

Using Occam's Razor to Discern Evil

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In the 14th century William of Ockham gave us an analytical tool known as "Occam's Razor". When more than one theory exists to explain phenomena, the Razor is used to identify the theory most likely to be valid. Occam's Razor can be stated in nine words:

The simplest and most direct explanation
is usually correct.

Caution is indicated when applying the Razor. In the hands of an agenda driven dogmatist, the Razor can be mis-used. For example, Evangelical pseudo-scientists offer a single explanation for the origin of the fossil record: A global flood killed all ancient species and then created the fossil record from their remains, all over the course of 40 days.

The fundamentalist theory is simple, wouldn't you agree? More simple than the complicated theories of biologists, paleontologists, and archaeologists. Would Occam's Razor indicate the less complicated fundamentalist explanation is correct?

The answer is no. Occam's Razor can only be utilized to select between theories based in fact. There isn't any factual substantiation for the fundamentalist's alternative explanation of the fossil record. Theirs is only a belief, a religious guess.

Today we have come here to discuss evil; as such, we must define the term. Reduced to its fundamental, "evil" can be understood by its outcome: Harm. Evil harms. Injuries can be physical, spiritual, economic, psychological, or even karmic.

It is not against the law to tell a child she fails in school because she is dumb. It is not illegal to start a rumor that a co-worker has HIV. It is not illegal to tell a sibling that he was unwanted. Freedom of speech protects your right to gossip in the neighborhood about the "goddamned sodomites" who live down the street.

One should not make the mistake of equating evil with illegality. Most evil is legal.

Evil actions are sometimes committed by otherwise good people. For example, a normally kind and affirming person may dislike someone, and make an unfair, malicious statement about them, damaging their standing in the eyes of another. One more example might be a person who has just begun to discover enlightenment, but is still involved in suppressive religious actions such as the fight against women's bodies, and the fight against marriage equality. Her current activities are still harming others, and are therefore evil. In this case, however, there is hope. As enlightenment grabs hold and takes root, the transforming person will naturally begin to eliminate evil from her life.

There are also people who are evil. What distinguishes good people from evil people is the regularity with which they harm others. If evil is the norm rather than the exception, we should not be afraid to label such a person as evil.

Clinically, the Evil Personality Type can be diagnosed. Several dozen diagnostic indicators exist, and when a sufficient number are expressed, and when the totality of assessment so indicates, then the

diagnosis should be made.

As an aside, let me say to those present who hold advanced degrees in the social sciences, the Evil Personality Type is not a DSM categorical entry. Bear in mind that although inclusion in the DSM is validating, the DSM does not hold all truth. It was not so very long ago that the DSM categorized homosexuality as a mental illness.

In his seminal work entitled "People of the Lie"¹, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck has identified 32 objective criteria which can be used to diagnose the Evil Personality Type. In my line of work I have found this tool to be profoundly useful in identifying the presence of evil in people.

In situations of human enterprise, explanations are sometimes offered which justify benefit and obfuscate harm. Occam's Moral Razor searches for the presence of harm, and when it is found, cuts through all arguments of benefit and simply labels the enterprise for what it is: Evil.

Matters under examination are sometimes quite complicated, and therefore deep mining for facts is necessary. Consider the example of Ecuador's relationship with the United States over the last four decades.

In 1968 oil was found in Ecuador. Soon thereafter, the United States began to build infrastructure in that country. We loaned the Ecuadorian government money to build a 300 mile crude oil pipeline through the Andes. We loaned them money to build the Agoyan hydroelectric dam, which dams up the Pastaza River. We loaned them money to build an electrical grid, and roads. We loaned them money to build airports and seaports. All we required was that they use US companies to do the building of these "improvements." Not surprisingly, Ecuador became the 10th largest supplier of oil to the US.

OK, let's apply the Moral Razor. What good, and what evil can be found in this situation? To find the answer we must more deeply mine for facts. Between 1971 and 1992 Chevron-Texaco dumped four million gallons of toxic liquid waste into 350 uncovered waste pits... each day. During "modernization" by US construction companies, more than 30,000 indigent Ecuadorians were permanently displaced from their ancestral homes.

The trans-Andean pipeline has leaked more than 1/2 million barrels of oil into the fragile Ecuadorian rain forest. As a result of US driven modernization, Macaws and Jaguars have virtually vanished. Three indigenous tribes are virtually extinct, their lands having been taken in the quest for oil. The poverty level in Ecuador has grown from 50% to 70%, and underemployment has grown almost five fold, from 15% to 70%. Since 1968 public debt has increased 64 fold, from \$240 million to \$16 billion. Periodically Ecuador earns relief from their debt to the US by voting alongside the US at the United Nations.²

From the objective data two competing explanations can be generated. The first is that there was great benefit to the United States in the form of oil supply, work for US construction companies, and the creation of a reliable friend at the United Nations. The second explanation recognizes the harm which was done to the Ecuadorian people, their economy, and their ecosystem. Occam's Moral Razor slices to the heart of the matter: Because people, animals, and the environment were harmed, the actions of the United States were evil.

Let us now consider evil people. Unlike mathematics, physics, or chemistry, psychology is an inexact science. As such, caution is indicated when evaluating and diagnosing. The totality of circumstance, and not just the results of a single test must be considered when forming opinions and conclusions.

Peck describes 32 indicators for the Evil Personality Type. A minimum diagnostic threshold has not been established. It has been my experience in using Peck's indicators for the Evil Personality Type

that people generally score either a small value, say one or two, or a high value of 12 or more. There does not seem to be much middle ground. Typically someone has either a low score, or a high score.

Briefly, let's consider a few of Peck's indicators for the Evil Personality Type. Recall that no single characteristic is positive for diagnosis, and that many of these descriptors are observed in people who are not evil. What begins to distinguish the Evil Personality Type is how many of them are found. That noted, here is a sample from among the 32 criteria which Peck has identified:

- Extraordinarily willful
- Lusts for power
- Greedy
- Dedicated to preserving an image of perfection
- Willing to sacrifice others in order to preserve self-image
- Attempts to control others
- Will use legal methods to harm others
- Narcissistic
- Impenetrable
- When faced with reproach, the response is to lash out
- Avoids self-examination
- Those who are nearby will suffer
- Those who are nearby feel revulsion towards the individual

Peck's indicators certainly give pause for thought.

When a person commits an evil act, we are sometimes quick to seek alternative explanations for a behavior. We might observe that the person who committed the evil act had a troubled childhood, or struggles with addictive drugs, or is the victim of discrimination, or is carrying a crushing financial burden, or has an anger problem, or did not receive an adequate education in the public schools, etc.

There is a time and place to be compassionate and forgiving. There is also a time to admit what Occam's Moral Razor shows to be factually true: That someone has committed an evil act. Occam's Moral Razor demands that we recognize evil when it exists, and not allow its presence to be obfuscated by alternative explanations.

So then, what do we do when Occam's Moral Razor illuminates the presence of evil?

With guilty knowledge comes obligation to action. In this case, our guilty knowledge is the increased ability to identify the presence of evil. The obligations of enlightenment require us to help protect our children, our neighbors, our friends, our co-workers, our community, our nation, and our planet from evil.

At this point the morning's thesis, its rationale, and its substantiation have been offered. We could end here, but the moment would be incomplete. Having raised our awareness about the discernment evil, it seems reasonable to briefly introduce two means by which we can reduce its harm to us.

Firstly, an observation: Evil people seem to be mathematically inclined. By that I mean they seem to run a balance sheet of cost and gain. When the cost attached to an evil deed exceeds the perceived gain, then most often people chose not to commit the evil deed. Conversely, when the risk of penalty is slight, evil has a field day. The first means by which risk can be reduced is to raise the cost of evil actions.

For example, sending an email to a Neanderthal co-worker who leers at you, memorializing what is

happening and how it makes you feel may turn the tables. Someone who writes an email memorializing what happened is the type of person who will tell management if the behavior is repeated. The cost just became too great to continue.

The second way that we can reduce the likelihood of evil being committed upon us is to minimize exposure. That is not always easily accomplished. What if you realize that you are married to, or in partnership with an evil person? The choices surrounding such a circumstance are not easily made, or implemented. You must search your soul over issues such as the value of your physical, mental, and spiritual health. The matter is further complicated if there are children involved.

What if you have developed an ulcer due to a suppressive supervisor who micromanages you, and writes up your every little shortcoming; someone who has been instrumental in seeing that you were passed over for promotion? Perhaps yours is a tenured position with a retirement at a certain age. Perhaps there is little possibility of finding another job which pays so well, or accommodates your childcare schedule. Choices to remove oneself from the regular proximity of an evil person are often complicated by realities such as financial and occupational need.

It is not always possible to easily distance ourselves from those who commit evil towards us. That noted, something quite interesting occurs when someone does remove them self from further association with an evil person: *There is an immediate and profound sense of relief.*

There is no neat and clean, inspiring end to this homily. However, there is an end, and we have reached it. I hope that I have given you pause for thought. I look forward to listening to the many comments I will undoubtedly receive after the service and at the church picnic this afternoon, and emails I will receive in the next few days. Thank you for your kind attention.

¹Source: Peck, M. (1983). People of the lie. New York: Simon & Schuster, pp 65-78, 107, 135-137, 150, 155, 167-168, 174, 177.

²Source: Perkins, J. (2004). Confessions of an economic hit man. New York: Penguin.

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