

The Puzzles of Evil and Altruism

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What led me to select today's topic, The Puzzles of Evil and Altruism, was the basic question of **why**. When people act in ways that abuse, terrorize, and kill others, we seek an answer to the **why**, or the motivation behind their behavior. We ask, "How could anyone do such a thing?" We ask "Are people born evil? Or do they learn to be evil through their life experiences, such as being exposed to early abuse, violence, or deprivation? We hope that in knowing the **why**, we will feel safer and hopefully do something to prevent future acts of evil.

On the other hand, when people act in altruistic ways that show love, empathy, and compassion for others, we are less likely to ask **why** questions. We label altruistic people as caring, exceptional, and even heroic. We usually do not question whether they were born with a "caring trait" or whether they learned this behavior from their life experiences. We do not worry about the person's motivation, as we do when faced with evil behavior, because we feel safe and grateful for the altruistic acts of others.

Evil and altruism defined

Evil can be defined as something that is morally bad or wrong; something that causes harm or pain to others. Interesting enough, I found that the words "evil" and "vile" are spelled

using the same letters, and both can be used to describe something or someone as wicked.

Altruism, on the other hand is defined as charitable acts that are motivated purely by the desire to help other people, even when there is the possible risk of self-harm.

Australian biologist Jeremy Griffith, (2011) suggests that probably, the most important question in all of human life is the issue of the 'good vs evil' human condition. Griffith asks, "Are humans good or are we possibly the terrible mistake that some believe us to be?" While humans are capable of great love, they are also capable of unspeakable brutality, murder and war. It can be argued that humans have been the most destructive force that has ever lived on earth. In fact, why have we become so competitive, selfish and brutal that some of human life has become almost unbearable and we have nearly destroyed our own planet? How can we reconcile our 'Yin and Yang'?

David Brooks, author of *The Road to Character*, reminds us that "we are all deeply divided selves, both splendidly endowed and deeply flawed. We each have certain talents but also certain weaknesses."

An Example of Evil

On the night of June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof, age 22, shot and killed nine people who were praying during a bible study at a

predominately black church in Charleston S.C. When he first arrived, he had been welcomed by the parishioners.

Roof, in a jailhouse journal, said that he felt the massacre was “worth it” because of what he perceived as the wrongs perpetrated by the black community. “I would like to make it crystal clear, I do not regret what I did,” Roof wrote. “I am not sorry. I have not shed a tear for the innocent people I killed.”

"I went to that church in Charleston and I did it," he said, then he laughed.

"Did you shoot them?" a law enforcement officer asked a calm and composed Roof.

"Yes," Roof replied, followed by another laugh.

He had fired 70 rounds and killed nine people and wounded others. At one point, Roof described his crime as "political" and said he considered himself "a white supremacist." "Our people are superior," he said. "That's just the fact." He later confessed that he committed the shooting in hopes of igniting a race war.

Are we genetically inclined toward evil?

There are many theories about why humans commit evil acts.

Evil, according to a Christian view, is any action, thought or attitude that is contrary to the will of God. According to the Bible, evil became a reality in the very beginning with the first couple, Adam and Eve. God instructed them to eat of the tree of life and avoid eating from the tree of good and evil. After

being coaxed by a serpent (which was the devil in disguise), Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree. In doing so, they sinned, and therefore all humans inherited the capacity for sinfulness. Perhaps this is the origin of “the devil made me do it” theory of inherited evil.

In contrast to this Christian view, some modern day neuroscientists argue that evil results from faulty brain wiring that lead to some mental health conditions. They point out that these conditions, such as borderline personality disorder and psychosis, have one thing in common—a lack of empathy, which is seen as a key measuring stick of good and evil. They conceptualize that those who commit acts of cruelty, murder, and torture are victims themselves of some faulty part in their brains.

However, if we attribute evil to a purely neurological glitch or dysfunction in the wiring of the physical brain, do we eliminate personal responsibility for one’s behavior? Does the excuse—“my brain made me do it,” mean that no human being really *wants* to do ill to another and therefore we are all innocent?

According to Jean Decety, a social neurologist at the University of Chicago, the root of both evil and good comes from our evolutionary past when the maintenance of large social groups was essential to survival. However, because groups had to compete for resources, the willingness to hurt and possibly kill others, was also crucial. Decety says “We are the most social

species on Earth, and yet, we are also the most violent species on Earth. We have two faces because these two faces were important to survival.”

Do we learn evil?

Since the 1960s, psychologists have found that children who were abused or neglected are more likely to commit crimes later in life. However researchers also point out that most children who are mistreated do not grow up to commit crimes and become criminals.

Author Brian Masters, who has written books about several mass murderers, says that every human being has the capacity to commit evil if significant numbers of people are supporting that evil behavior. He argues that one purpose of society is to prevent that evil, but when societal influence is absent - such as in Nazi Germany during the 1930s-40s where mass murder was encouraged – every human could actively commit (or passively ignore) these terrible acts of evil.

We urgently need to discover the root causes of evil behavior. Is evil behavior a result of our heredity or our environment? In terms of what we know at this point, the answer appears to be a combination of the two because heredity and the environment do not act independently. Both are essential for any behavior and it is impossible to separate the two influences, since both operate in separate and interactive ways.

An example of altruism:

An example of altruism is found in a *Psychology Today* article (October 2013) by Dr. Steve Taylor. He describes a construction worker named Wesley Autrey who was standing on a subway platform in New York, when a young man nearby had an epileptic seizure and rolled on to the track. Hearing the approach of a train, Autrey impulsively jumped down to try to save the young man, only to realize that the train was approaching too fast. Instead, he jumped on top of the young man's body and pushed him down into a drainage ditch between the tracks. The train operator saw them, but it was too late to stop: five cars of the train passed over their bodies. Miraculously, both of them were uninjured. Asked later by *The New York Times* why he had done it, Autrey said: "I just saw someone who needed help and I did what I felt was right."

The question of why human beings are sometimes prepared to risk their own lives to save others has puzzled philosophers and scientists for centuries. From an evolutionary point of view, altruism doesn't seem to make any sense. From a survival point of view, we shouldn't be interested in sacrificing our lives for others. However, in terms of genetics, it's not necessarily self-defeating for us to help people close to us, such as our close family group members. They carry many of the same genes as us, and in helping them, we may help our own genes to survive. But what about when we help people who have no relation to us?

According to some psychologists, there is no such thing as 'pure' altruism. When we help strangers, there must always be some benefit to us, even if we're not aware of it. Altruism makes us feel good about ourselves, it makes other people respect us more, or it might (so far as some believe) increase our chances of getting into heaven (or at least staying out of hell)! Or perhaps altruism is an investment strategy - we do good deeds to others in the hope that they will return the favor when we are in need. (This is known as reciprocal altruism.) According to evolutionary psychologists, it could even be a way of demonstrating our resources, showing how wealthy or able we are, so that we become more attractive to the opposite sex, and have enhanced reproductive possibilities.

Dr. Taylor argues that an essential trait of *altruism* is a lack of self-centeredness. It means the ability to empathize with other people, to feel compassion for them, and sometimes put their needs before your own. It may even mean sacrificing your own well-being, at least temporarily, for the sake of others. It means being able to see beyond the superficial difference of race, gender, sexual orientation and nationality. Dr. Taylor shares one of his personal experiences: "Yesterday, I was about to have a shower, and I saw a spider in the bathtub. I got out of the shower, found a piece of paper, gently encouraged the spider on to it, and scooped it out of danger. Why did I do this? Perhaps in the hope that a spider would do the same for me in the future? Or that the spider would tell his friends what a great person I am? Or, more seriously, perhaps it was the result of moral conditioning, a respect for living things and an impulse

to 'do good' which was taught to me by my parents? No, I think this simple act was largely motivated by empathy. I empathized with the spider as another living being who was entitled to stay alive just as I was. And I believe that empathy is the root of all pure altruism."

Is altruism genetically acquired?

Researchers have had evidence for years that altruistic behavior is at least partly influenced by genetics. For example, they have found that twins who possess identical genetic material show similar patterns of altruism. Using scanning technology, scientists can identify parts of the brain that are active when we empathize with others. By combining those results with other findings, researchers are beginning to determine which biological and environmental factors reinforce or decrease our capacity for empathy.

Our society benefits when all of us are cooperative and generous in some way. For example, a 2016 Canadian study entitled, "Altruism Predicts Mating Success in Humans," found that most humans are attracted to generosity and turned off by selfishness and greed. Generous behavior appears to be a magnet that attracts potential mates to one another like moths to a flame.

Can we learn altruism?

We know that children who experience core values, such as a nurturing and loving home, an altruistic parent or caretaker, a tolerance for people who were different, a childhood illness or loss that tested their resilience, an emphasis upon independence, discipline with explanations, and caring - are more likely to be altruistic.

Many of us were taught as children that it is more blessed to give than to receive, and scientific studies have shown that altruism actually does wonders for your health as well as your well-being. A now-famous Harvard University study conducted in the 1980s proved that people experience an immune system boost even when they simply watch an altruistic act, such as a film of Mother Teresa tending orphans in Calcutta.

For centuries the question of how good and evil originates has been a matter of philosophical or religious debate. But in recent decades researchers have made significant advances toward understanding the science of what drives good and evil. Both seem to be linked to a key emotional trait: empathy, which is an intrinsic ability of the brain to experience how another person is feeling.

Therefore, empathy may be the key that will solve the puzzles of evil and altruism. Researchers have found that empathy is what motivates us to help others in distress, and a lack of empathy is a marker for violent, psychopathic, and antisocial behaviors. With these new insights, we may be on the verge

of creating training and treatment programs that will enhance the brain's empathic response.