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ARTICLE

Evil and the Demonic

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Abstract

This essay highlights the centrality of 'the demonic' in human experience, both collective and personal. It argues in favour of the possibility of explaining it; it dismisses its personification into a demon or several demons; it then proceeds towards a definition and a phenomenology of it; it examines its effects; and it portrays a final feature, namely resentment and revenge, as well as a religious response.

Keywords: demon; demonic; effects of the demonic; evil; religious response

In this essay, I will make a case for the supreme importance of 'the demonic' *in human experience*, because this basic factor explains, to a certain extent, the psychological and sociological aspects of evil.

My argument will be comprised of five steps: arguing in favour of providing a certain explanation of malevolence; distancing ourselves from the fact of evil personified as Satan; introducing the notion of the demonic and scrutinizing its essence; exposing the effects of evil; signalling the influence of resentment and revenge, as well as the possibility of a religions solution.

1. Towards some explanation of malevolence

Having gone through both Nazism and communism in his native Poland, Pope John Paul II, who knew very well the moral limitations of the presumably autonomous individual, declared:

> The evil of the twentieth century was not a small-scale evil, it was not simply 'homemade'. It was an evil of gigantic proportions, an evil which availed itself of state structures in order to accomplish its wicked work, an evil built up into a system'.[1]

[1]Pope John Paul II, *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), p. 167.

Such 'evil of gigantic proportions', which requires a far-reaching 'system' (in the pope's words) is what I will understand here as 'the demonic'. Nonetheless, we must keep in mind the truth that the demonic lurks in the darkness within each of us and that, given influential incentives, it can transform ordinary, law-abiding citizens into shameless agents of moral disruption. For instance, Fred Katz, a social psychologist, pointed out that the ethics of individual self-interest spawns 'large scale assault on human dignity – in the form of high rates of poverty, untended disease among the disadvantaged, loss of occupational careers and neglect of public services'. And he commented:

> Many of the indignities were created by people pursuing personal careers, who did not deliberately and intentionally set out to hurt other people. They were bent on accumulating as much money and property for themselves as they could. Their contribution to evil was not at all obvious to themselves.[2]

Accordingly, we need an accurate psychology of evil. To provide it, I will quote at length several authors, mostly psychologists – several of them being social psychologists – who shed light on that dismal phenomenon. Hence, as a starting point, the definition that Katz submits is as follows:

> I define and use the word *evil* to mean behavior that deliberately deprives innocent people of their humanity, from small scale assaults on a person's dignity to outright murder. This is a *behavioral* definition of evil. It focuses on how people behave toward one another – where the behavior of one person, or an aggregate of persons, is destructive to others.[3]

Like Katz, I am interested in providing *some explanation* of malevolence, in contradistinction to the stance of those who contend that evil is utterly inexplicable.[4] Please note that partially explaining evil does not amount to condoning it. Along with Brand Blanshard, I reject 'motiveless malignity', because such a spontaneous and yet inadequate concept forecloses any attempt to understand evil conduct.[5]

While, at first, the arbitrary suddenness of monstrous actions appears to countenance an impression of complete irrationality, on second thought many factors can be invoked that partly account for evil's seemingly inconceivable emergence. Of course, Bernard Lonergan rightly asserts that sin, namely 'basic evil', is absurd, and that, as an act of the human will, sin is irrational and, therefore, radically incomprehensible. And yet, he also states that 'there may be excuses; there may be extenuating

[2]Fred E. Katz, *Ordinary People and Extraordinary Evil: A Report on the Beguilings of Evil* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), p. 13.

[3]*Ordinary People and Extraordinary Evil*, p. 5.

[4]Providing *some psycho-sociological explanation* of evil is an undertaking that many authors rule out, regrettably. For instance, Arthur C. McGill, *Suffering: A Test of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982; first published in 1968); Larry D. Bouchard, *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology: Evil in Contemporary Drama and Religious Thought* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989); Lawrence L. Langer, *Preempting the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

[5]Brand Blanshard, *Reason and Goodness* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), p. 341.

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circumstances'.[6] If there are 'excuses' and 'circumstances', these are not incomprehensible. Explanations do show that evil is not a *total* mystery, although, as I shall remark later, the profundity of evil is indeed 'the mystery of lawlessness', as St Paul put it.

Perhaps, no philosopher demonstrated so forcefully as Immanuel Kant the basic human quandary that he called 'radical evil'.[7] A few comments by Paul Ricœur on Kant's understanding of radical evil should be helpful:

> The principle of evil is not in any way an origin in the temporal sense of the term; it is only the supreme maximum which serves as a last subjective foundation for all the evil maxims of our free will. This supreme maximum is the basis for the propensity (*Hang*) towards evil throughout the human race … as opposed to the predisposition (*Anlage*) to good which constitutes good will.[8]

Interestingly, on the same page Ricœur designates this phenomenon as 'the demonic depth of human freedom'. Still, because Kant's analysis is structural and non-temporal, although basic, it does not assist in my endeavour to explicate, in this article, the concrete psycho-sociological factors that account for the emergence and maintenance of malevolence.

2. The existence or non-existence of the devil

It may very well be that once upon a time there were Satan and other demons, who would have made the fundamental decision of rejecting God's authority and love. Whatever was the case, I believe in the meaningfulness and helpfulness of the *theological* hypothesis that after their decision was effected, God ceased giving them the existence they had been granted that far – a gratuitous gift they needed in order to continue in being. According to this hypothesis, they fell into nonbeing because they had rejected the Source of their being. This hypothesis is based on the rejection of the long-lasting erroneous persuasion that an *infinite*, endless punishment would be justly meted out for *finite* sins committed over a very brief duration by evil angels or by evil human beings.[9]

Moreover this hypothesis allows us to eschew an inadequate manner of coping with evil. Hence, the appositeness of what the psychoanalyst Rollo May wrote:

> The common personalized term which has been used historically, namely the *devil*, is unsatisfactory because it projects the power outside of self and opens

[6] *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 3, ed. by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 690; see pp. 689–91.

[7] See Immanuel Kant, 'Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason', in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. by Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 55–215, esp. 69–171 (= parts 1–2, Ak 6:18–6:89).

[8] Paul Ricœur, *Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology*, trans. by John Bowden (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 53.

[9] Mt 6:13b (as well as Jn 17:15, 1 Jn 2:14, and I Jn 5:18) suggests either an impersonal or a personal understanding of evil, since this last petition of the prayer 'Our Father', *rusai ēmas apo tou ponērou*, can be translated as 'deliver us from evil' (as in the Roman Catholic mass) or as 'deliver us from the evil one' (as in the New Revised Standard Version). So the genitive *ponērou* can refer either to the neuter *ponēron* or to the masculine *ponēros.*

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> the way for all kinds of psychological projection. Furthermore, it always seemed to me a deteriorated and escapist form of what needs to be understood about evil. Especially in the American mood is there a lack of capacity and a lack of vocabulary to relate to evil.[10]

I accept May's psychological view according to which evil is mistakenly represented as a personal being or several personal beings. Naturally I interpret his position as in no way wanting to diminish the force of evil. Indeed, evil is an ominous state of affairs in which all human beings have a share, with several degrees of connivance. This deleterious state of affairs is an unavoidable fundamental situation in our present. What matters for a sound analysis of evil is not its hazy origin, but the manner in which it has been provoked and actualized throughout the history of the human race. Furthermore, I would venture to assert that it is the overwhelming and apparently unbounded strength of such evil forces that explains their being personified as Satan.

Therefore, I disagree with Scott Peck and Malachi Martin, who both believe in today's existence of Satan as a personal being endowed with the capacity to possess some men or women.[11] The cases of satanic possession are partially explained by psychiatrists as instances of trance, epilepsy, hysteria, or deliria, for instance by Dr. Jean Lhermitte[12]; they are likely to be better explained in the future with the progress of the science of pathology. Besides, if we believe in the presence of the demonic rather than in the existence of a Demon or of demons, we cannot accept the theological assumptions that preside over exorcisms, although we should not deny the fact that they manage to relieve, sometimes entirely, the sufferings of the possessed.

It is necessary to note that although most religious traditions have anthropomorphized evil, the Catholic Church has never solemnly declared that there is a Satan *now* tempting human beings.[13] Nevertheless, throughout history, Christians have taken for granted the existence of evil spirits, usually in order to underscore those spirits' metaphysical and moral limitations, against Manichaean dualism, which overemphasizes the power of evil, and in order to highlight our real, albeit restricted, human freedom in the face of those spirits.[14]

Of course the Bible, which, to a large extent, is an assemblage of *literary* books, also personifies evil, for instance when it says: 'The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he

[10]'Reflections and Commentary by Rollo May', in Clement Reeves, *The Psychology of Rollo May: A Study in Existential Theory and Psychotherapy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), p. 304. The Book of Job (chaps. 1 and 2) is typical of that kind of projection, which is justifiable by its literary genre. However, the Letter of James (at 1:13–15) rectifies that view. Indeed, if God never tempts anybody, why should he delegate Satan to do so?

[11]See Malachi Martin, *Hostage to the Devil: The Possession and Exorcism of Five Living Americans* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1976), and M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982). The psychiatrist Peck agrees with Martin's understanding of satanic possession while adding that Martin does not have the kinds of insights that psychiatrists readily get.

[12]Jean Lhermitte, 'Les pseudo-possessions diaboliques', in 'Satan', *Études carmélitaines* (Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1948), pp. 472–92.

[13]In the Bible, the Hebrew name is *Satan* ('the adversary') and the Greek name is *Diabolos* ('the slanderer', rendered in English as *Devil*).

[14]See The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Christian Faith and Demonology' (1975).

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was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him' (Rev 12:9). Nonetheless, in Rom 5:20–21, should we literally take 'law', 'sin', 'death', and 'grace' as being characters walking successively unto Israel's stage? Consequently why can't we de-personify evil and at the same time continue to focus on its massive impact in the drama of the human race? 'Satan language therefore is a "mythic" personification of collective human evil, but it is the language that is mythic, not the reality'.[15]

We can also construe Satan – or the Devil – as an archetype, in Carl Gustav Jung's sense. So, influenced by Jung, James Hillman argues in favour of becoming aware of this archetype in us:

> The archetype particularly involved during the darkness is the archetypal shadow, none other than the Devil. Confrontation with one's own darkness leads into those intense moral issues which are eternal, archetypal experiences of both growth and destruction… . The deepest level of the inner darkness, of the shadow, goes beyond your or my personal sins, crimes, negligences, and omissions. Below these are experiences of evil which cannot be humanized and which have been represented by devilish powers in the various religions of the world.[16]

Hillman offers an anthropological explanation: 'The Devil's power seems to grow not in our shadow but from our light. He gains when we lose touch with our own darkness, when we lose sight of our own destructiveness and self-deception'.[17]

As a consequence, whenever we quote biblical or non-biblical passages about the influence of the Demon or of demons, we should mean the demonic – a fact of life that is going to be defined more precisely in our next sections.

3. The demonic

As a cross-cultural phenomenon, the demonic affects individuals as well as groups. We are naturally appalled by cruelty on the societal, national or international scale. And yet, cruelty is equally vicious and ugly on the not-so-broad scale, within the family, where there is verbal or physical abuse, or in the workplace, where there are attitudes and decisions that are unfair and demeaning. Although it is most vividly expressed in collectivities, especially in whole nations, mere individuals or couples with no allies to support them can also be marked by evil. Inexorably even the isolated individuals or couples can in some measure be negatively swayed by other people.

Accordingly, in his model called *TLE* (The Lucifer Effect), the social psychologist Philip Zimbardo rejects 'an *individualistic* orientation' (his italics) in dealing with the ways evil emerges. Instead, he places (1) the individual agents (2) within situations (3) as submitted to powerful influences. He explains:

[15]Nigel Goring Wright, *A Theology of the Dark Side: Putting the Power of Evil in its Place* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), p. 79.

[16]James Hillman, *Insearch: Psychology and Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), p. 89.

[17]Hillman, *Insearch*, 91. Compare with Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. by Arthur Wills (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1952), p. 121: 'When we do evil we do not know it, because evil flies from the light'.

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> Thus *TLE* is a call for a three-part analysis of human action by trying to understand what individual actors bring into any setting, what situational forces bring out of those actors, and how system forces create and maintain situations.[18]

A few pages later in his book, he sums up the results of his study:

> One of the dominant conclusions of the Stanford Prison Experiment [in which he was involved] is that the pervasive yet subtle power of a host of situational variables can dominate an individual's will to resist … A set of dynamic psychological processes is outlined [in Zimbardo's research] that can induce good people to do evil, among them deindividuation, obedience to authority, passivity in the face of threats, self-justification, and rationalization.[19]

4. Two lasting forces

In the Bible, we cannot but be struck by the antinomy between the forces of righteousness and the forces of depravity. Thus, the serpent of the Book of Genesis successfully tempts the woman (Gen 3:1–15), whose brood will strike later at her head. Similarly, the woman of the Book of Revelation is attacked by a great red dragon and a war breaks out in heaven, which opposes Michael and his angels to the dragon, whose name is Satan, or the Devil (Rev 12). Moreover, several Christian traditions contrast two dramatic experiences, namely the Communion of saints and the malefic powers, or the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.

Thus, talking about 'the devices of the Devil', St Paul affirms: 'Our fight is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark world, against the superhuman forces of evil in the heavens' (Eph 6:12). Anthropologically speaking, there are mentalities that are shared by all of us, according to different degrees, and that lure us into committing evil. For Luke, it is 'the power of darkness' (*ē exousia tou skotous*, Lk 22:53b) and for Paul, it is the 'mystery of lawlessness' (*to mystērion tēs anomias*, 2 Thess 2:7), concretized in those who think of themselves as above human and divine laws, which clashes with the 'mystery' of God's eternal and salvific design (see Eph 3:3–6). The 'mystery of lawlessness' amounts to the counterfeit of 'the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed' (Rom 16:25b–26a), 'the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints' (Col 1:26), also named 'the mystery of piety' (*to tēs eusebeias mystērion*, 1 Tim 3:16).

However, Jesus' power is greater than the enemy's forces:

> The seventy [whom Jesus had sent in mission] returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread

[18]Philip G. Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How God People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2008), p. viii. See also his Foreword to Edith Eva Eger, *The Choice: Embracing the Possible* (New York: Scribner, 2017), pp. ix–xiii.

[19]*The Lucifer Effect*, p. xii.

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> on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you' (Lk 10:17–19).

On the one hand, such antagonistic representations have the moral advantage of firmly asserting the difference between good and evil, which is the basis of morality.[20] On the other hand, they have the moral disadvantage of inviting the individuals or the groups that are respectful of the law to make believe they themselves personify the forces of righteousness and progress while the miscreants, namely, individuals or groups who personify the forces of depravity, must be condemned. The former are canonized (as beyond reproach) and the latter are demonized (as basically evil). The former pretend that virtually all those belonging to their group are located on the side of God, thus ignoring that every human being is susceptible to exercising violence and to carrying out various forms of crooked acts. At the same time, owing to the psychological mechanism of projection, they pretend that members of the opposing group must be located on the side of the Demon.[21]

Zimbardo also insists on the importance of overcoming the pride involved in this antinomy: 'It is only through the recognition that no one of us is an island, that we all share the human condition, that humility takes precedence over unfounded pride in acknowledging our vulnerability to situational forces'.[22]

The situation of people infected with evil is compounded by the fact that their attempt to rationalize is corroborated by the sanction received from an outside authority. Particular groupings feel authorized to attack others. In *Sanctions for Evil: Sources of Social Destructiveness*, Nevitt Sanford and Craig Comstock note, 'Most social destructiveness is done by people who feel they have some kind of permission for what they do, even to the point of feeling righteous, and who commonly regard their victims as less than human or otherwise beyond the pale'.[23] Or, as another author puts it:

> The traits of inner conscience and strength of character operate to spur the perpetrator on to more severe and intense deeds. It is not simply that it becomes acceptable to hurt others – it becomes one's sacred obligation to do so. When inflicting violent harm goes from being a right to being a duty, it is fair to expect that the violence will become relentless and merciless.[24]

Sanford and Comstock justify the title of their book, *Sanctions for Evil*, in these terms:

> In using the word *evil*, we mean not that an act or pattern of life is necessarily a sin or a crime according to some law, but rather that it leads to damage or pain

[20]See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 94, a. 2: 'This is the first precept of law, that good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided. All other precepts of the natural law are based upon this'.

[21]See Robert and Carol Ann Faucett, *Personality and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), p. 95.

[22]Zimbardo, 'A Situationist Perspective on the Psychology of Evil: Understanding How Good People are Transformed into Perpetrators', in *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil*, ed. by Arthur G. Miller (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), p. 26.

[23]Nevitt Sanford and Craig Comstock, in Nevitt Sanford, Craig Comstock & Associates, *Sanctions for Evil: Sources of Social Destructiveness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1971), p. 9.

[24]Roy F. Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Cruelty and Violence* (New York: Freeman, 1997), p. 170.

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> suffered by people, to social destructiveness of a degree so serious as to call for use of an ancient, heavily freighted term.[25]

One of their associates remarks: 'To believe that one is an indestructible saint or crusader makes it easy to spread destruction in the world. Indeed, that belief often demands that one stamp out evil'.[26]

5. The nature of evil

This section will try to *explain* what have been simply *described* so far: that there are several different psychological-social ways of committing monstrous evils.

Peck points out:

> Evil is 'live' spelled backward. Evil is in opposition to life. It is that which opposes the life force. It has, in short, to do with killing … Evil is also that which kills spirit. There are various essential attributes of life – particularly human life – such as sentience, mobility, awareness, growth, autonomy, will. It is possible to kill one of these attributes without actually destroying the body.
>
> Evil … is that force, residing either inside or outside of human beings, that seeks to kill life or liveliness. And goodness is its opposite.[27]

We can detect here a hatred for life, which comes from what Erich Fromm calls 'the shattering of faith'. He explicates:

> The deeply deceived and disappointed person can also begin to hate life. If there is nothing and nobody to believe in, if one's faith in goodness and justice has all been a foolish illusion, if life is ruled by the Devil rather than by God – then, indeed, life becomes hateful; one can no longer bear the pain of disappointment. One wishes to prove that life is evil, that men are evil, that oneself is evil. The disappointed believer and lover of life thus will be turned into a cynic and a destroyer. This destructiveness is one of despair; disappointment in life has led to hate of life.[28]

Others become destructive in the presence of meaninglessness: 'Individuals whose life is without meaning hate themselves for their weakness and hate life for making them weak. This hatred manifests itself in absolute identification with destructive power'.[29]

It is as if the person has been exposed to polluted air and, in turn, has no qualm about polluting. All victimizers have been somewhat victimized, at least mildly so, with the bitter impression that they were let down by other people or, as they often say, 'by society', or 'by life'.

[25]Sanford and Comstock, in *Sanctions for Evil*, p. 5.
[26]Neil J. Smelser, in *Sanctions for Evil*, p. 19.
[27]Peck, *People of the Lie*, pp. 42–43.
[28]Eric Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, its Genius for Good and Evil (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 30.
[29]Jordan B. Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), p. 468.

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In 'Tragedy and the Common Man', talking about 'the underlying struggle [of] the individual attempting to gain his "rightful" position in his society', Arthur Miller declares:

> Sometimes he is one who has been displaced from it, sometimes one who seeks to attain it for the first time, but the fateful wound from which the inevitable events spiral is the wound of indignity, and its dominant force is indignation. Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly … The flaw, or crack in the character, is really nothing – and need be nothing – but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status.[30]

The egotist is outraged and can become violent when he perceives a 'challenge to his dignity'.

In his 'Introduction to Collected Plays', portraying Willy Loman, a character in one of his plays, Miller continues to expound his thoughts:

> He was agonized by his awareness of being in a false position, so constantly haunted by the hollowness of all he had placed his faith in, so aware, in short, that he must somehow be filled in his spirit or fly apart, that he staked his very life on the ultimate assertion. That he had not the intellectual fluency to verbalize his situation is not the same thing as saying that he lacked awareness, even an overly intensified consciousness that the life he had made was without form and inner meaning.[31]

Nietzsche points out: 'Benefiting and hurting others are ways of exercising one's power over them – that is all one wants in such cases. We *hurt* those to whom we need to make our power perceptible'.[32] He adds: 'Who will attain something great if he does not feel in himself the power to *inflict* great pain? … Not to perish of inner distress and uncertainty when one inflicts great suffering and hears the cry of this suffering – that is great; that belongs to greatness'.[33]

A troubling form of the pursuit of power is sadism, about which Petru Dumitriu remarks, 'there is the desire to harm, the savage joy of causing suffering, the ferocious enjoyment of the suffering of another'.[34]

Fromm describes sadism as follows:

> In sadism … the wish to inflict pain on others is not the essence. All the different forms of sadism which we can observe go back to one essential impulse, namely to have complete mastery over another person, to make of him a helpless object

[30] Arthur Miller, a text of 1949, reproduced in *Death of a Salesman*, ed. by Gerald Weales (New York: Viking Press, 1967), p. 144.

[31] Miller, in *Death of a Salesman*, p. 168.

[32] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. by Bernard Williams, trans. by Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Book One, §13 (his italics).

[33] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book Four, §325 (his italics). In these two texts, Nietzsche evidently praises cruelty, although his psychological analysis is terribly accurate.

[34] Petru Dumitriu, *To the Unknown God*, trans. by James Kirkup (New York: Seabury, 1982), p. 58.

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> of our will, to become his god, to do with him as one pleases. To humiliate him, to enslave him, are means toward this end, and the most radical aim is to make him suffer, since there is no greater power over another person than that of forcing him to undergo suffering without his being able to defend himself … The aim of sadism is to transform a man into a thing, something animate into something inanimate, since by complete and absolute control the living loses one essential quality of life – freedom.[35]

The sadist's enterprise consists in humiliating victims to the point of persuading them that they *are* despicable.

It happens that mostly out of fear, people identify themselves with a malicious leader, who reassures them and demands blind trust from them. Consequently, they ape that leader as they learn from him or her how to operate craftily and victoriously. Compliance on the part of weak individuals, namely the conformity of toeing the line and playing the game, stems from the ascendency of a front runner or a group endowed with prestige, and from his or her followers' intense wish to belong and to evade exclusion.

> The imagined threat of being cast into the out-group can lead some people to do virtually anything to avoid their terrifying rejection. Authorities can command total obedience not through punishments or rewards but by means of the double-edged weapon: the lure of acceptance coupled with the threat of rejection.[36]

On this phenomenon, Jordan Peterson has this comment: 'People need their group identification, because that identification protects them, literally, from the terrible forces of the unknown'.[37] A bit later in his book, he adds: 'An individual may come to sacrifice his own experience, in the course of development,

For their part, leaders wilfully enjoy commanding, being obeyed and exercising force whenever necessary. Thus Raymund Tallis remarks:

> Those who committed the genocide of the Jews, perhaps the worst atrocity humankind has ever committed, were not breaking the laws of their country. And among those who perpetrated or facilitated the mass murder of the Gulags (20 million souls) or Mao's Cultural Revolution (up to 10 million) there were many individuals who were sincerely committed to what they believed to be the best future for their country. Many more, of course, were motivated by terror,

[35]Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, p. 32. For vivid depictions of the human degradation of Jewish victims, performed by sadist and cruel men during the Second World War, see Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, revised and updated edition (New York: Pocket Books, at Simon & Schuster, 1985), pp. 85–105, and Elie Wiesel, *Night*, a new translation by Marion Wiesel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

[36]Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*, p. 259.

[37]Jordan B. Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), p. 460.

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> the simple need to protect themselves or their loved ones, by ambition, or a joy in the exercise of power and cruelty, or murderous instincts.[38]

The worst forms of evil are those of the leaders. Emil Fackenheim asserts: 'A Jew at Auschwitz … was *singled out* by a demonic power which sought his death *absolutely*, i.e., as an end in itself'.[39]

Herbert McCabe spoke of the force of 'the system' as a collective propensity that allows individuals to excuse themselves:

> The evil and inhumanity in the world is not for the most part, or hardly at all, due to individuals being especially wicked, being wickeder than we are. On the contrary, there are just hundreds of thousands of people playing the roles assigned to them in the structures. President Nixon was not, I suppose an abnormally corrupt man. The reason why you could trace a direct line from him to the children covered in clinging phosphorous jelly and burning to death in Vietnam or Cambodia is simply that he occupied a key point in the system. It is not as though by changing his mind he could have altered it all.

And he explained:

> Millions of people spend their days and nights just being parents or teachers or salesmen or soldiers or priests – ordinary decent people. And what they are doing is dominating, exploiting, humiliating, and tormenting other people simply because this is the way their roles fit into the system.[40]

6. The effects of evil

Peck mentions a disturbing effect of evil:

> There is another reaction that the evil [people] frequently engender in us: confusion. Describing an encounter with an evil person, one woman wrote, it was 'as if I'd suddenly lost my ability to think'… . Lies confuse. The evil are 'the people of the lie', deceiving others as they also build layer upon layer of self-deception.[41]

[38]Raymund Tallis, *Seeing Ourselves: Reclaiming Humanity from God and Science* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda, 2020), p. 297. Further on in his book, talking about 'fanaticism' he comments: 'If the meaning of life is something you are prepared to die for, it may well be that, in ranking your own life below some cause, you may rank others' lives even lower' (314).

[39]Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 81.

[40]Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters* (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 169.

[41]Peck, *People of the Lie*, 66; as we can observe, he associates 'deceiving others' with *self*-deception. On self-deception, see Louis Roy, *The Three Dynamisms of Faith: Searching for Meaning, Fulfilment, and Truth* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), pp. 165–77. Augustine defines lying as 'a false signification told with desire to deceive', in 'Against Lying', trans. by Harold B. Jaffee, chap. 12, *Treatises on Various Subjects*, ed. by Roy J. Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1952), p. 160. See the same definition by Augustine, in 'Lying', trans. Mary Sarah Muldowney, chap. 3, in *Treatises on Various Subjects*, pp. 54–56; interestingly, in chap. 6 of 'Lying', p. 67, Augustine quotes The Wisdom of Solomon 1:11, 'a lying mouth destroys the soul'.

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Thus Elie Wiesel states: 'The problem is that evil is sometimes done not in its own name but in the name of love … So it is very serious when evil takes on the appearance of good'.[42]

Peck offers another clarification:

> It is necessary that we first draw the distinction between evil and ordinary sin. It is not their sins per se that characterize evil people, rather it is the subtlety and persistence and consistency of their sins. This is because the central defect of the evil is not the sin but the refusal to acknowledge it … Their 'crimes' are so subtle and covert that they cannot clearly be designated as crimes.[43]

Notwithstanding all the self-deception and the hypocrisy that we observe in those who kill life – biological, psychological, and spiritual life – we would be mistaken if we thought that *everything* is evil in individuals whom Peck calls 'evil people'. Is it not preferable to speak of 'evil-doers' because, despite their bad conduct, there always remains an element of goodness in them?[44] Shakespeare alludes to this in these cryptic two verses:

> There is some soul of goodness in things evil.
>
> Would men observingly distil it out.[45]

An instance of the goodness that subsists is the sense of worth and dignity in defeated and crushed people who turn angry when their freedom is denied. May explicates this phenomenon very well:

> The fact that such a great amount of hatred is generated when people have to give up their freedom proves how essential a value freedom is for them. Often the person in actual life who has had to surrender much of his freedom, usually in his childhood when he could do nothing about it, and to give up some of his right and room to exist as a human being, may seem on the surface to have accepted the situation and 'adjusted to' the surrender. But we do not need to penetrate far under the surface to discover that something else has come in to fill the vacuum – namely hatred and resentment of those who have forced him to give up his freedom. To be sure the hatred is repressed; for the slave is not permitted to express hating thoughts toward the masters; but it is there nonetheless, and may come out … It has the function of preserving some dignity, some feeling of his own identity, as though the person – or persons, in the case of nations – were

[42]Wiesel, in Elie Wiesel and Michaël de Saint-Cheron, *Evil and Exile*, trans. by Jon Rothschild and Jody Gladding, 2nd edn (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 40.

[43]Peck, *People of the Lie*, p. 69.

[44]Stavrogin is an example of awful, callous and cruel behavior, and yet not without a few passing elements of goodness in him, in Dostoevsky's novel *The Possessed*, aptly and subtly described by Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of Good in History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 249–51.

[45]*King Henry V*, Act 4, scene 1, verses 4–5.

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> to be saying silently to their conquerors, 'You have conquered me, but I reserve the right to hate you'.[46]

In our competitive societies, many come to hate someone who has placed, voluntarily or involuntarily, hurdles in their way, thus preventing them from achieving some goal they thought paramount. Then the frustration turns into wish for revenge, scapegoating, hatred and denigration.

The consequence is the dehumanizing of others:

> One of the worst things that we can do to our fellow human being is deprive them of their humanity, render them worthless by exercising the psychological process of dehumanization. This occurs when the 'others' are thought not to possess the same feelings, thoughts, values, and purposes in life that we do. Any human qualities that these 'others' share with us are diminished or are erased from our awareness. This is accomplished by the psychological mechanisms of intellectualization, denial, and the isolation of affect.[47]

We notice here a decision to ignore any worth in the 'others'; this denial is meant to legitimate and buttress a hatred of them. Once a large portion of human beings (Jews, Blacks, Slavs, Arabs, or many other ethnic groups) have been dehumanized, the racists who have turned against them do not apply any moral standard in their fight against them.

On the other hand, dehumanizing often amounts to indifference to what one does to victims. In this respect, the psychologist Roy Baumeister points out:

> The perpetrator wants something and is using violence or harm to get it. If he gets it, presumably it doesn't matter much to him whether the victim suffers or not. The victim's suffering is merely a means to an end. The evildoer may be totally indifferent to the victim's fate or may even conceivably feel sorry for the victim. The perpetrator may tell himself with some truth that he did not want or intend his victim to suffer.[48]

Baumeister adds: 'To care about the victim only makes the perpetrator's task harder and more unpleasant'.[49] Elsewhere he declares: 'Most people whose acts are condemned as evil do not see their own actions as evil. For example, they may recognize that they harm or exploit someone but believe that the action is justified or that the victim deserved to be treated that way'.[50]

Another attitude, namely paranoia, is also involved:

> One of the most profound aspects of evil is that he who does the evil is typically convinced that evil is about to be done to him. He regards the world or

[46]May, *Man's Search for Himself* (New York: Norton, 1953), pp. 148–49.
[47]Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*, pp. 222–23.
[48]Baumeister, *Evil*, p. 124.
[49]Baumeister, *Evil*, p. 125.
[50]Baumeister, 'Human Evil: The Myth of Pure Evil and the True Causes of Violence', in *The Social Psychology of Morality: Exploring the Causes of Good and Evil*, ed. by Mario Mikulincer and Phillip R. Shaver (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2012), p. 368.

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> at least part of it as dangerous or bent on destruction and therefore something justifiably to be destroyed.[51]

As suggested before, the justification of hatred requires a good amount of self-righteousness and of self-deception. As Jesus said on the cross, having in mind the chief priests, councillors, and people who had insisted that Pilate had the duty to crucify him, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing' (Lk 23:34; see 1 Tim 1:13b). Nevertheless, such people think that they *do* know and that they live in truth. Hence, Jesus called the Pharisees 'blind' (Mt 23:16, 17 & 24), unmasked their 'blindness' (Mt 23:19) and, designating them as 'blind guides', commented, 'if one blind person guides another, they will both fall into a pit' (Mt 15:14).

In addition, after curing the blind man, he declared:

> 'I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind'. Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see', your sin remains' (Jn 9:39–41).

This blindness is associated with hatred for light: 'People loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed' (Jn 3:19b–20).

Jesus uncovered the source of their evilness:

> You are from your father the devil and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies (Jn 8:44).

Centuries before Jesus, a psalmist, describing an obdurate sinner, exclaimed: 'All day long you are plotting destruction. Your tongue is like a sharp razor, you worker of treachery. You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking the truth. You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue' (Ps 52:2–4).[52]

7. Resentment, revenge, and a religious response

One of the deleterious factors in the perpetration of evil is the fact that, in their state of confusion, human beings are unable to question their evil forms of behaving. Having taken, without serious critical considerations, a series of incremental selfish decisions, people become so accustomed to their evil conduct that they believe it is the *only* way to accomplish something in their existing society or in the world at

[51] Smelser, in *Sanctions for Evil*, p. 17.

[52] The phenomenon of falsification is increasing. Through a pernicious use of artificial intelligence, adversaries can now produce fake news and declarations that are indistinguishable from actual news or declarations.

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large. They are convinced that no other way can solve or mitigate their individual or collective problems.

In endeavouring to diminish a particular evil – other people's evil – they have recourse to another particular evil – their own evil – which they construe as a solution, with the result that evil is augmented. They fail to realize that, far from undertaking to crush or eliminate other people, the only solution consists in adopting attitudes that allow God to replace their heart of stone with a heart of flesh (Ezek 36:26). Hence this warning by Abraham Heschel:

> The problem of living does not begin with the question of how to take care of the rascals, of how to prevent delinquency or hideous crimes. The problem of evil begins with the realization that all of us blunder in our dealings with our fellow men. The silent atrocities, the secret scandals, which no law can prevent, are the true seat of moral infection. The problem of living begins, in fact, in relation to our own selves, in the handling of our emotional functions, in the way we deal with envy, greed, and pride.[53]

Surely therefore, a lack of imagination accounts, at least partly, for the strength of the demonic. So are people who are drifting, adopting false principles of conduct, being led astray, and resenting the noble persons who stand for truth – all wrong reflexes that oppose 'the Spirit of truth' (Jn 15:26) and that are tantamount to what the Gospel of John calls 'the world' (Jn 1:10, 15:18–19, and 17:14–16)?

That the demonic forces spring from awfully potent developments is illustrated by Stalin's Gulags, by Hitler's 'final solution', by the French Resistance's vengeful executions, by Mao Zedong's 'cultural revolution', by Pol Pot's executions, by Putin's ravaging war against Ukraine, and by the Hamas terrorists who were filmed as revelling in the joy of killing more than 1,400 Jewish civilians in October 2023.[54] Accordingly, in 2004, two authors wrote:

> The litany of recent genocidal events is both long and depressing, including major massacres in Uganda, Cambodia, Rwanda, Burundi, Zaire, Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, Hercegovina, among others. The beginning of the 21st century has not provided much relief either.[55]

Yet evil forces are not totally compelling. Against them, a resolute trust in the forces of goodness are not ineffective if they are accompanied by an intelligent realism, an eyed-open practicality, and a courageous determination regarding what can and must be attempted. Amidst the victory of evil – either patent or ignored by most people – a mediocre faith will not suffice. An anaemic faith or a loss of faith, which sadly characterizes our twenty-first-century world, brings about, in certain quarters, a severe

[53] Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 383.

[54] See Hanna Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd edn (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1967).

[55] Craig A. Anderson and Nicholas L. Carnagey, 'Violent Evil and the General Aggression Model', in *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil*, p. 168.

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diminution of collective meaning, a forgoing of community, and despair in the presence of evil, especially in difficult circumstances such as the worldwide pandemic that we experienced in 2020–22 and that recurred in 2023–2024.[56]

Thus, Heschel insists on the religious nature of any appropriate response:

> The Biblical answer to evil is not the good but the *holy*. It is an attempt to raise man to a higher level of existence, where man is not alone when confronted with evil. Living in the 'light of the face of God' bestows upon man a power of love that enables him to overcome the powers of evil.[57]

Fortunately it happens, more often than we are perhaps capable of imagining, that what Heschel calls the 'power of love', namely, the structures of grace, created by both God and human agents, withstand the structures of sin, which embody the demonic.[58] At time's end, that is, at the Last Judgment, earthly solidarity in goodness will prove to have been stronger than the powers of evil.

As Potia, a protagonist in a play by Shakespeare, put it,

> How far that little candle
> throws his beams
> So shines a good deed
> in a naughty world.[59]

Meanwhile however, those who have succumbed to evil do receive, without exception, a divine succour, thanks to which at least some of them are converted and thus join the communion of saints. As George Eliot observed, 'The repentance which cuts off all moorings to evil, demands something more than selfish fear'.[60] As a consequence, insofar as those who have perpetrated horrible crimes are concerned, we must earnestly pray for them while being vigilant regarding decayed political-social-economic mentalities and structures, which almost inevitably set up conditions propitious to the emergence of horrible crimes.

8. Conclusion

This article has examined several kinds of ideas, stances and responses to particular situations, which shed light on the various routes onto which men and women engage as they succumb to evil. Perhaps, the most frequent theme of this essay is the potential destructiveness of those who think that human life is meaningless.

[56]Tallis, an unbeliever, honestly and fairly weighs the pros and cons of secularist humanism. For our purposes here, I am drawing my readers' attention to 'What secularism cannot offer', namely, among the several benefits of religious faith, 'Profound belonging', 'Convergence of meaning and purpose', and 'Consolation'. See his *Seeing Ourselves*, pp. 343–46.

[57]Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 376.

[58]For a vivid illustration of a Jesuit priest who was his best self in a harrowing situation, see Walter J. Ciszek, *With God in Russia*, ed. by Daniel L. Flaherty, 2nd edn (New York: HarperOne, 2017).

[59]Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act V, Scene 1.

[60]George Eliot, *Wise, Witty and Tender Sayings* (Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1875), p. 190.

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Another important idea that pervades it is that notwithstanding its power, the demonic is not infinite. Although it exercises endless negative effects, it ever stands in situations within which the infinite good may triumph. It is not easy, of course, to be patient regarding the prolonged duration of situations in which evil does triumph. Nonetheless our just Judge declared: 'At the set time that I will appoint I will judge with equity' (Ps 75:2).

Consequently, one ought never to demonize an individual or a group as if they were *absolute* evil; this would equal succumbing to the Manichaean view of the world. Nevertheless, extremely evil people may be rightly seen as embodying evil, albeit not totally. Hence, thanks to divine grace a hopeful attitude is always justified with respect to anyone, persecutor or victim.

To sum up what has been my aim: In twenty-first-century theology, the idea of the demonic can and must very adequately exercise a function that the demon or the demons have fulfilled in many religious traditions, Christian and non-Christian. Indeed, this function, provided it is critically understood, is essential to faith in Jesus, as it provides a way of understanding and coping with evil, in a manner that is worthy of Christian hope.

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