Pure Evil and the Humanistic Ethic
By
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For the past two years a pair of robins have built their nests beneath the awning of our front porch, each of which ended up containing four bright blue eggs. All four of last year's eggs hatched and I was able to observe the daily progress of the healthy hatchlings until, one morning, there were only two. This wasn't because they had matured well enough to fly away but because a robin's nest is ultimately only large enough to contain two healthy hatchlings. Two of them were destined to be squeezed out from the start. In this year's nest, one of the eggs was stolen by crows even as a hatchling was breaking through, one failed to hatch altogether, perhaps damaged by the crow attack, leaving two healthy chicks to hatch and fill the tight space. As those two grew and were getting close to leaving, one of them fell to its death. I put a rubber mat down to spare the only surviving fledgling from succumbing to the same fate. That's only three out of eight that lived long enough to have a chance at life.

This is but one example of the harsh reality of life. Nature must be extremely inefficient in order to guarantee some life can continue. It wastes life and a lot of potential life to make life. Not only has sexual reproduction evolved to produce millions of times more gametes, such as sperm, eggs, seeds, fruit, pollen, and spores, than will ever reproduce, but, as in the case of these robins, the majority of the lives that are produced don't survive long enough to mature. The result is that there are far more robins born than there are mature robins, far more fruit than fruit trees, far more pollen than flowers, far more fertilized fish eggs laid than fish, and so forth. Throughout most of human history, until it began to change in the 19th century, it's estimated as many as half of all human children died within their first five years. According to the World Health Organization[1] things have improved a lot since then, especially since 1990, when there were 12.5 million under-five deaths, just 3.7 percent of all births. In 2022, there were only 4.9 million such deaths, almost half of whom were newborns and 80 percent of whom were from sub-Saharan African or Southeast Asia, which tells us economic imbalances in the world still have much to do with childhood mortality, even in modern times.

If our solar system is any indicator, the entire Universe is just as inefficient. Consider all the time and space there is compared to what must be an infinitesimally small amount of life in comparison, life that took billions of years to come into existence only to result in miniscule lifespans. I bring all of this up because, in order to discuss the nature of evil, the name we often give to all this suffering and loss, we must begin by admitting evil is a human concoction, that neither nature nor the Universe are inherently evil or good. They just are. Nature and the Universe don't care how many of us die, which, so far, is all of us, so long as a few of us live long enough to pass along the information encoded within us. That's the cold reality. It's how evolution happens, not the result of angry gods who require our appeasement because of something we did wrong.

But evil can be considered relatively real to us because that's how we experience suffering and death and try to do our best as human societies to alleviate as much of it as we can. Those among us who intentionally cause others to suffer and die, or who simply prevent them from achieving

their full potential and living a happy life, are rightly, from our human perspective, called evil, or, at least, engage in evil acts and evil systems. As human beings, we do care for and are saddened by the deaths of our loved ones, moved by the grief of those who have lost theirs, and consider the loss of any child a tragedy for us all, as we should.

The other thing to remember about morality, in general, is that it is a perennial philosophical problem. One may feel certain that one's own beliefs about what are good and evil is correct, but one's level of certainty proves nothing. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is certain he knows what good and evil are and, therefore, feels entirely justified in killing as many innocent people as necessary to achieve his moral ends. The United States and Soviet Union, along with a few other nations, were certain that amassing a global arsenal of 80,000 nuclear warheads during the Cold War, enough to destroy the entire planet many times over, was the right thing to do. Our understanding of what is good and what is evil usually coincides with our own interests as individuals and societies.

"The result," according to social psychologist Erich Fromm, "is the acceptance of a relativistic position which proposes that value judgments and ethical norms are exclusively matters of taste or arbitrary preference and that no objectively valid statement can be made in this realm."[2] But must we leave at this, he asks:

> Are we to accept the abdication of reason and matters of ethics? Are we to believe that the choices between freedom and slavery, between love and hate, between truth and falsehood, between integrity and optimism, between life and death, are only the results of so many subjective preferences?[3]

Fromm offers us another choice; to base our understanding of morality upon our human condition, psychology, and needs. Regardless of what is true of the larger universe, regardless of the epistemological problem of holding any truth with absolute certainty, we can simply choose to live in a way that promotes human welfare and individual unfolding so that both humanity and each individual can achieve our full potential. He refers to this choice as the "humanistic ethic," explaining that:

> *Formally*, it is based on the principle that only man himself can determine the criterion for virtue and sin, and not an authority transcending him. *Materially*, it is based on the principle that "good" is what is good for [humanity] and "evil" what is detrimental to [humanity]; the sole criterion of ethical value being [human] welfare.[4]

This includes recognizing our relatedness to others and to the world, including to the environment and other creatures. It also includes recognizing our common humanity, which is why the humanistic ethic has, since the French Revolution, been summarized as the *inherent worth and dignity of every person*. Fromm says, "All men are in need of help and depend on one another. Human solidarity is the necessary condition for the unfolding of any one individual."[5] To be humanly ethical means we must truly love another. But love isn't an emotion, it's a way of behaving toward others. Humanistic love, which is the basis of the humanistic ethic, is universal and, thus, recognizes our common humanity connecting us to all people everywhere. "The most fundamental kind of love," Fromm says, "which underlies all types of love, is brotherly love. By this I mean the

sense of responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of any other human being, the wish to further his life. This is the kind of love the Bible speaks of when it says: love thy neighbor as thyself. Brotherly love is love for all human beings; it is characterized by its very lack of exclusiveness."[6]

Yet, throughout human history, our societies have been built around grave inequalities in which a few have had all the power, wealth, and rights, at the expense of everyone else—kings and commoners, nobles and surfs, patricians and plebians, pharaohs and peasants, commanders and infantries, and so forth. This hierarchical ethic, which may work for the benefit of the larger society —providing some stability and security—isn't humanistic because it is not enough to maintain the greater good at the expense of an individual's need to flourish.

The humanistic ethic, by contrast, recognizes that the individual cannot thrive if he or she is not free to reason and choose for oneself. It is an ethic recognized in the universal golden rule that calls upon us to treat others the way we'd like to treated, which is predicated on a belief in our common humanity, and is not limited to our common religion, our common king, our common nation, our common ethnicity, our common political party, our common identity, or any other closed circle that feels justified in discriminating against or abusing those outside. The humanistic ethic encompasses the "whole hoop of the world" and every human society and individual upon it.

The humanistic ethic is reflected in Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative; "never treat others as a means to your own ends but as end within themselves," and was revamped during the French revolution as "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," an articulation of the principle that has been imbedded in the constitutions of many democracies, and, until recently, was the Unitarian Universalist Association's first principle. But I prefer Fromm's mid-20th century definition, that, "the principle that 'good' is what is good for [humanity] and 'evil' what is detrimental to [humanity], *the sole criterion of ethical value being [human] welfare*,"[7] and "that the unfolding and growth of every person [should be] the aim of all social and political activities."[8]

I prefer Fromm's because it parallels Abraham Maslow's well-known hierarchy of human needs, which likewise addresses general human welfare at the bottom half of the pyramid—clean air, food, water, shelter, clothing, sleep, health, employment, security, and so on—and what is necessary for individual unfolding at the top half—friendship, society, family, self-esteem and respect, and all that it takes to self-actualize. Societies that concentrate on only one half of the pyramid of needs, by providing basic needs at the costs of one's freedoms or guaranteeing one's freedoms at the expense of the masses, are not living according to the humanistic ethic and contribute to the degradation and suffering and both society and the individual. To live according to the humanistic ethic requires us to establish rights, rules, and regulations that enable both society and the individual to progress. Economies that only work for a few, are failed economies. Economies built upon the suppression of individual freedom and other indignities are failed economies.

From all of this we can conclude that if what is good is what is good for human welfare and individual unfolding, then what is evil from a humanistic perspective must be considered whatever is detrimental to these dual goals, including any systems disregarding our common humanity in

order to favor one group of people at the expense of other groups of people. Recognizing this, we are now in a position to consider the evils currently happening in our world and have solid reason for making such claims; evil is that which rejects our common humanity, disregards the inherent worth and dignity of every person and all peoples no matter where they are from, what they look like, or what they believe, and otherwise undermines human welfare and individual freedom and growth.

Before discussing real and present examples of pure evil, I'd also like to point out that, in my own opinion, this humanistic view of ethics implies that only humans can commit evil acts, whether collectively or as individuals. While there are certain natural calamities, like hurricanes, droughts, and diseases that cause humans to suffer, nature does not do so with the intention of causing us to suffer. Wild animals can also be dangerous and deadly to humans, but their behaviors are without malice. Lions, sharks, Grizzley bears, and mosquitos, among other predators, only do what evolution has designed them to do. Evil, rather, is a human concept and is caused by humans who willfully and knowingly ignore the negative impacts of their actions upon the welfare of others.

I've already mentioned, for example, the evil that is currently happening in the Middle East. War, in general, is an evil because it is clearly detrimental to human welfare and individual flourishing and is rooted in the failure of one side failing to see the humanity, worth, and dignity of the other. Sadly, sometimes war is necessary in order to defend a people against outside aggressors, like Russia's current invasion of Ukraine. But doing so in a manner that indiscriminately blames and kills masses of innocent civilians in the process, or destroys their homes, hospitals, schools, and infrastructure, is, according to the humanistic ethic, pure evil. The 18th century French Revolution began as a just effort to increase human welfare and individual freedoms by addressing social inequalities and abolishing monarchy. Like all such revolutions, it was necessarily violent. But in 1793, four years after it began, the revolutionaries became perpetrators of such evil themselves by executing thousands of people during a year of savagery now infamously known as the Reign of Terror. That's pure evil.

Global warming is also an evil, one of the worst ever, because it's one the planet's greatest existential threats to human welfare in the entire 4.5-billion-year history of the world. Unlike naturally occurring disasters, global warming is an evil because it has been caused by unmitigated human activity. Scientists have known about the greenhouse gas effect since the turn of the 20th century, which has increasingly been taken seriously by the public since the 1960s. So much so that in 1970 Republican President Richard Nixon formed the Environmental Protection Agency. Only a few years later, after he was elected in 1976, Democratic President Jimmy Carter created the Energy Department, lowered the national speed limit from 65 to 55 MPH, rolled out green tax credits, and installed 32 solar panels on the White House roof. As one of the worst polluters and carbon emitting nations in the world, we were on our way to becoming the global leader in addressing climate change before things worsened to the point they have gotten today.

But after Ronald Reagan took office in 1980, he removed the solar panels, raised the speed limit to as high as 75 MPH, and his anti-government, anti-regulation philosophy made neglecting the environment fundamental to the conservative cause. Reagan created a conservative party that's

against conservation and, ever since, it has lied, denied, and blocked any meaningful response to this unfolding existential threat. At first, they simply confused many American voters by falsely claiming global warming is a hoax and that there is much disagreement among scientists about it. They also made us think that any effort to protect the environment would cost jobs. When George H. Bush was running against Bill Clinton in 1992, for example, he mocked Clinton's VP pick, Al Gore, "ozone man," further saying, "This guy is so far out in the environmental extreme we'll be up to our necks in owls and outta work for every American."[9] Later, when his son George W. Bush was running against Gore, Bush joked that his opponent "likes electric cars. He just doesn't like making electricity."[10]

Bush ended up winning that election by a vote of 5 to 4, when the partisan Supreme Court decided it would be unconstitutional to allow Florida to recount its votes, which would have most certainly proven that Gore had actually won the election. In order to unfold as individuals, humans need to be free, and that means having our voices heard and our votes counted. So the Supreme Court's decision is another evil of our modern times; the same Supreme Court that recently decided that a woman's right to choose ought to be left up to the states, including the state of Florida that doesn't have the right to recount its votes in a questionable election. Pure evil!

But let's get back to global warming. During the brief four years between Bush's SCOTUS appointment to the Whitehouse, the impacts of global warming became too fierce to deny. So, the GOP strategy was to subtly shift their argument from "it's a hoax" and "scientists greatly disagree about whether or not it's happening," to, "it's a natural cyclic occurrence" and "scientists greatly disagree about what's causing it." Yet even now, as each year for the past decade has been the hottest on record, the Grand Old Party continues to block any meaningful response to this perilous problem, including intentionally pulling out of any plan to work on it as a global community—like the Paris Climate Agreement.

Instead, all we hear from them is the border, border, border, as if it is the greatest and only problem the U.S. faces. Yes, between 100,000 and 200,000 border encounters with immigrants per month is serious and has to be dealt with, but doing so by separating children from their families, locking them in cages on the hard floor, and not keeping any records of whom they belong to—that's pure evil! So is claiming you want to do something about the issue and blaming your political opponents for doing nothing, even after you block meaningful bipartisan legislation to address it, just so your opponents can't get any of the credit in an election year—that's pure evil.

But I'm not through with global warming yet. Last summer, like my entire neighborhood, I was evacuated from my home because of a fire. Today, the homes in my neighborhood are at risk of losing fire insurance because of the risk. And just last week, there was another fire threatening my neighborhood again, as well as the location of our church. Even so, I recall a Mitt Romney interview recently, in which he spoke about the move to oust the Speaker of House, calling it a distraction and saying, "We have important issues to address like the border." That was it, the only thing mentioned on his list. Likewise, during a February 27 press conference, House Speaker Mike Johnson himself said, "The first priority of the country is our border and making sure it's secure … it is a catastrophe, and it must stop." A month later on April 16, he told reporters, "The Biden

border catastrophe remains the number one priority of the house republicans." And, in response to the failed attempt to oust him from his position, I heard Johnson say we have important issues to deal with "like the border and… ah… ah… sound government." It took him a couple of seconds to think of something other than the border problems.

I have an idea. How about global warming which has led to catastrophe upon catastrophe? If you're worried about immigrants crossing the southern border, how about wildfire smoke crossing the northern border? How about the category 4 and 5 hurricanes crossing the eastern border? How about the category 4 tornadoes already well inside the all our borders, wreaking deadly havoc in the American heartland and southern states? These are the real catastrophes that must stop. To ignore them and to distract our attention from them with a single political wedge issue, falsely claiming we're being invaded by millions and millions of murderers and terrorists, while continuing to ignore the deadly and devastating impacts of climate change and gun violence by our fellow Americans that are already happening within our borders, truly impacting the lives of millions and millions of people—is pure evil.

We have so many challenges, like affordable healthcare, adequately funding public education, housing and homelessness, political gridlock, and so many other issues preventing humanity from progressing. We have to stop focusing on what's good for ourselves, our party, our nation, and start asking what will best promote human wellbeing and individual freedom and fulfillment. Anything less, is pure evil.

[1] https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/topics/topic-details/GHO/child-mortality-and-causes-of-death

[2] Fromm, Erich, *Man For Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, An Owl Book, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 5.

[3] Ibid., p. 6.

[4] Ibid., p. 12f.

[5] Ibid., p. 101.

[6] Ibid., pp. 42-43.

[7] Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, ibid., p. 13.

[8] Ibid., p. 229.

[9] https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/04/24/ozone-man

[10] Ibid.