

THE SOCIAL  
PSYCHOLOGY OF  
GOOD  
AND  
EVIL

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*Edited by* Arthur G. Miller

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## ABOUT THE EDITOR

**Arthur G. Miller, PhD**, is Professor of Psychology at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He received his doctorate in social psychology from Indiana University in 1967 and spent 1979–1980 at Princeton University on a National Institute of Mental Health fellowship, studying with Ned Jones. Dr. Miller's professional affiliations include the American Psychological Association, the American Psychological Society, the Society of Experimental Social Psychology, and the Society for Personality and Social Psychology. He has written *The Obedience Experiments: A Case Study of Controversy in Social Science* (1986, Praeger) and edited *In the Eye of the Beholder: Contemporary Issues in Stereotyping* (1982, Praeger). Dr. Miller's primary teaching and research interests include stereotyping and stigma, biases in attribution and social judgment, and judgmental reactions to diverse explanations of evil and violence.

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**CHAPTER 5**


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## THE EVOLUTION OF EVIL

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On the evening of July 24, 2002, in the thriving city of Houston, Texas, Clara Harris got into her Mercedes Benz and killed her husband, David Harris, in the parking lot of a hotel. Using her car as the device of murder, she ran into him once. Her anger still not allayed, she circled the lot and ran over him again. Witnesses differ in precisely how many times she backed up and crushed her husband with the 4,000-pound vehicle. One said five times, another four, and a third witness indicated only twice. Video from the hotel security cameras revealed that the correct number was three. Some think that Clara Harris is evil and deserves to rot in jail for the remainder of her life. But some view the homicide as justifiable, or at least understandable.

The circumstance that elicited the homicide was David Harris's affair with Gail Bridges, his former office coworker. Clara Harris discovered the affair through a private detective, whom she had hired when her suspicions were initially aroused. The morning of his death, David Harris swore to Clara that he would end the affair. Later that night, Clara, along with her stepdaughter Lindsey, began to search for David Harris. When they finally tracked him down at a hotel, according to Lindsey, "She said she could kill him and get away with it for what she's been through." Indeed, Clara had gone to great efforts to win her husband back after she discovered his affair. She made herself "real pretty so Dad would want her and not Gail," Lindsey said. During the week before the murder, Clara Harris spent time at a tanning salon, a beauty shop, and a gym. She also consulted a plastic surgeon, inquiring about breast implants.

It might also have aggravated Clara that the hotel was precisely the one where Clara and David had gotten married a decade earlier—on Valentine's Day. When she saw her husband emerge from the hotel elevator with his mistress, the two hand-in-hand, Clara Harris went "ballistic." She ripped the blouse off her rival's body and wrestled her to the ground. Although she clearly intended to do more damage, her husband separated the two women, and Clara was firmly escorted out of the hotel by the clerk on duty. As she left the lobby, David shouted, "It's over! It's over! It's over!"

It was then that Clara Harris became strangely calm, according to her stepdaughter, Lindsey, who accompanied her out of the hotel. Clara silently got into her Mercedes, and her tears stopped flowing. Clara was cool and composed as she suddenly stomped on the accelerator and rammed the car into her husband. She then ran over him again and again. Her stepdaughter tried to exit the vehicle, but had to wait until Clara stopped the car and the damage had finally come to an end. "You killed my Dad," Lindsey said, when the car finally stopped. In light of the circumstances, many in Texas do not judge Clara's horrific deed as evil. Some think that David Harris got exactly what he deserved.

Can good and evil be evaluated from an evolutionary perspective? In this chapter, we consider several related issues:

Have humans evolved adaptations to commit deeds that most would consider "evil"?

Have humans evolved defenses against the perpetration of evil on them?

Do the apparently universal cognitive categories of "good" and "evil" have special functional uses, aiding humans in solving critical, adaptive problems?

### EVIL AS THE INFLECTION OF FITNESS COSTS

Evil has no direct analogue in the formal structure of evolutionary theory. Evolution by natural selection operates by the simple process of differential gene reproduction as a consequence of differences in heritable design. Heritable variants that lead to greater reproduction, compared with competing variants present in the population at the time, become represented in greater numbers in the next generation. Iterated over multiple generations, the process of selection leads to the evolution of adaptations that exist solely because they contributed, either directly or indirectly, to the reproductive success of their bearers. Thus, the process of natural selection is value-free. Whatever qualities lead to increased replicative success are those that evolve.

The evolutionary process of selection produces many products, and humans have little hesitation in labeling some of those products "good" and others "evil." At a first approximation, those we label as "evil" are behaviors or behavioral dispositions that result in a massive imposition of fitness costs on another individual or group. Indeed, as we argue later in the chapter, humans have evolved a specialized psychological categorization system for making these judgments.

The imposition of fitness costs on another individual can vary in magnitude from trivial to catastrophic. At the low end, someone bumping into you in the hall or stepping on your toe might be considered annoying, but probably not evil, unless these acts were repeated to the point of torture. At the high end are events such as robbing, maiming, rape, torture, and murder, with combinations of these usually viewed as embodying evil more fully than any considered alone. Intentional premeditated murder occupies the extreme end of the continuum, but within that broad class, some murders are considered to be more evil than others—murder with malice, murder without provocation, murder of young, defenseless children, murder of adolescent girls, serial murder, mass murder, and genocide. Some homicides, on the other hand, are considered excusable, justifiable, or even altruistic—for example, killing in self-defense, killing to protect a family member from harm, or killing to prevent a helpless stranger from being raped. Of course, as Baumeister (1997) points out, the judgment of the perpetrators and victims will surely differ in how evil these deeds are evaluated to be (a point that we will take up later). The key point here is that the acts we consider evil invariably involve the imposition of massive costs on victims, even though not all massive costs are considered to be evil.

By what metric do we judge acts to be costly? One contention of this chapter is that the deeds we view as evil occupy the extreme end of a continuum of reproductively relevant costs—that is, those that impose a massive fitness cost on the victim will be viewed to be the most evil. Humans, of course, do not think in these terms. We do not think to ourselves: "Gee, the damage done to Sally inflicts a large cost on her fitness, which impairs her relative gene replication . . . hence, it's evil." Rather, we propose that humans have evolved evaluative psychological mechanisms that function to gauge the magnitude of fitness costs inflicted on themselves, their allies, their children, and their extended families—roughly, the degree of evil. We have also evolved evaluative mechanisms to assess the magnitude of fitness benefits that others bestow on us and our vehicular allies—roughly, the degree of good. According to our evolutionary theory of good and evil, the degree of evil and of good judged by a person is partially a function of the person's degree of genetic relatedness to the person upon whom costs are inflicted or benefits are bestowed. Costs inflicted or benefits bestowed upon closer relatives would be more evil or good, respectively, than the

same amounts of costs or benefits accruing to more distant genetic relatives. Degree of evil or good is also a function of "strategic confluence," that is, the degree to which other individuals are allied with us in achieving some goal (Buss, 1996). Thus, extreme fitness costs inflicted on a close friend would be judged as more evil than comparable costs inflicted on a stranger or an enemy. Indeed, massive fitness costs inflicted on an enemy are often judged to be good. In sum, the degree of strategic confluence, including individuals who are either genetic kin or non-kin allies, is predicted to mediate the degree to which an intentionally inflicted fitness cost is judged to be evil.

In order for these evaluative mechanisms to have evolved, however, there must have been evolutionarily recurrent deeds that humans performed that correspond to these psychological categorizations. Thus, before exploring the evolution of human judgments of good and evil and the functions of these psychological mechanisms, we must first explore why people inflict extreme levels of egregious harm on other people.

### HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY AS THE END PRODUCT OF A COMPETITIVE EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

From an evolutionary perspective, modern humans are the end products of a long line of successful reproducers. Indeed, all humans are evolutionary success stories. Each one of us owes his or her existence to an unbroken chain of ancestors, each of whom did what was necessary to survive and reproduce. If any one of our ancestors or their ancestors had failed at these tasks—for example, by dying before reaching reproductive age, failing to find a mate, failing to best competitors in attracting a mate, or failing to keep their own offspring alive so that they could mate—we would not be here to ponder the momentous issues of good and evil. As end products of this vast chain of events operating over deep evolutionary time, modern humans carry with them the adaptations that led to their ancestors' success and the genes that contribute to the reliable development of these adaptations. These adaptations comprise our universal human nature.

Aside from genetically identical twins and lifelong monogamous mates, the fitness interests of all individuals are, to some degree, unique and diverge from each other. Stated differently, humans are, to some extent, reproductive competitors with other humans to become ancestors. Competition need not be direct and need not involve overt contests. Indeed, competitors need never meet for competition to ensue. Scramble competition, for example, involves striving for the acquisition of limited or better resources in the external environment. Intrasexual competitors can compete with each other in individual courtship displays to attract a particular mate. Parents can compete with other parents merely by investing

in their children's success. Although some of these forms of individual competition, such as investing in children, do not correspond to human intuitions about competition, they do embody competition at the formal level of natural selection, as much as two stags locking horns in direct combat or two humans clawing each other psychologically to get ahead in the status hierarchy.

Since all modern humans are the descendants of ancestors who succeeded countless times in direct and indirect competition, modern humans carry with them the competitive adaptations that led to their ancestors' success, and pass on the genes that contribute to the development of these adaptations to their children. Some of these adaptations function to inflict costs on other humans.

### WHY HUMANS INFLICT HARM ON OTHER HUMANS

At an abstract level, there are two fundamental strategies for besting a competitor in a fitness contest. One strategy involves the acquisition of benefits that aid fitness—for example, scrambling for superior access to resources, displaying more alluring attractant signals to a mate, bestowing on children resources that aid their reproductive success, or aiding one's kin in a manner that increases inclusive fitness (Hamilton, 1964). The other strategy involves inflicting costs on competitors—for example, impairing their access to resources, interfering with their mate attractant signals, or harming a competitor's kin.

In the world of nonhuman animals, both strategies are seen in great abundance. Baby birds compete for their parents' food resources by "begging" with beaks wide open, but they also sometimes push a sibling out of the nest and hence commit siblicide. Male scorpionflies compete for females by securing insects to feed them as part of the nuptial gift, but they also jostle competing males away from the female, inflicting physical costs on their rivals. Among humans, intrasexual strategies of mate competition involve both sending attraction signals (Buss, 1988) and verbally derogating rivals (Buss & Dedden, 1990; Schmitt & Buss, 1996). Although damaging a rival's reputation may not be considered "evil" in the grand scheme of things, from the victim's perspective, the lost social status and consequent failure in mate competition may seem evil. Indeed, these status losses sometimes drive people to kill those they perceive as having harmed them. The emotion of vengeance may have evolved as a defense designed to staunch such costs or deter others from inflicting similar costs in the future.

In summary, we can expect selection to have favored the evolution of some adaptations that function to inflict costs on intrasexual rivals specifically and conspecific competitors generally. These costs vary from small to

large in the currency of fitness damage to the recipient. As the fitness costs grow in magnitude, we become more and more inclined to label the actions as evil. According to our theory of the evolution of evil, humans have adaptations to inflict these costs—adaptations to steal rivals' resources, adaptations to damage rivals' reputations, adaptations to physically injure rivals, and adaptations to steal their mates. Humans also are likely to have evolved adaptations to kill (Buss & Dunton, 2003).

### KILLING AS PROTOTYPICALLY EVIL

Probably no other class of human action is judged to be more evil than premeditated murder, and there may be no other class of actions that inflicts a greater fitness cost on the victim (Buss & Dunton, 2003; Dunton & Buss, 2003). Although no formal theory is needed to tell us that it is bad to be dead, killing is worse for a victim's fitness than is currently recognized by any existing psychological theory, except the homicide adaptation theory (Buss & Dunton, 2003). First, by being killed, the victim forfeits all future reproduction. He loses sexual access to his current partner as well as all future mating opportunities he may have acquired if he remained alive. With his death, he is no longer around to invest in his children. His children's survival and reproduction become imperiled as a result of his untimely death. It is known that the death of a parent can impair the survival of children, in some cultures by as much as 10% (Hill & Hurtado, 1996). If the children live and his mate remarries, the victim's children become stepchildren—the single largest risk factor for physical abuse and child homicide (Daly & Wilson, 1988). Furthermore, the victim's extended kin—his brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces, grandparents and grandchildren—all become more vulnerable as a consequence of his death through the loss of his protection and the perception of his family as exploitable. And if all of these fitness costs are not bad enough, his rivals benefit from his death. His mate becomes a potential sexual partner for his rivals. His resources become available for their taking. And his rivals' children now have a competitive edge over the victim's own children. His death, in short, can become his rivals' gain. In summary, killing may inflict more momentous fitness costs on a victim than any other single act—such a consequence constitutes prototypical evil from the perspective of the victim and the victim's friends and kin.

Reversing the perspective from victim to perpetrator yields interesting insights. As a thought experiment, consider that your assignment, should you decide to accept it, is to outreproduce your rivals. You can achieve this goal by various means—for example, besting them in the quest for high-quality food, developing more hygienic practices to better combat parasites and diseases, cultivating strategies that succeed in better attract-

ing desirable mates, or investing more heavily or more skillfully in your children. But one remarkably effective strategy remains by which you could accomplish your mission in dramatic fashion—killing your rivals.

From the perspective of the inclusive fitness of the killer, killing a rival, in principle, can offer a bounty of benefits. By killing a rival, you may gain access to the rival's resources, since the rival is not around to protect them—resources such as land, food, tools, weapons, or shelter. Since rivals are often in competition for the same pool of potential mates, killing a rival can eliminate mating competition. The rival's existing mates become potential new mates for the killer. The killer's current and future children may have less competition in the next generation, thereby enhancing their fitness. The victim's losses, in short, can become a killer's gains.

This brief description of the potential benefits of killing a rival, of course, ignores the costs of killing, and indeed, killing can be a dangerous and costly strategy to carry out. Killers risk being injured or killed while attempting to carry out a murder. Even if "successful," the kin of the victim may extract revenge in the future. In some cultures, killers suffer retribution from the larger group. Furthermore, killing may harm the reputation of the perpetrator, hindering future access to social resources, including mates. The key point is *not* that killing is always, or even often, beneficial to the fitness of the killer. Rather, *killing historically has been potentially beneficial in the currency of reproductive fitness under some delimited circumstances* (i.e., when the risks are low, when costs are unlikely to be incurred, when the potential yield is large in magnitude, or when killing is the least costly strategy available amid an array of costly options). As a result of these benefits to the killer, combined with the costs to victims, as soon as homicide enters a population as a strategy, evolution will immediately select for coevolved defenses, resulting in an "arms race" of antagonistic coevolution.

#### DEPENDING AGAINST EVIL: ANTAGONISTIC COEVOLUTION

There can be little doubt that, from the victim's perspective, their killers or would-be killers would be considered evil. Before we consider the possible evolution of a universal cognitive category of evil, however, it is critical to consider the evolutionary events that would be set into motion once killing entered the human strategic repertoire. Because of the dramatic fitness costs of being killed, selection would act strongly to create defenses against killing—what we have called anti-homicide mechanisms (Duntley & Buss, 1998).

The intensity of selection is generally a function of two critical factors: (1) the fitness consequences, and (2) the frequency of the fitness-relevant

events. There is no doubt that being killed inflicts enormous fitness damage on victims, fulfilling the first criterion. Given the magnitude of damage, the frequency of killing need not be high at all for selection to act consistently and strongly in fashioning anti-homicide defenses. The lifetime odds of being killed in the United States are roughly 1 in 200; they are 1 in 26 for certain groups such as inner-city males (Ghiglieri, 1999). Among more traditional societies, such as the Ghibusi tribe of Africa or the Yanomamo of Venezuela, as many as 30% of all males die at the hand of their fellow humans (Chagnon, 1983; Ghiglieri, 1999). Even among the so-called "peaceful" !Kung San of Botswana, murder rates are higher than in Los Angeles or Detroit. Paleontological evidence, which reveals arrowheads lodged in rib cages and crushing blows to ancient skulls, points to a long human history of killing (Buss & Duntley, 2003).

Although it is impossible to determine with precision the exact frequency of homicide over the long course of human evolutionary history, available evidence suggests that it was likely to be far from uncommon. And given the large fitness impact of being killed, even small rates of killing, such as the 0.5% rate that exists currently in the United States, would easily have met the required criteria for selection to have operated to fashion anti-homicide defenses.

Indeed, humans likely have evolved many different types of anti-homicide defenses (Duntley & Buss, 2003). Stranger anxiety, for example, is an excellent candidate for an evolved anti-homicide strategy. It emerges predictably at 7–8 months of life, is specific to male strangers (who historically have been more dangerous to infants), and appears to be universal across cultures (Heerwagen & Orions, 2002; Marks, 1987; Marks & Nesse, 1994). Other potential anti-homicide defenses include ethnogenesis, fleeing mechanisms, mind-reading abilities specialized for detecting homicidal intent, and many others (Duntley & Buss, 2003).

Because humans risk getting killed in many different circumstances, a single anti-homicide adaptation would have been insufficient to combat all of the dangers. Being killed in infancy is different from being killed by an intrasexual rival in a status dispute as an adult. Being killed in a status dispute is different from being killed by a jealous mate who has suddenly discovered a sexual infidelity. Being killed by an enraged mate is different from being killed in tribal warfare. Given the many, varied, and evolutionarily recurrent circumstances in which the lives of humans have been endangered, selection will have forged a complex armament of defensive, anti-homicide devices.

Once anti-homicide defenses begin to evolve, however, killing becomes a more costly strategy to pursue. First, the success rate of the strategy becomes lower as a consequence of anti-homicide defenses, rendering fewer fitness benefits to the killer. Second, attempting to kill can be downright costly to the killer. Killers risk injury from intended victims, and they

