketh in the children of disobedience".

(I made no attempt here to deal with the psychology of St Paul)

Paul produces a well-known list of what he call 'the works of the flesh' in Galatians 5: 19-21: "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings and suchlike of which I tell you, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." No mistake there, then.

Although the idea of the flesh does take in worldly preoccupations with wealth, status and greed, as Christianity develops, it comes to mean more and more specifically sexuality. This became especially so under the influence of St Augustine who can be clearly identified today as a sex addict before he renounced it altogether and reacted into hating it. The parallels with Buddha and Mara are interesting. In the Christianity that follows and among the evangelicals today "the flesh" is variously defined by some of them as "the physical sensual nature"; "the evil principle within man's nature, the traitor within, who is in league with the attackers without. The flesh provides the tinder on which the devil's temptations can kindle" and "The flesh is a built-in law of failure, making

it impossible for the natural man to please or serve God. It is a compulsive inner force... which expresses itself in general and specific rebellion against God and His righteousness”.

The devil or Satan or the Beast or Leviathan, however you named the power, played a starring role again in the book of Revelation and the vision of the last days. My grandfather, who believed that every word in the Bible came from God, searched the books of Daniel and Revelation especially for predictions of how and when the world would end and the American Christian right, those of the Tea Party who from time to time threaten the shut-down of the American economy have carried the study of eschatology, the last days, into wanting to speed up the coming of the end of the world before they die and what they call the Rapture when all believers shall be justified and on the Day of Judgement the Unitarians will all be cast into Hell.

With the book of Revelation, Satan returns in strength to take a starring role in the last days before doom and the day of judgement. Here he is in Revelation 20: 7-9 – “When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth – Gog and Magog – to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them.”

In Medieval Europe the idea of the Devil developed apace. Augustine described man as a horse, “with either God or the devil as rider” and the perception of the dual potential of humankind for good and evil persists through to today when not many years ago our Scottish onetime Archbishop Holloway wrote a book titled “Between the Monster and the

Saint". This internal conflict, between the selfish, instinct-satisfying self and the socially sensitive, tribal-serving self, found its way through German Romantic dramatists of the nineteenth century, through the Jewish mind of Freud into the great twentieth century myth of the Id, the Ego and the Superego. The Id was depicted as the source of the demanding compulsive urge to satisfy instinct regardless of time place, damage or social restraint, the Superego as the representative of the demands of society and the Ego as the practical reconciler of the two. The parallel with St Paul and St Augustine is there. The pseudo-science of Psychoanalysis and its many derivatives which, last century became another religion to many, is now dying too.

The treatment of witchcraft in Europe provides a vivid warning illustration of the humanitarian dangers of a simple black and white belief in good and evil. I will not try to quote any figures with any semblance of accuracy of the numbers of people, almost entirely women, tortured and put to death even as late as the seventeenth century in Scotland and later still in America. It can happen again, even in the most civilised culture and is still happening in various forms all over the world, although most prominently in Islamic states.

Perhaps more acceptable spins-off of the cult of evil are the great literature of Milton's Paradise Lost and the Romantic Gothic Horror stories of the nineteenth century. But these imaginary creations are a poor consolation prize after the real horrors of the inquisition and the witch hunts.

So far all this has been about the spectacular black and white stuff of big evil. Today I am more interested in the insidious grey stuff of little evil, the ambivalent thoughts and actions, the smaller cruelties and the dirty

tricks of everyday life. So finally let us turn to that. Do they have a part in evolution?

Scientific psychologists who gather data first and then try to explain what they find, as opposed to the intuitive kind who theorise first and then try to support their ideas with research designed to confirm them, have tended to avoid black and white categorisations and instead they tend to think in dimensions – not ‘is it, or is it not’ so much as how much is it? This dimensional approach is even entering the categorisations of medicine’s psychiatry in the new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, version five. It began about a hundred years ago with attempts to measure general intelligence and it soon extended to the description of individual differences in personality. To give you an imaginary example, the question was not so much ‘Is this person aggressive?’ as how aggressive is this person on a scale extending from ‘totally supine’ at one end of a scale from one to ten to ‘unable to tolerate peace for long’ at ten at the other end of the scale. So we have a scale for the measurement of extraversion as opposed to introversion and most of us come out as around the middle and some come out as more introverted at one end of the scale and others of us as more extraverted at the other end. No black and whites, only degrees of greyness.

I spent many years lecturing on the grand intuitive theories of human nature and on the painstaking, grinding work of establishing the main dimensions along which human beings around the world, regardless of culture, appear to differ from each other.

After processing questionnaires filled in by millions of people from many cultures, through huge computers, we have general agreement within the last decade that the individuality of we human beings can be best

described in terms of our position along five major dimensions, known together as the Big Five – measuring Extraversion as oppose to Introversion; Agreeableness as opposed to disagreeableness, Conscientiousness as opposed to irresponsibility; Emotional volatility, over-reactive as opposed to unresponsiveness and under-reactivity; and Openness as opposed to Unwillingness to consider new ideas and new people. Besides these Big Five, there a number of specialist scales for the measurement of individual differences in personality that are well established as measuring something important. I, myself, with my specialism in addictions worked for many years with the Sensation Seeking Scale, one of the most reliable and best validated of the minor specialist scales.

But there are three scales for the measurement of personality characteristics which have become known as ‘The Dark Triad’ which are of interest here because those who score highly on them could be seen as agents of what I might call ‘low grade evil’ or ‘little evil’ – to put it more dramatically than it may deserve. Certainly the high scorers on these scales appear to cause a lot of trouble. This Dark Triad measures three characteristics of individual people labelled Psychopathy, Machiavellianism and Narcissism. These scales are highly correlated which means that it is fairly well established that if you are high on one you will probably tend to be high on the other two as well and there is now a single scale measure of that ‘Dark Triad’. (Is it not interesting that these careful social scientists of the new era beyond Christianity use the term ‘Dark’ with echoes of dark and light, evil and good?)

James Oliver, a fully paid-up careful systematic and scientific psychologist himself, popularises many ideas. In his latest book, out this year, he describes the Dark Triad. Other researchers have shown that

those Dark Triaders commonly leave a trail of destroyed relationships behind them. James Oliver attempts to help those more naive and perhaps more loving people who suffer from living and working with them. He asks his readers, “Do you know somebody who?”:

Tends to exploit and trick others for self-advancement

Sometimes use deception or even lies to get their way

Has used ingratiation to get their way

Tends to manipulate others for selfish reasons

Tends not to feel regretful and apologetic after having done wrong

Tends not to worry about whether their behaviour is unethical

Tends to be lacking in empathy and crassly unaware of the distress their behaviour is causing others

Tends to take a pretty dim view of humanity, attributing nasty motives and selfishness to others

Tends to be hungry for admiration

Tends to want to be the centre of attention

Tends to aim for high statuses and signs of their importance

Tends to take it for granted that other people will make extra efforts to help them

If you know somebody who has a lot of these characteristics to a high degree, James Oliver claims the likelihood is you know a ‘Dark Triader’ and you need to beware. The person does not need to have all of the attributes, because, remember, we are not dealing with an ‘either/or’ or

a 'black and white' judgement. But if you give each question about your 'local suspect' a notional score of between *one, meaning 'not at all' or 'never'*, through *five, meaning 'maybe occasionally'* to *ten, meaning 'definitely' or 'repeatedly' or 'all the time'* and then tot them up, you may be surprised at what you find.

Of course you can always ask these questions of yourselves. But we psychologists who design and test out questionnaires are not naïve. As far back as the nineteen forties there was a scale developed which runs like this:

Have you ever taken the praise for something you knew someone else had really done? NO NEVER

Were you ever greedy by helping yourself to more than your share of anything? NO NEVER

If you say you will do something, do you always keep your promise, no matter how inconvenient it might be? ABSOLUTELY ALWAYS

Have you ever blamed someone for doing something you knew was really your fault? NO NEVER

Are ALL your habits good and desirable ones? DEFINITELY

Have you ever taken anything, even a pin or a button that you knew belonged to someone else? NO NEVER

Would you dodge paying taxes if you could be sure you would never be found out? ABSOLUTELY NEVER

Do you sometimes talk about things you know nothing about? NEVER

As a child did you do immediately as you were told without grumbling? UNTHINKABLE

Do you sometimes boast a little? NO

Have you ever said anything bad or nasty about anyone? NEVER

Do you always wash before a meal? YES

Have you ever cheated at a game? NEVER

Have you ever taken advantage of someone? NEVER

Have you ever insisted on having your own way? NEVER

Do you always practice what you preach? YES

Have you ever been late for an appointment or work? NEVER

Do you sometimes put off until tomorrow what you ought to do today?
NO

Are you always willing to admit it when you have made a mistake?
ALWAYS

Every time you reply in the positive you increase your score. Of course, I have exaggerated here for you, the positive answers so that you can see, as you go along, how ridiculous a high score would make you. But these questions, and others like them, are always hidden among other more innocent ones so that as you answer a fifty or two hundred questions, you do not notice them and identify them as the trap that they are.

It is known as the Lie Scale and items from it are lurking in many questionnaires. If a person scores highly on it they are probably a Dark Triader too.

A week or two ago I met up for the first time with an English academic psychologist who used to work on the fringes of my main concerns.

Chatting with him, he asked me why I had withdrawn from a particular field of research so soon after retirement. I told him that a young psychologist (whose doctorate I examined down in darkest England) had taken my general theory of addictions, previously published in a book, changed a couple of points in it and published it as his own in a well-known scientific journal. This had sickened me and I had just left the field. The reply from my colleague was “He will do well” and indeed he has.

So do these ‘Dark Triaders’ gain power and status. I think that as long as they do not make themselves too obvious they do. What do you think? Of course they do.

Does that mean that Psychopathy, Machiavellianism and Narcissism are personality assets for survival? Probably yes. Oliver James seems to think so in what he calls ‘office politics’. Certainly the overly trusting, the hopelessly naïve and the people who underestimate themselves do not generally become the leaders of their tribe.

Does that mean that leaders of groups, organisations, political parties, nations tend to often be ‘Dark Triaders’? Think Thatcher, Nixon, Mao, Stalin, Putin?

If human beings are incurably tribal, as I believe they are, and if many or even most nations are led for some of the time, or even most of the time, by Dark Triaders, does that mean that insidious low-grade, grey-green, creeping ‘little evil’ rules the world? If so, what does that mean for peace between the nations? And if we have weapons that can destroy us all and most of the biosphere with us, what does that mean for the evolutionary future of the human species?

Do we even need the dark powers of a Satan to frighten us, when we realise how much of this world works? Mayor Giuliani of New York introduced a policy for combating crime which focussed on the small, apparently trivial offences, the breaking of windows, the writing of graffiti, the minor acts of intimidation and tried to reduce them. To the surprise of many, the incidence of the major crimes, such as murder fell too - dramatically. If we tackle the minor 'manifestations of evil' if we can call them that, will this prevent the Dark Triaders becoming leaders of their tribes, large and small, in such great number as seems to happen today?

May we not be afraid of the grey half-light of dawn or that of the dusk of our lives. May we control our anxieties and be careful not to jump prematurely to conclusions. May we be granted the patience and the courage to discern the unclear path even through the grey.