# Bad Language
## The Etymology of Evil
## By
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Last week I talked about my belief in the inherent goodness of human nature, by which I mean our natural instinct to care for each other. But if, as the *Tao te Ching* says, "When people see some things as good, other things become bad," then I now have the problem of evil to contend with. If humans are so good, why is there so much evil in the world? This problem, whether phrased, "If the gods are good, if God is good, or, if human nature is good, why does evil exist?" is a perennial question that people have been wrestling with for thousands of years, which means we won't be able to resolve it in twenty or so minutes today.

But just considering the problem and some of its solutions can be of great benefit in helping us lead better lives, in helping us to be better people. For if, as I have already suggested, compassion—caring for others—is at the core of what it means to be good, then simply realizing that the question remains unanswered may cause us to be less judgmental toward those with different ideas of good and evil. And, since judgment is the opposite of compassion, becoming less judgmental makes us more compassionate in the process.

Judgment, furthermore, demands that evildoers be punished, whereas compassion seeks to understand and forgive them. So this polarity, between judgment and compassion, already shows how difficult it is to define evil. I think compassion is the meaning of goodness, that caring for others is at the heart of morality, and that judging, condemning, and punishing others is wrong. This is so because I have, what I like to call, a biological ethic; meaning I equate right and wrong to pleasure and pain. But there are many who, with sound reason, have argued the individual pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain is what leads to evil behavior, and the only way to preserve the common good is to protect society from selfish individuals by appropriately judging, condemning, and punishing them.

In his work, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche proposed there are two fundamental views of morality, "master-morality" and "slave-morality," which hold distinctly different definitions of evil. Master-morality, which is the morality of the ruling elite, believes evil to be anything that can be considered common, especially common people, with their common ways and ideas, whom they regard as ignoble, despicable, cowardly, insignificant, and distrustful. Those with a master-morality, conversely associate goodness with anything noble, including themselves, whom they regard as worthy to create universal values and to judge and punish those who don't live up to them.

Slave-morality, by contrast, considers evil anything or anyone causing others to fear and suffer. "On the other hand," Nietzsche said, "*those* qualities which serve to alleviate the existence of sufferers are brought into prominence and flooded with light; it is here that sympathy, the kind, helping hand, the warm heart, patience, diligence, humility, and friendliness attain to honour..."[1]

So, without delving further into these distinctions right now, the only point I want to make is that it's pretty difficult to tackle the problem of evil, the question of why evil exists, if we haven't even agreed upon what evil is, or even if it is. Some believe evil is ontological, meaning it has it's own independent existence. As such, evil can be transferred, like a disease, if we come into contact with it, or passed on from one generation to the next. Ontological evil can be inherited, objectified, and personified. Unfortunately mythical demons and devils aren't the only such personifications. Those who believe in ontological evil, that it is a real thing that exists, too often project evil onto real persons. To paraphrase the *Tao te Ching*, "When we see ourselves as good, other people become bad."

Since Nietzsche brought it up, let's take the word, *slave*, for example. It probably comes from the Indo-European word, *Slavic*, originally referring to people who simply spoke a particular language. In fact the word, *slav*, means, "fame," and remains the suffix at the end of many Eastern European names, denoting what a person's family was most famous for, much the way "son" remains at the end of many English names (or why some people are named, Miller, Carpenter, Baker, and the like). As the Slavic people became dominated and oppressed by the Holy Roman Empire at the start of the 9th century, however, their ethnic name, actually meaning "Famous People," eventually became the word used to describe anyone who was dominated and oppressed by others. So slaves were originally designated as such because of their ethnicity, because they appeared to be different, with a different language, culture, color, and so on. Because of these arbitrary differences, they were also considered evil, and, therefore, deserved to be judged, condemned and punished.

*When we see ourselves as good, other people become bad. When we see our ways as good, other ways become bad. When we see our language as good, other languages become bad. When we see our color as good, other colors become bad. When we see our gender as good, other genders become bad. When we see our sexuality as good, other sexualities become bad. When we see our religion as good, other religions become bad. When we see our nations as good, other nations become bad. When we see our politics as good, other politics become bad.*

So this is really the ethical issue I have with the ontological definition of evil. By objectifying evil and, thus, objectifying others, those judged to be evil are often judged because of some insignificant difference, like color, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, etc., not because they've done anything that is actually harmful

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[1] Friedrich Nietzsche. *Beyond Good and Evil.* Trans. by Helen Zimmern (1909-1913), p. 8.

to anyone. Yet their accusers feel perfectly justified condemning, exploiting, and punishing them. Good must triumph over evil, so dominating evil people is considered the right thing to do.

Ontological, physical, personified evil, furthermore, projected onto entire groups of people for arbitrary reasons, creates a moral conflict of interest for those who then feel justified exploiting and punishing them. In other words, good people believe they have the right to take whatever they want from bad people. Bad people ought to be punished. It's the right thing to do. So good people enslave them, exploit them, take their homes, their property, sometimes their children, as well as their language, culture, and every shred of dignity they have, all in the name of goodness.

In almost every instance, English words that have come to denote evil people, like pagan, heathen, peasant, savage, barbarian, and, as we have already seen, slave, originally just referred to someone's culture. "Pagan," from the Greek word, *pagani*, originally meant something like "farmer," or, "country folk," and only became synonymous with godlessness and evil after the Holy Roman Empire began exploiting their agricultural resources in the late 4th century. "Peasant," comes from an Old French word meaning, "local inhabitant." It eventually became a derogatory term used by occupying forces desiring to exploit the "local yokels." "Savage," comes from the Latin word meaning "woods," again, referring to those who lived outside the city gates, in the countryside, who, when exploited, were looked down upon as uncivilized simpletons. "Heathen" originally referred to those from the heather, meaning, "untilled land." "Barbarian," comes from the Greek, *barbaras*, originally meaning, "foreigner," probably because it sounds like the stammering or babble associated with an unfamiliar language. Eventually it too came to refer diminutively to anyone not of the Empire, becoming synonymous with wild, rude, ignorant, if not dangerous, outsiders who deserve whatever ill treatment they get.

So you're beginning to see the pattern, the dominant group that considers its culture, ways, and beliefs as good, feels justified in exploiting those outside, and comes to see them as evil simply because of their ethnicity, where they are from, the language they speak—Slavs, pagans, peasants, savages, heathens, barbarians, and so forth. And here's one more current example of how this same conflict of interest occurs in our own society. In 2014, according to an FBI crime report, burglars stole 3.5 billion dollars worth of property from Americans. That same year, law enforcement seized more than 5 billion dollars worth of assets from criminals or, in many cases, from those they only suspected of crimes, which is perfectly legal to do. These seizures, as with everything else about our criminal justice system, disproportionately target people of color, especially African Americans, most of whom don't have the resources to get the legal help necessary for recovering their property.

So that is the problem, as I see it, with ontological definitions of evil. If evil is a thing, if it is real, it can be objectified, which means some things are intrinsically evil, including some people who become the personification of evil and are treated accordingly. But if evil is not a thing, what is it? If evil is not a thing, evil is, by

definition, nothing—no-thing. Evil doesn't exist. I realize this might sound confusing, if not absurd, but, believe it or not, some of the most renowned thinkers in our history have said the same thing, that evil doesn't exist. Most recently, Michael Shermer, publisher of *Skeptic* magazine and author of, *The Science of Good & Evil*, writes quite plainly, "*there is no such thing as evil.*"[2]

In western schools of thought this denial of evil is called *privation*, a word meaning something is lacking, missing, or not present. Philosophers and theologians as well known as Socrates, Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, among many others, were privationists, meaning they didn't believe in the existence of evil. To understand how they came to such a counterintuitive, if not naïve, sounding conclusion, we must first realize the difference between the problem of defining evil, and the problem of evil itself. As we have seen, defining evil is a problem, because it's definition is not universally agreed upon. The problem of evil, however, asks how evil can exist if God, the gods, or human nature, is good?

As opposites, good and evil are incompatible and, therefore, cannot coexist. So how can anyone claim there are good gods, especially an all-loving, all powerful God, or even that human nature is fundamentally good, when there is obviously so much suffering in the world? Before explaining why some of history's greatest thinkers have chosen to reject the existence of evil rather than good, even in the wake of such obvious misery, it's also important to understand the problem of evil itself has become more problematic over time.

During its Hellenistic era, among the early Greek philosophers, it was little more than an intellectual puzzle to be argued and resolved, but there was little urgency in doing so. During the Christian era, however, when, for the first time, monotheism became the dominant form of religion, and religion became more about theology than morality, more about believing in a specific idea of God than anything else, the problem of evil also became known as the *problem of God*. If God is benevolent and omnipotent, how can evil exist? Surely a good god cannot create a Universe with evil in it? If God is good, and God is all, then all must be good. So evil, if not adequately explained, could cause one to doubt the existence of God.

But it wasn't until after the German Holocaust that the Problem of God really became a public relations nightmare! As Rabbi Robert L. Rubenstein explained in his 1966 book, *After Auschwitz*, "To see any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic, antihuman explosion in all history as a meaningful expression of God's purpose…[3] [Yet] A God who tolerates the suffering of even one innocent child is either infinitely cruel or hopelessly indifferent."[4] The Holocaust has proven so devastating for those still hoping to promote a rational belief

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[2] Shermer, Michael, *The Science of Good & Evil*, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 2004, p. 68.

[3] Rubenstein, Robert L., *After Auschwitz*, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, IN, 1968, p. 153.

[4] Ibid., p. 86-87.

in God that "the problem of God," has since become it's very own branch of study, *Theologie auch Auschwitz*, "Theology after Auschwitz."

And since no one can logically have it both ways, we have to reject the existence of an all-loving, all-powerful God, or reject the existence of evil. I know what some of you are thinking, that the simplest and most obvious solution is that the existence of evil is so apparent that we must reject the existence of God. I haven't believed in the existence of a personified God in many years, largely because there's so much suffering in the world I find it impossible to believe a loving, omnipotent being could allow it to continue. Yet, because I believe in the basic goodness of human nature, I still have the problem of evil to contend with. If human beings are so good why is there such cruelty, suffering, and injustice in the world? Either, I have to admit human beings are almost completely selfish and depraved and that compassion, peace, and justice will never prevail so long as our species inhabits the Earth, or I have to reject the existence of evil, which, it might surprise you, I do.

To understand why, let's look at the case for privation as argued by Origen of Alexandria, a 2nd century Christian theologian who, despite have experienced tremendous suffering and injustice himself, held an unwavering belief in a benevolent God. Origen also believed that nothing exists outside of God, that God is the entire Universe, and the nature of everything in the Universe, therefore, must be unconditional love. Thus, to explain the obvious suffering and injustice around him, Origen simply argued that evil has no independent existence. Evil, rather, is only the absence of the good. Evil is never present, because it doesn't exist. Suffering, cruelty, injustice occur, rather, because something is missing. And that, quite simply, is the privation argument in a nutshell. For Socrates evil is a lack of knowledge. For Plato it's a lack reason and awareness. For Plotinus, a lack of unity. For Origen, Augustine, and Aquinas, evil is a lack of God's goodness and love.

As much of a stretch as some of their arguments might be, and as much like denial as they might seem, I too reject the existence of evil, that evil is a thing, that it can get inside us and make us evil, or that evil can be a condition some of us are born with. When suffering, cruelty, and injustice occur, rather, it's not because of the presence of evil, it's because something is missing, namely, compassion, equality, and justice.

When unarmed black men are gunned down, or choked to death, or shot in the back by police officers while fleeing the scene of a traffic stop, there's something missing.

When people of color are pulled over, arrested, prosecuted, imprisoned, and even executed in disproportion to whites, there's something missing.

When, more than 50 years after the Civil Rights Act, African Americans are still largely living in poverty, and the unemployment rate among Blacks is more than twice that of whites, there's something missing.

When one of every four black baby boys born today is expected to go to prison, there's something missing.

When 45 years after the Equal Rights Amendment was passed, women are still paid less than men and are in far fewer executive positions, there's something missing.

When only 62 people on Earth hold the same amount of wealth as the poorest 3.5 billion, there's something missing.

When the minimum wage is not a living wage, there's something missing.

When 30 million Americans are still without Health Insurance in the wealthiest nation in human history, there's something missing.

When kids graduate from college with more debt than they can afford, even before they find work, if they find work, there's something missing.

When the average person in our nation will need more than a million dollars to retire with, in an era when corporations and Wall Street have raided their pension plans to inflate the value of their own portfolios, and most people haven't been able to save money since 1980, there's something missing.

When our brothers and sisters south of the border want to come here to find a better, safer life, are turned away at the gate, if not locked away. When the children of immigrants already here can't go to college, or are afraid to go to the hospital, or to call the police in an emergency because they or their parents might be deported, there's something missing.

When war refugees seeking safety and asylum are rejected because of their religion, even as we watch then drowning and starving, there's something missing.

When our entire planet is threatened by global warming and too many of our leaders still deny it's even happening so they can keep doing business as usual, there's something missing.

So this is my solution to the problem of evil. Evil isn't a thing. It's not a label we can conveniently stick on people because of their color, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, or nationality, just so we have a good excuse to take whatever we want from them. Evil isn't something any of us are born with. It's not cooties. Evil, rather, is what happens in the absence of compassion, equality, and justice. Evil is what happens when we just don't get it. Evil is what happens when there's something missing.