

The solution to human evil: a transpersonal perspective

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The question of evil is one of the great ignored or side-stepped issues in humanistic psychology. Partly this is a result of a postmodern climate that simply does not offer us the conceptual wherewithal to consider effectively the nature of evil. Mainly, however, our difficulty is that a defining and distinguishing feature of the humanistic approach in psychology has always been its relentlessly positive and optimistic view of human nature. Typically this has been contrasted with the negative and pessimistic assumptions of the more traditional psychological paradigms, such as psychoanalysis and behaviourism.

I define moral evil, after the moral philosopher John Kekes in his important book Facing Evil, as undeserved harm caused by people. In my view this evil is a real and significant aspect of the human condition which cannot and should not be ignored, especially by a psychology that claims to be humanistic. In contrast with the assumptions often attributed to psychoanalysis and person-centred theory, human nature is, in my opinion, fundamentally amoral - in itself neither evil nor good. However, while our nature is amoral, our potential, both as a species and as individuals, is to develop either for good or for evil.

In order to understand how these potentialities emerge, and how good rather than evil may be promoted, we need to acknowledge the contribution of both unconscious and conscious factors in the developmental process. Although the unconscious, as an aspect of human nature, is originally and basically amoral, it develops to include one important functional component that, in certain circumstances, can become a source for much of the evil that human beings create in the world. This component is the shadow - those personal qualities and characteristics that are unacceptable to the ego, which consequently defends against them. One of the most important of these ego defence mechanisms is projection, in which the unacceptable shadow characteristics

are cast out from the self and are perceived as being located in something external - usually in other people. This unconscious phantasized projection generally causes a corresponding conscious moral devaluation of its object, which in turn leads us to behave towards the innocent person or group in harmful ways. In practice this may range from the comparatively minor damage caused by a snub or hurtful comment to the major evils of rape, torture, murder and ethnic cleansing.

In addition to the evil that may be caused by unconscious shadow projections we also need, as John Kekes, M. Scott Peck and Erich Fromm have all importantly recognised, to acknowledge the reality of character evil. In this, it is the ego-persona system that is the principal, direct cause of evil, not the shadow. The individual thus develops a conscious personality structure that is itself evil. In other words we develop character traits that are vicious, in the literal sense that they are full of vice.

How is such a vicious development of the self possible? The simple answer, of course, is that personality development is the result of socialisation and enculturation. By introjecting the behaviours, views, values, expectations and opinions of others, communicated via rewards and punishment, behavioural example, language, ideology and cultural mores, the child acquires a socialised self-system, persona, and self-concept. If these introjects are themselves vicious, then the child will inevitably develop a potentially evil-producing character structure.

According to John Firman and Ann Gila in their excellent book The Primal Wound, although this damaging process of socialisation may be typical, it is not inevitable or natural, but represents a basic failure of empathic concern for the developing child that often results in neglect and abuse. They argue that children are traumatised into developing a false self, or survival personality, because of the failure of adult caretakers to empathise with and mirror accurately the child's own experience. In this way, the child is unable to acquire an authentic self-system, based on reflected knowledge and acceptance of its own total Being. In its place, the child develops a false-self system, based upon adapting to the non-empathic behaviours, values and opinions of the caretakers.

Carl Rogers suggests that adults achieve this manipulative moulding through their conditional love and conditional approval of the child. In this way the child gradually learns how it must think, feel and behave in order to receive the love and approval of its parents and other significant figures. These imposed "conditions of worth" are

eventually incorporated into the child's self-concept and thereby become characteristic features of its persona, or survival personality. The remedy for this damaging process, according to Rogers is for the adult's attitude to the child to be based on unconditional love or unconditional positive regard. Only if love and respect are unconditional will the child experience a psychological and social atmosphere in which it is possible and safe to become what he or she truly is.

In my view, the failures of empathy and unconditional love are not simply features of the primal wounding of the child, but are general characteristics of the psychology of evil. Thus moral evil results when people treat others (or themselves) as things or objects, or when there is a failure of concern for their welfare. If we truly empathise with people, treating each person as a Thou, rather than an It, and if we simultaneously show them moral regard and concern, then personal moral evil (or, character evil) is simply not possible. If either of these conditions is not met, then various kinds of moral evil can occur.

This argument is illustrated in Figure 1. Here I distinguish firstly between empathy and egocentrism. In empathy, there is understanding of the experience and needs of another (or of the larger reality of the whole Self), whereas from an egocentric or narcissistic position, there is awareness only of one's own limited egoic experience and needs. Secondly, I distinguish between benevolence and malevolence. Benevolence is essentially having good will towards oneself or others, wishing them well, and showing concern for their welfare. Malevolence is ill will, or wishing someone harm. The diagram recognises that egocentrism and empathy, and benevolence and malevolence, can exist in varying degrees. Also, importantly, that these two dimensions seem to be more or less independent. In other words, a high degree of empathy can coexist with either benevolence or malevolence. The various combinations and degrees of egocentrism-empathy and benevolence-malevolence give rise to different potentials for good and evil. If there is both empathy and benevolence, then moral good is the likely outcome, whether expressed as compassionate action, care, sympathy, or interest in others. If both egocentrism and malevolence predominate, then we have the potential for the evils of neglect, antipathy, abuse and enmity.

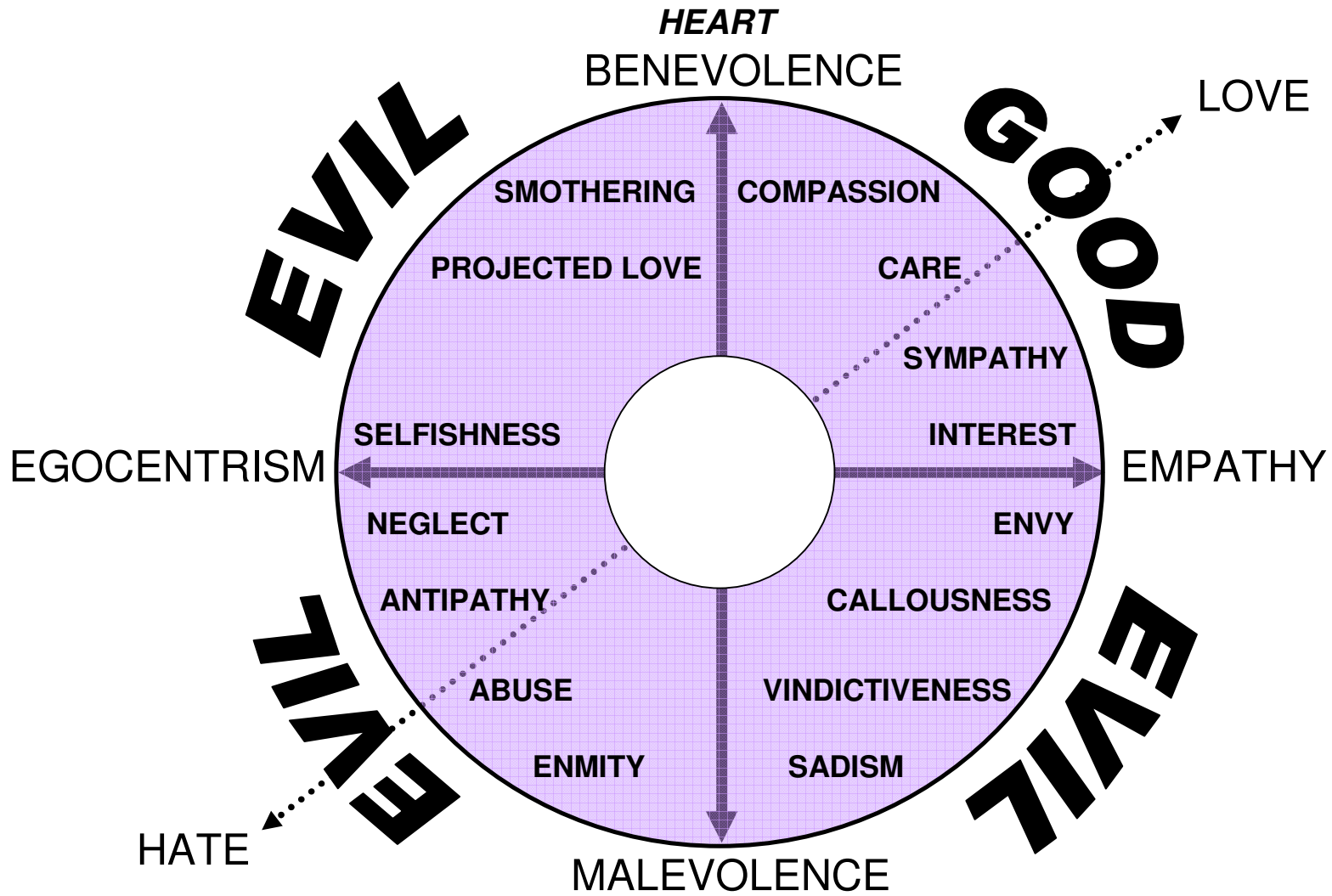


Figure 1: The Wheel of Virtue and Vice

Other kinds of evil are possible, however, when egocentrism is combined with benevolence, or empathy with malevolence. Consider, for example, the infatuated lover or smothering parent who, despite what may be intense feelings of good will and concern for the other, is unaware of the actual experience of their partner or child and instead projects their own needs onto the relationship. Such narcissistic projection is inherently damaging to the other person because it is non-empathic and distorting. Then there are those forms of evil in which the person seems to understand certain aspects of another's experience, but who is malevolently envious, or who sadistically delights in the other's suffering.

Although I have emphasised the dimensions of empathy-egocentrism and benevolence-malevolence in determining the potentialities for good and evil, an additional factor in the manifestation of these potentials is personal effectance, or the power to act. In practice a person may be both empathic and benevolent, but may lack the power, capacity or skill to effect beneficial action. Similarly, a person may be non-empathic and malevolent, but is fortunately prevented from engaging in evil action through personal weakness or by strong social controls.

According to this model, the basic solution to character evil lies in the development of empathy and benevolence, or the head and the heart. In order to promote moral good, we also need to encourage personal effectiveness and a hands-on approach in our moral dealings with other people. To do these things, we need to replace the vicious circle of non-empathic primal wounding and malevolent socialisation with a virtuous circle of empathic responding, benevolence and moral effectance. To see how this may be done, we need to understand more clearly the function of significant others in creating and defining the self. Heinz Kohut calls these significant others "selfobjects" and psychosynthesis refers to them as "unifying centres". In object relations theory they are known simply as "objects". In this discussion I shall use the term "self-centre" to refer to these defining and unifying selfobjects.

Self-centres are often individual people, but they also include groups, norms, customs, values, roles, beliefs, ideologies and worldviews. Since the self exists, and

can exist, only in relationship, these self-centres reflect and re-present the individual's experience, and in this way serve to define and maintain the self-system. Because they are fundamental to the self's very existence, representational images of external self-centres are incorporated psychologically and thereby come to function as internal centres with which the subjective self maintains an interior relationship.

The assumption in all this is that if external self-centres are distorting, damaging or evil, they will produce distorted self-systems and damaged or evil characters. We actually know quite a lot about the ways in which manifest evil results from people's relationships to significant others that are either non-empathic or malevolent, or both. There is extensive research, for example, on the traumatising and damaging effects of inadequate or abusive parenting, or of growing up in an emotionally disturbed and conflicted family environment. Social psychological studies have also shown that people are less likely to act to help a victim when they observe other people who fail to act, and will themselves inflict what they believe to be life-threatening pain when ordered to do so by someone in authority. Furthermore, members of groups will conform to harmful behaviours and, when occupying a social role that permits actions that harm others, people will often act in ways that fulfil this malevolent role. Here the actions of others, or the authority of the leader, or group ties, or a social role, act as non-empathic or malevolent self-centres in relation to which the individual becomes seemingly incapable of empathic and benevolent moral action.

According to this analysis, the solution to human evil must recognise the centrality of empathy and benevolence in the moral equation, and the need for a relationship with external and internal self-centres that represent and express these qualities, thereby enabling the self to experience its connection to the total reality of its Being. In practice, such empathic and benevolent self-centres may include:

- Significant others such as empathic and benevolent parents, friends, mentors, therapists, or spiritual teachers.
- Universal moral values and principles.
- Religious, social and political ideologies that express values of universal empathy and benevolence.

- Internal archetypal images of empathy and benevolence, such as the Realised Self, Buddha, Christ, the Virgin Mary, Krishna, God or Goddess.
- For those who have been able to discover these within the self, perhaps as a result of spiritual practice, there are also the soul, which I understand as the benevolent spiritual heart, and the Transcendent Witness, or our empathic spiritual head.

Only in relation to these empathic and benevolent self-centres, can the self begin the process of healing the damage caused by the influence of non-empathic and malevolent centres. Such healing can be viewed as a process of self-knowledge and self-realisation, an important component of which is the acknowledgement and integration of both the personal and collective shadow. This process may involve personal therapy, the further development of moral consciousness, fundamental changes in relationships or in religious or political affiliation, or spiritual practice of one kind or another.

It is also important, however, not to see the phenomenon of evil as a purely personal or psychological problem. This would open us up to the charge of psychologism. Ken Wilber's quadrant model provides one important way forward in this respect. According to Wilber it is important to recognise both the interior-exterior and the individual-collective aspects of any phenomenon. If we apply this to the phenomenon of evil, then we might come up with something like that illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. The Quadrants of Good & Evil

| | INTERIOR | EXTERIOR |
|------------|--|--|
| INDIVIDUAL | Self & identity Moral development Psychotherapy Meditation & spirituality | Drug treatment Behaviour therapy Token economy Psychosurgery |
| COLLECTIVE | Myths Cultural values Ideology and religion World View | Laws and customs Institutions Language and propaganda Economic system |

Firstly, we have the individual-interior quadrant. This is the quadrant of inner psychological experience. In relation to morality and evil it is the quadrant of moral and spiritual consciousness, of empathic awareness, of the development of moral judgement, character and personality, and of psychotherapy and self-realisation. One of the ways in which we can seek to promote human goodness and tackle moral evil is by working directly on these aspects of our Being. For many people, especially psychologists and psychotherapists, this may seem the most important quadrant to address. However, the important implication of Wilber's quadrant model is the need to examine also the other three perspectives.

In the exterior-individual quadrant we look at individuals from the outside and respond to their external behaviours. In the moral sphere, this is the quadrant that addresses the question of how we should attempt to control the person who is behaving in an evil fashion, and how we might seek to replace antisocial with prosocial behaviour. This quadrant seeks external solutions to individual evil, such as restraint or imprisonment, the imposition of training programmes or regimes of reward and punishment, or the use of medication or psychosurgery to control aggressive behaviour.

Next we have the interior-collective quadrant. Here we look at groups, societies and cultures from the perspective of the insider who has a shared understanding. In terms of morality, this is the quadrant of cultural values, beliefs, myths, ideologies and worldviews. In practice, many of these aspects of collective experience are manifestly evil. By way of example we may cite myths of racial superiority, religious doctrines such as that women or black people have no soul, and political ideologies that are fascist, despotic or that permit slavery. The demands of morality clearly require that such cultural features should change, yet because this is a quadrant of interior experience, it is not possible to alter this from the outside, or to impose alternative, morally better perspectives in any direct way. Instead, change must develop from the inside, perhaps as a result of the efforts of enlightened and brave members of the community who dare to challenge the dominant evil consensus.

Finally, there is the exterior-collective quadrant. This refers to those social structures that are observable from the outside. These include laws and customs, institutions, the use of language to maintain shared perspectives or as a means of propaganda, and the economic system. In many cases, these social structures support a system that is itself evil or provide the social context in which evil is nurtured. Although it may be hard to break customs or change the way in which people use language, governments do have powers to propagandise, to pass laws, to reform institutions and to modify the economic system. In fact this is perhaps the most immediate and direct way in which evil can be tackled within society. Thus, for example, the establishment in Britain of the National Health Service and the introduction of laws against racial and sexual discrimination are undoubted victories for good. Equally, however, governments can, and often do, use their powers for evil, for example in the passing of the Nuremberg Laws defining the status of Jews in Nazi Germany. Another important element in the exterior-collective approach to evil, as Ervin Staub has shown in The Roots of Evil, is the importance of eliminating the social conditions that produce hardship, stress and frustration since these are the conditions in which evil can propagate. Although once again this may be in the hands of those with political power, it is not only governments who have the ability to instigate changes in social structures. In this respect we should not underestimate the power of pressure groups, the media and political commentators. Neither also, should we forget that we all also live in micro-societies such as family groups, clubs and organisations in which many of us have the power to bring about significant social change, either for good or ill.

My purpose in identifying and describing these quadrants is to emphasise that the solution to evil should ideally work on all four quadrants. It is not enough to enact laws if we do not also attend to people's values and beliefs. Nor can we expect evil to disappear in the world by devoting ourselves to a life of purely personal development, whether through psychotherapy or spiritual discipline, if in so doing we ignore urgent social and political realities such as suffering and injustice. And, of course, it will never be sufficient to rely solely on an approach that simply advocates locking up or punishing offenders or subjecting them to psychological or medical treatment.

The mistake entailed in each of these perspectives is that of ignoring the value and importance of the others. The significance of each is its own unique contribution to the total picture, which must be seen from an all-quadrant perspective. There is still much work to be done towards understanding the ways in which development occurs within these quadrants. However, according to Wilber, there are in fact very close parallels between the evolutionary patterns or waves of development that may be seen in each quadrant. At its simplest, he argues, there is a general three-stage evolution from the prepersonal and presocial, to the personal and social, to the transpersonal and spiritual.

This evolutionary pattern has, I believe, important implications for our understanding of moral development and of the nature of good and evil. I have argued that moral action depends upon the development of empathy and benevolence, of head and heart. In simple terms, empathy is present whenever a person moves beyond an egocentric perspective to an understanding of the experiences of others (or of the larger self). Yet empathy may have a lesser or a greater span. Thus some people may be able to empathise only with their immediate family or friends, others also with members of their own gender or peer group, or with those who share the same nationality or ethnicity. Perhaps a minority is capable of extending the capacity for empathy to all people. Here we see empathy as something that may expand during the course of development in a way that parallels the general evolutionary movement from individual-egocentric to personal-social to global-transpersonal. In a similar way we can perhaps also understand the development of benevolence as involving an increase in moral span, in other words an expansion in the number and range of people for whom we show moral concern and whom we consider as a Thou rather than an It. At the highest levels of transpersonal development, as Wilber argues in Integral Psychology, moral consideration may extend beyond the human realm to encompass all sentient beings or even the whole of reality.

From this transpersonal perspective, good is brought into the world and evil is countered through the development of our human capacity for moral consciousness, as expressed in all four of Wilber's quadrants. Yet consciousness is not enough, for

we also need the ability and willingness to act directly and effectively in accordance with our moral consciousness. In other words, we also need skilful and willing hands. Good and evil arise in the human head and heart, and our moral destiny is literally in our own hands. There is no other solution. Evil is not a mysterious, unknowable, demonic reality that possesses or infects us. Evil is a part of the human equation. It is as familiar to us as our own face. Indeed it is the human face, as seen at our most non-empathic, malevolent or ineffectual moments. Moral evil arises as a result of our human capacity for ego-consciousness and personal being. It exists because we exist. The radical solution to evil can only be for human consciousness in all its manifestations to develop beyond egocentrism and the wounded self-system towards a truly transpersonal foundation based upon an ever-expanding empathy and benevolence, and an increasing capacity to act according to our conscience. In this way we pave the way for the true realisation of the Self - in the sense of the whole person connected to the whole of reality. In my opinion such realisation of the Self is simultaneously the realisation of the human spirit. Indeed it is this spirit, I believe, that is the deep source of our moral consciousness and the true Ground of empathy and benevolence.

Further Reading

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Acknowledgements

This article is an edited reworking of "Towards a transpersonal psychology of evil" originally published in Transpersonal Psychology Review, 5(1), 2001.

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