

## The Nature of Good and Evil

If God is good where does evil come from? The Bible talks of the devil but in many ways the idea that there is some sort of "being" responsible for evil creates as many problems as it solves.

The fundamental Christian belief is in one all powerful God yet he battles with the devil and they seem evenly matched. Surely that makes the devil an evil deity, a bad god = two Gods? If you do what the devil wants why would he punish you? Then there is the idea that if you displease God you will go to hell and be tormented by the devil - so does the devil work for God and punish those who have displeased God? **Hardly satisfactory.** We have to remember that the Bible was written a long time ago and people had ways of describing what they didn't understand. For example Jesus "cast out evil spirits". Today we might see that as Jesus curing those afflicted by mental illness. I would suggest "devil" is a place-holder for whatever the nature of evil is. I believe that thanks to Darwin we can understand what evil is and can replace the place-holder.

Stephen Fry described the behaviour of a particular wasp which paralyses a cockroach and lays its eggs on it - its grubs then eat the cockroach alive. Fry posed the question "How can anyone believe that a compassionate God created such a horrible thing? It has to be the result of evolution". I would turn the question around. If Fry is simply the result of evolution why on earth would he feel compassion for a cockroach?

Animals behave in a manner we would describe as evil. For example when a younger stronger lion ousts an older incumbent and takes over a pride the first thing he will do is kill any young cubs. This makes perfect sense in terms of evolution as it means the females will come into season sooner and can start producing his offspring. In the natural world the only motivation, and the driving force of evolution, is that of self interest - generally resulting in brutality and exploitation. We have a choice. We can either assume that the natural world was created by the devil or that it is what God created and we must accept that that is **how** nature works, that is **why** nature works. We do not live in a zoo and God is not a zoo-keeper. There is no getting away from the fact that the natural world is harsh, brutal, beautiful, dynamic, and merciless. What in the natural world is "natural behaviour" in man might be described as "behaving like animals" = evil. There is no problem in explaining Evil, Darwin in effect did that. What requires an explanation is what we describe as "Good".

We should perhaps avoid the assumption that God created the world simply for our benefit but while we share the world with the rest of his creation it is reasonable to assume that God has a special place for us. After all we are the only creature on the planet capable of appreciating the enormity of his creation and of relating to him the creator. When God created us he implanted in us his desire that we create a society based on compassion and the intelligence to understand the concept which animals do not possess. Even Stephen Fry, an atheist, feels this hence his question. Jesus' message resonates so powerfully because it puts into words - and clarifies - what was already there. Thus man is both a part of the natural world and apart from the natural world. A part of his nature is his natural, evolved inheritance. This helps him survive and while not itself evil gives him the potential to be evil. The conflict of good and evil is the conflict between doing what we know God wants us to do and reverting to nature, - to self interest, exploitation and brutality, to following the devil within us.

I suggest that everything we call evil can be explained by evolution. We are essentially a pack animal - we refer to human "packs" as "tribes" but it is the same thing and the fact that we now live in cities does not change our basic nature. The leader of any pack gets first go at the food, mates with most females, and is in a position to ensure his offspring are well fed. In evolutionary terms the ideal strategy. The desire for power is part of man's natural inheritance.

It is the strongest natural motivation and its ruthless pursuit and its misuse are the causes of greatest evil.

The desire for power is not exclusive to those who attain it, it can manifest itself at all levels of society by people who derive satisfaction by exerting power over someone weaker than they are, starting with the bully at school. At one extreme it can be the counter clerk who deliberately keeps you waiting, at the other, someone who picks a child off the street, tortures it then takes its life. The ultimate power trip - the power of life and death.

Another aspect of the pack animal is the desire to belong. A serious danger to survival is being rejected by the pack and having to survive outside of it. You are more likely to be picked on and thrown out if you are different, if you don't accept what everyone else accepts. The enormous power of peer pressure comes from this, as does the desire to be fashionable - same thing really. It also results in a widespread tendency to accept what everyone else accepts because it results in a sense of belonging. At one extreme people dress in a manner which is a source of embarrassment later in life, at the other people accept something which with the hindsight of history is abhorrent like slavery or racial segregation.

In our modern complex society there are all sorts of "packs" and each of us identifies with several - our country – our church – our football team - our political party - our racial identity.

Particularly evil is another aspect of the pack animal. His attitude to members of other packs. Essentially it is in an animal's own interests to look after members of his own pack (group security) while showing no mercy in driving away members of other packs to maintain his territory. Decent people will fail to look critically at what their own "pack" does while showing contempt for people they don't see as "one of them"; who are identifiably different. Thus the upper classes exploited the lower classes sending children down mines and into dangerous environments. White men saw black Africans as mere commodities to be sold as slaves. The Nazis fed Jews into gas chambers, Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland blew each other up, Jews treat the Palestinians with contempt, Hutu slaughtered Tutsi ... and at a different level entirely - Leeds supporters beat up Manchester United fans. All forms of sectarianism, while evil, are natural behaviour in terms of evolution.

This natural tendency is exploited in the army where the pack instinct of belonging is reinforced to the point where members of a unit will risk their lives to help other members. The other side of the coin is that the "other pack" instinct is also reinforced and labelled "the enemy" - someone dehumanised in training. A man who can be killed without remorse rather than someone's son, a child's father or a woman's husband. We are then shocked when soldiers in a war zone are not always paragons of virtue and get traumatised by their experience.

It is not even "natural" in terms of evolution for Steven Fry to feel compassion for a fellow human being unless he be a member of his particular circle (tribe) - never mind a cockroach. There is absolutely no problem in explaining evil, what St Paul described as "our sinful nature". It is "good" which does not fit in with the natural order - which requires explanation. God is that explanation. He wants us to rise above our natural inheritance. The fight between good and evil is the conflict between doing what God wants us to do or reverting to nature.

*John Kennaugh 2020*