

Good, Evil, and the Biggest Question Before Humankind

By Tom Kinney

Presented September 18, 2011 to
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

****ready—28 minutes****

Presentation:

We have a set of beliefs, religious and secular, sorted along many criteria. One of those criteria, and maybe one of the most important, is how we sort good from evil. This is the white hat, black hat question we need to ask ourselves as we fall into the trap of categorically condemning others. When you think of those bad guys, and here you should feel free to pick your favorite category of bad guys whether they be industrialists, governmental, financial, political, religious, healthcare, legal, management, or union segments of our population, the doers or the complainers or just activists noise-makers wanting their perspective to reign supreme. Personally, I'm one of those irresponsible automotive engineering managers supposedly sacrificing the safety of my customers and risking the lives of my loyal family members partial for my particular car line all for the sake of profit. Or you may have handy a black hat for the narrow-minded devout believers – Christian, Islamic, Atheists (yes, atheists can be devout believers that they have the answer) or whatever. Frequently, as we overcome our cockiness about knowing sufficient about each of these folks to make such judgments and begin to increase our knowledge of these individuals and their activities, we find people of high morals and integrity. Actually quite similar to how we perceive ourselves. And, in some cases as we review our own transgressions, we may find those others a little more honest, a little

more productive, and less selfish than ourselves. And, hopefully, they will also learn that the black hat they have placed on our heads because of our profession, affiliation, priorities, religious or social perspective, or whatever will also bleach in the sunlight of understanding – hopefully at least to a rather light tint of gray.

Society, rightly or wrongly, has a tendency to tie many of these good vs. evil questions and judgments to religion. And scientist Stephen Jay Gould offers, “You cannot understand the human condition without understanding religion or religious arguments.” Philosopher Spinoza highlights the challenge with, “I have made a ceaseless effort not to ridicule, not to bewail, not to scorn human actions, but to understand them.” When it comes to religions, it seems especially difficult for any of us to apply this principle consistently. It’s good that we here at UFR spend a great deal of time looking more deeply into the concepts of religion and why people do what they do.

What’s good and what’s evil? Life used to be **simple** amongst the cave dwellers, quoting our most authoritative reference, the Flintstones, Fred and Wilma: “Hey, Fred, what’s good and what’s evil?” “Well, Wilma, good is food and sex. And evil is the absence of both.” “Thanks, Fred, --just curious.” Fred and Wilma Flintstone successfully found good, that is food and sex, and, as a result, we, their descendents, are here today. In later ages, the source of such good and evil knowledge, those people of the caves in the rocks, were replaced with a hole in the rocks called an Oracle in a world **full of magic and superstition**. Then, for the last 2500 years or so, Fred’s wisdom of good and evil came mostly from **religions**, including Christianity’s disciple Peter, coincidentally called Peter

the Rock, as interpreted by Popes and others of special privilege. In the minds of some, the knowledge of good and evil was rock solid. Now we have emerged into the age of science, a new discipline of thought that intrudes into that clarity.

Individually, we've followed this rock-strewn path. Early on all I cared about was **simple**, getting fed and my diapers changed. And I've been told **I screamed** when things didn't happen on schedule. A little later, I would get screamed **at** or even lovingly swatted. It was a time of **mystery and superstition** as it was sometimes a total mystery to me as to what evil I had perpetrated to warrant that reaction. Later still, I recognized I had my some sort of **religion** with my own personal Pope that defined for me what was good and evil. And, when I made the wrong choice, my personal Pope called in her Abbott, who happened to be her husband and my father, to excommunicate me for a bit until I exhibited more progress in my religious education. I survived in to my teen years with sufficient food, insufficient sex, and finally passed through the age of enlightenment realizing there are questions surrounding the issues of good and evil. You may have followed a similar path.

We have a sense of good and evil. We think we generally know what is good and generally know what is evil. One might say about understanding good and evil that it certainly isn't rocket science. But can we apply basic scientific logic and investigative principles to sharpen our perception of the issues? The words we choose are important.

Integrity demands that I credit Richard Shermer and others I'll mention later for inspiring parts of this talk and some words gleaned from his books, "How We Believe" and "The Science of Good and Evil."

Let's look at some mythology first. There seems to be a myth of pure evil, a 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? The existence of pure evil would force us to grant some validity to the sometimes heard defense "The devil made me do it." 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?" We here in our UU world, preferring hopeful visionaries, may have the tendency to accept that evil as a noun just does not exist. We generally consider evil as a descriptive adjective for a range of environmental events and human behaviors that we describe and interpret as bad, wrong, awful, undesirable, or whatever appropriately descriptive adjective or synonym for evil is chosen. To name some **thing** "evil" invites the supernatural rather than leading us to a deeper understanding of the cause of evil behavior and its effects on humans. As such, a disease, for example, can not be evil as disease has no moral existence. Good and evil are human constructs. Which is not to say that a person is not morally responsible for his or her choices and their effects.

Recognition of this understanding of evil helps us tune in our choice of words and also

helps us to constructively deal with the words and perceptions of others, one of the valuable take-homes of today. We likely agree evil should be avoided.

To explain away this problem of evil, believers often invoke the final clause in a modified version – read “God’s will” for “Whatever is.” We have all heard this many times. In the aftermath of the school shootings in Kentucky a few years ago, a local minister declared that it was God’s will that his own son was spared a bullet. On the flip side of evil, Kenny McCaughey, father of the McCaughey septuplets thanked God for the good health of the babies and the mother and said it was “God’s will.” These statements puzzle me. As to the Kentucky shootings, does that mean it was God’s will to spare the minister’s son but snuff out the lives of the three teenage girls who were killed? And the McCaughey septuplets were a product of in vitro fertilization after years of infertility between Kenny and wife, Bonni, presumably also God’s will. Was modern medicine’s intervention God’s will along with the McCaughey’s decision not to undergo selective abortion to **lower** Bonni’s risk, an action they consider evil? What if Bonni’s life had been lost because of that decision to forego selective abortion? Would that have been God’s will as well? On a much less threatening scale, I recently heard these exact words from a Winter Texan friend from the Pennsylvania coal mining area whose church’s rental space in an abandoned shopping center is threatened by the building owner’s pending sale, among the most minor of evils. She questioned as to whether someone would come forward to lead the raising of funds for a new or different church building with a shrug supposing it would happen if it’s “God’s will.” It seemed not to occur to her that a little initiative of consequence on her behalf could spark a bit of “God’s will” in the

right direction. If you are really, really talented with gentle words, you might like to explore this good and evil “God’s will” concept in the mind of the speaker the next time you hear it.

In a discussion of evil, Thomas Keneally, author of *Schindler’s List*, was asked what was the difference between Oskar Schindler, rescuer of Jews and hero of his story, and Amon Goeth, the antihero 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 questionable at times, perhaps, but relatively harmless and ineffectual as historical personages. What a difference a war makes. The Stanford Psychology department’s prisoner/jailer experiment of 40 years ago comes to mind which had to be aborted as both subjects playing jailers and those playing prisoners went out of control. We don’t like to hear stories like this as we may think “but for circumstances, there go I.”

And what of pure good? Applying the science of equivalents of opposites, do not the same arguments apply? Thus, there seems to be a mirror-image myth of pure good, a belief that good exists separately from individuals, or that good exists within people as something like what we traditionally think of as a good “force,” driving them to perform good acts. We here may have the tendency to accept that good, as a noun, just does not exist either -- outside of metaphorical speech. Good, like evil, is a descriptive adjective for a range of environmental events and human behaviors that we describe and interpret as right, considerate, nice, desirable, or whatever appropriately descriptive adjective

synonym for good is chosen. Thus good and evil are of the natural world where we have some control and certain responsibility as opposed to the supernatural world of which we have no control, and certainly no responsibility. You and I control our good.

Having thus dealt with the grasp of good and evil in a more objective, maybe even scientific way, let us UU's now explore applying that perception back upon science itself.

To do this effectively, we must reach beyond the pure sciences into the humanities and philosophical realm, including what some label as the social sciences, to gain what Edward O. Wilson calls, consilience: the unity of knowledge, featured in his book of that name. *[explanation of consilience excluded from the presentation--*Wilson uses the metaphor of the Cretan labyrinth to explain his word, consilience, this uncertain conjunction of the disciplines that has mythic elements that would have pleased the ancient Greeks.

Here's the basics of the story: Into the heart of the Cretan labyrinth walks Theseus of Athens unraveling a ball of thread given to him by the lovestruck princess of Athens, Ariadne. Somewhere in the hidden passages he meets the Minotaur, the cannibal half man, half bull, to whom seven youths and maidens are sacrificed each year as Athens's tribute to Crete. Theseus kills the Minotaur with his bare hands saving Athens from continuing the yearly sacrifice. Then, following Ariadne's thread, he retraces his steps through and out of the labyrinth.

Consilience among the branches of learning, the corridors of the labyrinth, is the Ariadne's thread needed to traverse it. Theseus is humanity, the Minotaur our own

dangerous irrationality. Near the entrance of the labyrinth of knowledge is physics, comprising one gallery, then a few branching galleries that all searchers undertaking the journey must follow, each of the pure sciences like chemistry and biology. In the deep interior is a nebula of pathways through the social sciences, humanities, art, and religion. If the thread of connecting causal explanations has been well laid, it is nonetheless possible to follow any pathway quickly in reverse, back through the behavioral sciences to biology, chemistry, and finally physics. Following the string backward from the depths allows proud practitioners 20/20 hindsight in saying “yes, that was to be expected”. However, the next foray into that deep interior does not necessarily benefit from that experience and the practitioners can only guess poorly as to what should be expected beyond the first few chambers.

With time, we discover that the labyrinth has no center, only an immense number of end points deep within the maze. The labyrinth of the real world is thus a maze of almost infinite possibility. We can never map it all, never discover and explain everything. But we can hope to travel through the known parts swiftly, from the specific back to the general, and – in resonance with the human spirit – we can go on tracing pathways forever. We can connect threads backwards into broadening webs of explanation, because science has given us the torch and the ball of thread. As the distance away from physics increases, the options allowed by the antecedent disciplines increase exponentially. To stay on course all the way seems impossible. Consilience, and the labyrinth, may give you a new way of looking at your journey and goals.—*end of what was excluded from the presentation]*

Now, armed with consilience, the inclusion of a labyrinth of science and equally rigorous but less provable knowledge and perceptions, let us return to the challenge of good and evil by exploring two examples. First, a simple black hat, white hat challenge.

President Truman, with his advisers, made the decision to drop atomic bombs to save an estimated million American servicemen's lives in an invasion of Japan. Black hats and white hats? (Pause) But where does this technology lead? Fifty years later, during President Clinton's time, A.Q. Kahn, a Pakistani who headed his country's nuclear weapons program, decided on his own that anyone opposed to Western ways and who would pay him \$10 million or so should be supplied technology and components leading to their own nuclear bombs. Thus, this "nuclear jihadist," exposed in the book by that name, delivered uranium enrichment technology and sample equipment to Iran, North Korea, Libya and others. Actually, in Libya lacking indigenous technical capabilities, Kahn was setting up an entire enrichment plant for Libya without Pakistan's knowledge. He personally carried the detail plans for making a nuclear bomb in two shopping bags via Dubai to Momar Ghaddafi and presumably did the same for Kim Jong Il and for the Iranians. Plus, in the late 1990's through a cohort, Bashiruddin Mahmood, he provided Osama Bin Laden's people nuclear bomb designs. The release of documents last week including Kahn's letters to his wife furthers the intrigue. A.Q. Kahn sees himself in a white hat in using his consilience of hard science with the social sciences, philosophy, and religion. (Pause) Depends upon who is picking the hats. That's a take-home to ponder from all sides.

The second example is more complex and with perhaps the furthest reaching impact you might imagine. It might make an excellent candidate for a Ph.D. and Philosophy program. If our vision of the continuing human biological advances in knowledge and scientific capabilities are even partly attained, which seems inevitable unless a great deal of genetic and medical research is halted in its tracks, and if that knowledge and capability are made generally available, which is problematic, humanity will be positioned godlike to take control of its own ultimate fate. It can, if it chooses, alter not just the anatomy and intelligence of the species but also the emotions and creative drive that compose the **very - core - of - human-nature.**

The engineering of the genome will be the final of three periods that can be distinguished in the history of human evolution.

During almost all of the two-million-year history of the genus *Homo*, culminating in *Homo Sapiens*, people had no clue what shaped them. In historical times, over the past ten thousand years, populations were still experiencing racial differentiation in response to local climatic conditions and other factors, just as they had throughout the more distant past.

During this passage through evolutionary time, shared with all other organisms, human populations were also subject to stabilizing selection; gene mutants that caused disease or infertility were weeded out in each generation. These defects were able to persist only when recessive in their expression, which means their effects could be overridden by the

activity of dominant genes paired with them. Possession of two recessive genes, however, causes genetic disorders, as exemplified by cystic fibrosis, Tay-Sachs disease, and sickle-cell anemia. Their double-dose carriers die young. Stabilizing selection, in this case through early death, continually sheds the genes from the population, making them mercifully rare.

With the advent of modern medicine, human evolution has entered its second period. More and more of the hereditary defects can be deliberately moderated or averted, even when the genes themselves remain unaltered and present in a double dose. With some elementary facts in their reference books, physicians are now able to prevent the symptoms entirely through various interventions. These interventions are becoming common and will be multiplied many times over in the years immediately ahead. For the first time people are using scientific knowledge to gain conscious control over their heredity, progressing one gene at a time. The evolutionary effect will be to relax stabilizing selection at an increasing rate and thereby increase the genetic variability of humanity as a whole. In developed countries, those destructive gene folks no longer die young. This second period, the suppression of stabilizing selection, is only the beginning. Over many generations, the moderation of the effects of harmful genes could result in a substantial change in human heredity at the population level. The benefits accruing will have to be bought, of course, with a growing dependence on exacting and often expensive medical procedures.

We should not, however, worry that such destabilizing of selection will go too far as this second period of human evolution is transitional. It will not last enough generations to have an important impact on heredity of the species as a whole, because the knowledge that made it possible has brought us swiftly to the brink of the third period, that of voluntary evolution. As we understand what changes in the genes cause particular defects, then in principle the defect can be permanently repaired. Geneticists are hard at work to make this gene therapy a reality. They are hopeful that cystic fibrosis, to cite the most advanced current project, can be at least partly cured by introduction of unimpaired genes into the lung tissues of patients. Another class of defects that seem permanently treatable within a few years includes hemophilia, sickle-cell anemia, and certain other inherited blood diseases.

Progress will accelerate. Too much hope is at stake, and too much venture capital poised, to permit failure. Thousands of genetic defects, many fatal, are already known. More are discovered each year. Each such gene is carried in single or double dose by thousands to millions of people around the world, and **each individual person** bears an average at least several different kinds of defective genes somewhere on his chromosomes. In most cases the genes are recessive and loaded in single dose; but the carrier, even if he does not suffer the defect, risks having a child with a double dose and full-blown symptoms. It is obvious that when genetic repair becomes safe and affordable, the demand for it will grow -- swiftly.

It is predicted that some time in this century that trend will lead into the full voluntary period of evolution. The advance will create a new kind of ethical problem, which will be the Faustian decision, the black hat white hat that is the basis of this example: How much should people mutate themselves and their descendants? And if that is to be controlled, who should be granted the power to do the allowing or disallowing? Consider that your descendants, whom you may wish to fund the alteration of -- in some beneficent manner, may well be descendants of the person behind you through intermarriage in the years ahead. With that in mind, can we ever agree on how much DNA tinkering is good? Or evil? In making such choices, there is an important line to be drawn between the remedy of clear-cut genetic defects on one side and the improvement of normal, healthy traits on the other. The scientific imagination will think it but a small step from, say, severe dyslexia, and another short hop to unimpaired learning ability, and, finally one step more to superior learning ability. A person with mild dyslexia today that is nothing more than an occasional nuisance would likely have preferred to learn instead that it had been fixed when they were an embryo by parents, had they known and been able, who would have probably agreed and taken care of the problem.

Fair enough, but what about altering genes in order to enhance mathematical and verbal ability? To acquire perfect pitch? Athletic talent? Sexual preference? Adaptability to cyberspace? In a wholly different dimension, humanity might choose to make themselves less variable in order to increase compatibility. Or the reverse: They might choose to diversify in talent and temperament, aiming for varied personal excellence and thus the creation of communities of specialists able to work together at higher levels of

productivity. Above all, they will certainly aim for greater longevity. If such engineering for long life proves even just partly successful, it will create vast social and economic impacts. Imagine a total collapse of health care for the aged as no longer needed as most centenarians, 100-year-olds and older, a free of the typical age related diseases and just die suddenly. Imagine sharp, energetic, and productive workers in their 90's benefitting and sharing nearly a century of their incomparable experience and insight.

The present trajectory of science ensures that future generations will acquire the technical ability to make such choices. We are not in the volitional period yet, but we are close enough to make the prospect worth thinking about. *Homo sapiens*, the first truly free species, is about to decommission natural selection, the force that made us. There is not genetic destiny outside our free will. Evolution, including genetic progress in human nature and human capacity, will be from now on increasingly the domain of science and technology tempered by ethics and choice. Soon we must look deep within ourselves and decide what we wish to become. This may be truly the ultimate science of good and evil. And that discussion is only beginning.

What lifts this question above mere futurism is that it faces directly the meaning of human existence. And illustrates how much more we need to know in order to decide the ultimate question: To what end, or ends, if any in particular, should human genius direct itself? Without a doubt, there will be some categorizing of black hats and white hats within this discussion. We individually and as UU's have a part to play in this dialogue

based upon what we think, what we write, and what we say here and elsewhere. We in this room have an inordinate amount of influence as compared to our mere numbers. We think about the black hat-white hat issues of humanity, of religions, this science of good and evil, and the good and evils of science. We work toward an understanding of the science of good and evil that clarifies our thoughts and prepares us to apply thought to these opportunities and decisions. We have fellow travelers with whom to share and refine those thoughts. We have our UU Principles to test those thoughts against. And we have paths, paths to make those thoughts heard.