**Defining Evil: Not Black and White; Gray**

Evil- profound immorality, wickedness, and depravity, especially when regarded as a supernatural force

Recently, three young men attempted to rob an off-duty police officer on the far South Side. The boys, 16 and 17 years old, drew guns and demanded the keys to the officer’s car. The officer, afraid for his life, drew his own gun and shot one of the teenagers dead. Was evil involved? Were the kids who pulled the gun on an innocent man at a gas station evil for intending to harm and steal from him? To answer that question, it is important to define what makes something evil. In order for evil to be present, three things must also be present: 1) The belief in a set of standard morals 2) One being capable of understanding those morals and 3) One willingly deviating from them.

In an interview later, the mother of the slain boy spoke about how she tried to help her son. She discussed all of the various programs and mentors he had throughout his upbringing. Someone watching the interview might conclude that the boy was a bad seed, they might cite the fact that even with all kinds of support, this boy was determined to do something wrong. But does this make him evil? Not according to his mother. She went on to say that a few years prior, the boy had had bacterial meningitis. He lived in a hospital for a year. She told of how he was changed after that experience, cynical, angry. He fell in with a crowd who felt the way he felt and he began to get in trouble with the law.

To label a person as evil is to align them with being amoral. Situations are often described as evil, such as slavery or the Holocaust, however, because a situation cannot believe in something, understand something, or willingly deviate from something (situations are not living and therefore cannot make choices), situations cannot be evil. This leaves the people in the situations who commit the “acts of evil” to assume the title based on the three afore mentioned criteria.

In order for evil to be present within a person, that person must first accept a certain set of morals. For instance, if a certain society believes that that people must wear clothing, then in order to be considered part of the society, one must agree with this belief. Because societies can have different beliefs, morals can vary widely. If, for instance, a child is raised in a household where they are taught to hit back if they are hit, but live in a society where this is considered amoral, then this child would qualify as evil to the rest of the society. But what if the morals of the family differ from that of society as a whole? Then a child cannot be labeled as evil because they are abiding by a different set of morals and therefore must reject contradicting morals. Further, if a child is too young to understand morals and thus truly believe in them, the child is exempt from criteria one and two. Because the child cannot believe in or understand morals, they do not know they are deviating from other morals. If the child does not fit all three criteria, they cannot then be considered evil.

In a study presented by the president of the American Psychological Association, Phillip Zombardo, people demonstrated what our society would consider to be evil behavior: they chose to inflict pain on others through electrical shock. Subject were given an order by someone they viewed as an authority, telling them to administer a shock to a complete stranger. The subjects of the study obeyed. Though the morals of our society dictate that we should not inflict pain on others, the results demonstrated that people did so when instructed to by an authority. Zombardo claimed that the participants did so not because they were evil, but because they found justification by changing their morals based on the instruction of an authority. They were able to reframe the situation’s context to comply with the “rules” being dictated. Because these people were able to make this moral shift, they could justify that they weren’t deviating, but following the morals with which they had just been aligned. Therefore, these people, according to the criteria, would not qualify as evil.

The other two teens in the police officer’s attack were not holding guns. They approached the boy holding the gun and also advanced toward the officer. Could they have been following orders? If one belongs to a group within a larger society, like a gang or area or neighborhood, then which society determines the moral standards? The conflict presents challenges to the argument of what is evil because, like a child raised in a household of hitters, the morals upheld by someone who belongs to a group may differ from that of a larger society. If the boys who did not point guns felt coerced into the robbery, were told by one of their authority figures (who could be other kids or outside influences) to commit this act, then, like the subjects of the study, they might justify their act by saying that they were “just following orders.”

Some might argue that changing one’s morals to fit certain situations is an act of deviance, however, this requires moral judgment to be placed on the morals, meaning that someone has to decide which moral is more moral. This argument is always subjective. If, for instance, someone decided that not wearing clothes in public is amoral, then this renders the morals of a nudist society invalid. If a child is taught not to hit others, then they would be deviant in a household that considers hitting to be moral. The question of which moral is more moral is subject to the interpreter, and it is for this reason that deviance, like that in the electrical shock experiment, is also subject to interpretation. Would we call a child wrong for learning not to hit? In a household that values self-reliance and physical power, that child might be morally heroic. Evil is always subject to the people interpreting the action. This is why one society accepts dictatorship and another rejects it. Within each society, though, the same three criteria can be applied and it will always be up to the larger group to decide what is or is not evil.