

The Psychology of Good and Evil

*Why Children, Adults, and Groups Help
and Harm Others*

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Preface

I received my Ph.D. in psychology at Stanford in 1965, started my work life as a professor at Harvard, and almost immediately began to focus on the topics of this book: goodness and evil. For many years, I have conducted research on, extensively written about, and more and more applied to the real world the understanding that is presented in this book on a variety of interrelated questions: What leads children and adults to be generous and helpful, and what leads them to respond to someone's urgent need in an emergency rather than remain passive bystanders? Why do children and adolescents bully, harass, and intimidate each other, and what can we do about it? What influences lead people, especially young people, to become aggressive and violent, and what socialization and experience in the home and school lead children and youth to become caring and helpful? What leads groups of people to engage in violent actions, especially in extreme forms of violence such as genocide and mass killing? How can groups (and individuals) heal from the trauma created by past victimization? How can members of perpetrator and victim groups, or members of groups that have mutually harmed each other, reconcile? What is the role of passive bystanders in allowing violence to unfold, and how can we use the great potential power of "active bystanders" for preventing violence or generating helping? And how can violence and other harm-doing by individuals and groups be prevented and caring, helping, and peace be promoted, and how can cultures that generate these be created? Since September 11, 2001, I have also applied my prior work to the understanding of the roots of terrorism and its prevention.

As I engaged with these issues over the years, I increasingly entered the "real world." I lectured and conducted workshops for parents and teachers on practices in the home and school that would help them raise caring and nonviolent children. In this book I write about positive (as well as negative) socialization in the home and about the practices of "caring schools." It is possible to provide all children, I believe, with experiences

that foster in them caring about other people, while also helping them maximize their own personal and human potentials, that is, helping them to become optimally functioning persons. It seems profoundly important to me, and I hope it will seem so to readers of this book, to bring this about.

In another entry into the real world, after the famous incident that someone captured on film – in which a few police officers severely beat Rodney King while a group of officers stood by watching – I developed a training program for the agency responsible for police training in the state of California, aimed at preventing the use of unnecessary force by the police. Later, together with Dr. Laurie Anne Pearlman, I developed, trained people in, and carefully evaluated the effects of their use in the community of an intervention to help promote healing and reconciliation in Rwanda, in the wake of the terrible genocide there in 1994. We have also worked with some of that country's leaders to help them understand the roots of violence and develop policies and practices they might use to prevent renewed violence and to break the cycle of violence.

As I am writing this, in December 2002, we are about to leave for Rwanda to try to help channel the feelings that arise from the *gacaca*, so that instead of retraumatization and renewed rage and hostility, the country can move toward reconciliation. The *gacaca* is a community justice system, newly created and initiated in 2001–2002. It was inspired by a traditional practice in Rwanda for resolving conflict and reconciling wrongdoers with the community. The large majority of 115,000 people who have been in prison since 1994, accused of perpetrating the genocide, will be tried in *gacaca* courts by 250,000 members of the community who were elected to serve as judges and trained over a period of several months.

As I have mentioned, I have done extensive writing in books, articles, book chapters, and at times in newspaper columns, about the topics I have just described: the roots and prevention of evil and the roots and creation of goodness. This book is a selection from my writings, covering primarily the period from the publication of my book on evil, *The Roots of Evil*, in 1989, to 2003; it also includes a number of earlier publications that I regard as especially important – particularly about influences that lead people to help others in need – and substantial new writings.

The Roots of Evil provides a thorough, detailed examination of the roots of genocide and mass killing at many levels, from culture and society to individual characteristics and human relationships, with detailed analyses of a number of important instances. The current book is much broader in its focus. It focuses on goodness as much as evil, on what leads individuals to help others, and on how caring and helping develop in children. Although I do not provide here the same deep exploration of the roots of genocide and mass killing, I summarize the material from *The Roots of Evil* in an award-winning publication that I have recently updated. I include publications that focus on new examples, especially Rwanda. I describe

influences I have identified since *The Roots of Evil* – for example, the role of past victimization and woundedness in making violence by groups more likely. In *The Roots of Evil* I also discuss how violence by groups might be prevented. In the writings in this book I add to that exploration, addressing profoundly important matters such as healing, reconciliation, and even forgiveness, specific actions “bystander nations” can and ought to take to prevent violence by groups, and democratization as an avenue to culture change.

I wrote opening and concluding chapters for this book and included some other new or recent, not previously published pieces. The volume contains whole articles or book chapters, and parts of others. In a few selections, material that reports the results of research has been rewritten to make it easier to read and thus accessible to a wider audience. In putting together these selections, my aim has been to describe and interweave all the important elements in the understanding I have gained about goodness and evil in the course of my life’s work, to represent what I know at this time about goodness and evil.

My life experience, and my lifelong work on good and evil, altruism and aggression, and helping and harm-doing, have been deeply intertwined. As one of the selections describes, I am what is nowadays called a child survivor of the Holocaust. I was a 6-year-old boy in Budapest in the summer of 1944 when about 450,000 out of about 600,000 Hungarian Jews were transported to Auschwitz and killed. I and members of my nuclear family survived because of Raoul Wallenberg, a Swede who heroically saved many lives in Hungary, and Maria, a Hungarian woman who worked for my family and did all she could to help us. We called Maria “Macs,” an abbreviation of the Hungarian word for cat. I don’t know how that came about. But Macs was my second mother, and I feel that her courageous actions and loving nature taught me, in spite of my experiences during the Holocaust and afterward in Hungary under communism, to have faith in human beings and in the possibility of our caring about each other, about the “other,” and about all “others.”

I believe that my beginning to work on what leads people to help others and what stops them from helping those in need, including my focus on the passive and active “bystander,” and my lifelong concern with preventing violence, passivity, and promoting goodness, owe a great deal to Macs. On one of my visits to her in Hungary, when she was in her late eighties, I told Macs that the work I have been doing all my life was inspired by her. With her head with its beautiful fine silver hair shaking, as it did constantly in those days, she smiled and said, naturally and without pride, “I know.” This book is dedicated to her, and to all others who have not and will not remain passive bystanders in the face of others’ suffering and need, who act on behalf of others and thereby make this a more caring world.

Good and Evil

Themes and Overview

This book is about understanding the roots of children, adults, and groups of people helping and harming others. It is about ways to create more caring for others' welfare and less harmful, aggressive, violent behavior. It is about how children, adults, small groups, and nations can become "active bystanders" who respond to others' suffering and help those in need, rather than remaining passive observers, even closing their eyes and hearts to others' fate.

There is much goodness in the world. A mother paying loving attention to a child. A father taking time off work to take his child to the first day of kindergarten – an act that saved the life of the president of a major bond-trading firm at the time of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. A grown son taking care of a sick old father. A popular girl spending time with a new, somewhat awkward girl in class, saving her from unkind behavior by classmates. A young Canadian boy, Craig Kielberger, hearing about child labor and with the help of an older brother and parents creating an international organization, of children and led by children with the help of adults, to eliminate child labor, to protect children, to promote their welfare. Another child, seeing homeless people on the streets, organizing a movement to bring blankets to homeless people.¹ A Hutu man in Rwanda coming to the home of a Tutsi woman after her husband is killed, sent there by another Hutu who used to work for this woman. He stays there protecting her from killers who come to the door to take her away, asking for nothing in return.²

Many people respond to the need of others, whether the need is to relieve suffering or to help enhance well-being. Some men and women organize their lives to serve others' welfare – whether by establishing the innocence of people in jail for a crime they did not commit, or finding money to lend to people in poor countries to start small businesses,³ or by working for positive social change. Most of these people are not making sacrifices. The desire to contribute to others' welfare has

become part of them. Helping people provides them with satisfaction and fulfillment.

Countries send food to other countries wracked by famine; give refuge to people who are fleeing from political repression; take action against the persecution of a minority at home or in other countries; intervene to stop violence. These and a million other acts of kindness, ranging from small to extreme, requiring little effort and sacrifice or involving great sacrifice or extreme danger, are all examples of goodness. When I asked a group of students who had expressed pessimism about human kindness to keep a diary of kind acts they received or observed, they were surprised by how much of it they witnessed.

On the “evil” side, individuals and groups harm others in small and big ways. Even if we encounter little significant violence in our own lives, we are surrounded by images on television, reports in newspapers and stories people tell us describing violent acts by individuals such as physical and sexual abuse of children, adult rape and murder, or youth violence ranging from physical attack to drive-by shooting and murder. We also hear about violence by groups against members of other groups in the course of “ethnopolitical” warfare, persecution and torture of groups of people, terrorist attacks on civilians, mass killing and genocide. And just about all of us experience, if not great violence, still hurtful, painful acts against us – when as children we are attacked by peers who call us names, spread rumors about us, hit us or exclude us, or when we are blamed or in other ways treated badly by adults, or as adults experience aggression against us.

A third very important part of this picture is the bystander, the individual or collection of individuals, including nations, who witness what is happening. While bystanders can be heroic in their efforts to help, they often remain passive. This passivity encourages perpetrators. When children in school intimidate, harass, or bully other children, peers who witness this usually remain passive – and some even join the perpetrators. Adults also often remain passive. When one group turns against another group, nations often remain passive. They may try hard to avoid both the feeling and the appearance of an obligation to act. For example, in Rwanda about seven hundred thousand Tutsis were killed in 1994, in the course of an attempt to eliminate all Tutsis. This was a genocide, since it aimed to eliminate a whole group of people. But the governments of the United States and other countries avoided the use of the term genocide.⁴ By acknowledging that the killings were genocide, given the UN genocide convention, they would have had a moral obligation to act.

Bystanders have great potential power to do good. When two people hear sounds of distress from another room, what one person says can greatly influence whether the other witness helps or not. As a number of selections will show, individuals and groups can limit, stop, and even

prevent violence, and encourage helpful actions by their words, actions, and example.

WHAT IS GOODNESS, WHAT IS EVIL?

To me, evil means human destructiveness. This can come in an obvious form, as great violence against others, such as a genocide. Or it can come in smaller acts of persistent harm-doing, the effects of which accumulate, like parents being hostile and punitive, or peers picking on a child day by day for a long time. Such actions can destroy a child's spirit, his or her dignity, self-worth, and ability to trust people.

At times, intense violence, destructive as it is, is not evil, but justified self-defense in response to unjustified attack – on oneself, one's family, one's group. The Nazi attacks on Czechs, Poles, Jews, and many others gave rise to violent but justified and necessary response by the Allies in World War II. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, are further examples of destructiveness that requires self-defense.

However, determining when violent acts are justified self-defense is not a simple matter. Perpetrators of evil acts often claim that they are defending themselves. Or they claim moral reasons or higher values for their actions, such as total social equality, which the Cambodian communists, the Khmer Rouge, claimed was their goal, or the purity of the group, which is often the "higher" purpose of nationalists who turn against minorities. In addition, the form of self-defense that is justified is also an issue. The actions of a teenager who is bullied day by day by peers and then takes a gun and shoots people, as in the case of some of the school shootings in the United States, seems unjustified, evil. It may be understandable – and this book is about both understanding and preventing evil – especially if bystanders are passive and uncaring and the child feels he or she has no one to turn to, even though it is still wrong and evil.

The view of evil inherent in this discussion is different from colloquial or theological views of evil. After my book *The Roots of Evil* was published, I was invited to be on a TV talk show by Ron Reagan, our former president's son, on evil. Others on the show were the author of a *Time* magazine cover story on evil, a priest who was known for conducting exorcisms (to drive the evil spirit out of people), the daughter of the leader of a Satanic cult (a group that worships Satan), a psychiatrist, and a professor of religion. The selection of these participants says a great deal about popular views of evil.

My definition of and concern with evil has to do with human actions that harm others (see also Chapter 4, on Evil). The focus is on evil actions. But individuals, as well as groups or societies, can develop characteristics that make it likely that they will repeatedly engage in such actions. Whether

we do or do not want to call such individuals or groups evil, we must recognize their inclination for harm-doing. We must come to understand its roots and develop the knowledge required and the will to use this knowledge to prevent destructive behavior.

Especially when faced with great evil, such as genocide or seemingly senseless acts of great individual violence, there is a tendency in public discussion to regard them as incomprehensible. Perhaps we do not want to understand them because we want to keep them outside the common human realm that we are part of. But destructive actions are the outcome of certain basic, ordinary psychological and social processes and their evolution into extreme forms. Understanding their roots enables us to prevent them, and to prevent individuals and groups from developing the characteristics that make these acts likely.

Understanding itself can be of great value. In working in Rwanda in the aftermath of the genocide, we found that healing by both survivors and members of the perpetrator group who were not themselves perpetrators was furthered by understanding the circumstances, societal processes, and psychology of individuals and groups that created the genocide. Seeing the violence against them as understandable human acts and seeing the perpetrators not as embodiments of pure evil but as human beings whose evolution led them to their horrible acts helped survivors feel more human themselves (see Chapters 36 and 37).

Goodness is the opposite of evil. It refers to actions that bring benefit to individuals or whole groups: the greater the benefit and the more effort and/or sacrifice it requires, the greater the goodness. Goodness, like evil, can come in an obvious form, like a single heroic act that saves someone's life. Or it can take the form of persistent efforts to save people, as in the case of people in the United States who through the Underground Railroad helped slaves escape, or Hutus in Rwanda who endangered themselves to save Tutsis. Heroic acts and such persistent acts of goodness require great effort, courage, and at times even the willingness to endanger one's life.

But goodness can also take the form of persistent engagement in helping people or creating positive social change that does not involve great danger. It can consist of small, repeated acts that bring benefit to others, like kindness by a neighbor or relative toward a child who is neglected or badly treated at home, kindness that can help the child develop normally and even flourish in spite of adversity.

Nations often act in selfish and destructive ways. But goodness by groups, small and large, does exist, as I have already noted. In the case of nations, it sometimes comes from mixed motives, as in the case of the Marshall Plan, which rebuilt Europe but also aimed at preventing the spread of communism. At other times, as in Somalia, seemingly altruistic motives come to bad ends. The United States tried to help people suffering from starvation, but due to circumstances and some seemingly unwise decisions,⁵

U.S. soldiers were attacked and killed. The work of the Quakers in the abolition of slavery and of the villagers in La Chambon, France, saving thousands of Jews during the Holocaust, may also be regarded as group efforts born of humane values and expressing unselfish caring or altruism.

Like evil, goodness too is comprehensible. Like evil, goodness also evolves, individuals and groups changing by their own actions, which shape them to become more caring and helpful.

The material in this book presents a great deal of existing knowledge about the influences that generate either goodness or evil in individuals, nations, the whole world. My study of the roots of evil and goodness and my active efforts to help prevent violence and promote caring that this book presents have been motivated by my belief that evil can be prevented, goodness can be created, generated, helped to evolve, that bystanders can become "active." This was true even in the early stages, when I chose these topics and issues for my academic work out of deeply set psychological forces in me (see the next selection), without necessarily a conscious, well-formed intention to make a difference in the world. Over time, and at times in spite of despair over events in the world, I have come to hold these beliefs more consciously, and act out of them with greater self-awareness. With already existing knowledge, and further knowledge we will gain over time, we can engage in creating a more benevolent world.

THE PROGRESSIVE INCREASE IN, OR EVOLUTION OF, GOODNESS AND EVIL, AND THE ROLE OF BYSTANDERS

People who harm others tend to devalue those they harm, which makes it easier to harm them again; those who help others tend to value more the welfare of people they have helped, or of people in general, which makes it more likely that they will help again. This kind of change or evolution is a central feature of both goodness and evil. This does not mean, however, that an aggressive act will inevitably lead to more aggression, or a helpful act to more helping. It depends in part on the already existing characteristics of an individual or group. One of my students described the experience of a "friend" stealing a significant amount of money from him. He was very angry, invited this friend over, was waiting for him with other friends, and beat him up after he arrived. He was later horrified by his own actions and became very nonaggressive. When a person already holds caring values, and circumstances and his feelings (of anger, unjust treatment, and so on) lead him or her to act aggressively, this act need not contribute to an evolution of increasing violence.

The behavior of bystanders has a crucial influence on evolution. Unfortunately, as I have noted, when they witness others' need, or aggression against people, bystanders often see but do not act. They may even protect themselves from distress created by empathy, or from guilt due to inaction,

by turning away, by closing their eyes to others' suffering. In one of my studies (see Chapter 6, Section E) some passersby, after a single look at a person who collapsed on the street, looked away and continued on their way without ever looking again. But when the passivity is in the face of harmful acts, it encourages the perpetrators and facilitates the evolution of greater harm-doing. I will propose that in extreme cases – like relatives or neighbors who know that a child is severely neglected or is physically or sexually abused but do nothing, or nations that take no action while a genocide is perpetrated in front of their eyes – passivity by bystanders may be regarded as evil (see Chapter 26).

At times people turn away internally, psychologically, from those in need. At other times bystanders see, know, but choose not to act and even become complicit: they directly or indirectly encourage perpetrators of violence. A country sells arms to and continues commerce and other normal relations with a country that engages in large-scale murder of people within its own population. A spouse or other family member continues warm relations with a person who physically, sexually, or psychologically abuses a child.

Bystanders also evolve. Some passive or complicit witnesses change and join evildoers. For example, a group of psychoanalysts in Berlin in the 1930s passively stood by as their Jewish colleagues were persecuted, accepted a nephew of Hermann Göring, the second highest Nazi after Hitler, as the head of their institute, and rewrote psychoanalytic theory to fit Nazi ideology. Some of them then participated in the euthanasia movement, identifying mentally ill, physically handicapped and other "inferior" Germans to be killed, and some later participated in the extermination of the Jews.⁶

Caring values and empathy with other people give rise to motives to help. But opposing perpetrators requires courage. In its early stages it may require moral rather than physical courage. Moral courage is the ability and willingness to act according to one's important values even in the face of opposition, disapproval, and the danger of ostracism. I will discuss moral courage in this book, although it has been little studied either in children or adults. It is an essential characteristic, however, for active bystanders, whether a child associating with or helping an unpopular peer, or a person speaking out against some policy or practice in a group.

THE POWER OF CIRCUMSTANCE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF WHO WE ARE

This book identifies influences that lead to great or persistent acts of harm or benefit. It also identifies ways that aggression, violence, and harm-doing in general may be prevented and caring, helping, and altruism may be promoted. The book examines psychological processes, such as anger, hostility, the devaluation of groups of people, empathy or its absence, and a feeling

of responsibility for others' welfare that lead a person to act in destructive or caring ways. It looks at characteristics of persons that give rise to helping or harming others, the characteristics of cultures and social/political systems, and the evolution of these characteristics.

It also looks at circumstances to which individuals or groups respond that make either destructive or benevolent behavior likely. Certain circumstances have great power, leading many people to behave the same way. But even in the most extreme circumstances, who people are, their personalities and values (and in the case of groups, their culture), affects their reactions. Many people would not go into a burning house to save a life, but some do. If someone points a gun at us in a dark alley and demands our money, most of us hand it over. But some resist, willing to die in the process.

A man named Mark Bingham once wrested a gun from a would-be mugger. The same man was on Flight 93 on September 11, 2001, which crashed near Pittsburgh; presumably he was one of the passengers who attacked the terrorists. He and the other passengers died, but saved the lives of the people who would have been killed in the intended terrorist attack. What happened on that flight seems a good example of the combination of the power of the situation and individual characteristics. Without a passenger learning on his cell phone about the terrorist attacks on other targets, the passengers would probably have assumed that this was a normal hijacking, which they might survive without anyone getting hurt. But once they understood the nature of their situation, it still required some individuals to initiate action. The power of individuals can powerfully show itself in such a situation. One or two determined people can have great influence in mobilizing others.

The power of circumstance, of a specific situation, was clear in the many studies of bystander behavior in emergencies initiated by two social psychologists, John Darley and Bibb Latané.⁷ They found that the larger the number of people present when someone suddenly needs help, due to an accident, an attack of illness, or some other reason, the less the likelihood that any one person will initiate help. Research on emergency helping is well represented in this volume, including research in which I found that what one witness says to another, which is an aspect of the circumstances that can influence action, greatly affects whether the other person helps or not.

The power of circumstance was also shown in the studies of Stanley Milgram on obedience to authority. A large percentage of people, the actual percentage depending on exact circumstances, obeyed a person in charge who put them in the role of "teacher" and told them to give stronger and stronger electric shocks to a "learner" when this person made mistakes on a task. When all that the teacher saw were signs on the machine indicating that the shocks were increasing and in the end extremely dangerous – when

the supposed recipient of the shocks was in another room and no distress sounds were heard by the teacher – 69% of participants obeyed the person in charge and proceeded to administer the strongest shocks.⁸

But circumstances affect people in different ways. In this situation, 31% of the participants refused to continue to administer shocks. One study found that those who refused had a stronger feeling of moral responsibility than those who continued.⁹ As in harming, so in helping others, our values, feelings of competence, and other characteristics strongly influence how we respond.

When the teachers heard distress sounds and loud complaints from the other room by the supposed recipient of the shocks (who did not actually receive the shocks), a smaller percentage of them obeyed. When the learner sat next to the teacher, who had to put the learner's hand on the shock machine, even fewer people obeyed.

The circumstances of a whole group of people, social conditions like the state of the economy – inflation, depression, and unemployment – or political turmoil, or threat or attack from the outside, powerfully affect group processes and actions. However, the characteristics of cultures, like a history of devaluation of a subgroup of society or overly strong respect for authority, and the nature of social and political systems also greatly affect how groups respond. Culture not only affects group behavior, but shapes individual psychology. Up to early in the twentieth century the popular view of children in Western countries such as England, the United States, and Germany, as presented in books on parenting, was that they are inherently willful (see again Chapter 4, on Evil). These books suggested that to become good people children's will must be broken, and broken early, using as much punishment as necessary. But as we shall see in this book, research shows that harsh treatment and cruelty to children *enhance* the potential for both individual and group violence.

HUMAN NATURE, GOODNESS, AND EVIL

Psychologists, social thinkers, and philosophers have written extensively about goodness and evil in human nature.¹⁰ Some have assumed that humans are selfish and aggressive by nature. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes had an extreme view. According to him, if allowed to do so people would use any and all means to fulfill their own interests, resulting in constant violence, war by each against all. To prevent this, strong external controls by authorities were needed. Others, like the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, had similar but milder beliefs and thought that people need to acquire internal controls, in the course of growing up, to prevent harmful behavior by them.

Many others, like the French author/philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the American psychologist Carl Rogers, have assumed that

humans are good by nature, that they care about others' welfare. However, in reality their views confuse nature and nurture. Both believed that this inherent goodness would be apparent under the right circumstances – that is, given the right “nurture” or experience. Rousseau's noble savage lost his goodness due to the bad institutions society created, and Rogers's child could lose his or her goodness by not receiving unconditional love. In other words, the right experiences are required to bring the inherent goodness to the fore. Still others, like David Hume, thought that relationships among people in groups can give rise to positive actions as people pursued their enlightened self-interest.

Sociobiologists think about human nature in the more modern terms of shared genetic makeup. They believe that both altruism and aggression have become part of the human genetic makeup. When others are in great need, this activates altruism. Threat to life activates aggression. When there is constant threat to life – for example, not enough game in the forest to feed people in surrounding areas – a culture may develop that promotes aggression in the service of survival. E. O. Wilson¹¹ has used this explanation for the culture of the Mundurucu, Brazilian headhunters who train children from an early age in fighting and attacking.

However, there have been nontechnological societies living in great scarcity that have been peaceful. A contrasting explanation would be that cultures that promote aggression develop for various reasons, which include scarcity and threat by other groups. These cultures then re-create themselves and over time even tend to evolve toward greater aggressiveness. Scarcity may contribute to, but does not make the development of a culture of violence inevitable. In seeming opposition to the sociobiological view, a group of scientists have signed the Seville Statement, expressing their belief that human beings are not aggressive by nature.

The assumption about human nature is an assumption about the shared genetic makeup of all humans. This is what sociobiologists write about. Evolutionary psychology, a recent development, is also concerned with shared human genetic makeup. It focuses on psychological mechanisms that have developed in humans because they help with “inclusive fitness,” that is, they help us to survive so that we can transmit our genes and lead us to protect our children so that they can further transmit our genes.

David Buss has proposed that anger is such a mechanism, its purpose to prevent “strategic interference.” Many theorists of aggression have viewed the interference with or blocking of goal-directed behavior as creating frustration, which in turn leads to aggression. While frustration-aggression theory has assumed that frustration leads to aggression, Buss does not assume that strategic interference leads to aggression. He proposes that it “motivates action designed to eliminate the interference or to avoid subsequent interfering events,”¹² leaving open the possibility of varied types of actions that may accomplish this goal. This is realistic, in line with much

research that shows that frustration may, but does not necessarily, lead to aggression. It can also lead to a different approach to accomplish one's goals.

In addition to the shared human genetic makeup, the heredity of particular individuals is another important genetic influence. Are some people more aggressive while others are less aggressive by nature? Are some more altruistic while others are less so?

All that I have learned in the course of my studies of children and adults, my work with teachers and parents, my study of genocide and mass killing, my engagement with real-life situations like Rwanda, trying to help prevent renewed violence after the genocide of 1994 by promoting healing and reconciliation, my work with police officers and others, and my study of others' work tells me that human beings have the potential for both goodness and evil. Perhaps extreme conditions, such as attack, or the intense need of a helpless person – for example a young child's need in front of our eyes – do give rise to a natural inclination respectively for aggressive self-defense or help. But a young child who is attacked may cry, run away, or hit back. The "natural" inclination is not clear, and if it is there, it is only an inclination, not a genetically determined action.

But the experiences that children, adults, and groups have do develop characteristics that may lead them to be caring and helpful, or untrusting, hostile, and aggressive. Given these characteristics, circumstances give rise to psychological states and processes, like anger or empathy, and feelings of effectiveness or helplessness, that in turn can lead to helping or harming others. Over time an evolution to great kindness or cruelty can take place.

Individuals, of course, differ in heredity. One approach to hereditary origins is the search for particular genes associated with some behavior or characteristic. Most human characteristics and behaviors have highly complex origins and do not seem to be accountable by the nature of a single gene. When such a gene is identified, as in the case of manic-depressive or bipolar illness, over time the discovery has repeatedly turned out to be in error.¹³

Another approach, used in behavior genetics, is to identify a heritability statistic that aims to show the extent to which particular behaviors are due to genetic inheritance versus environment and experience.¹⁴ This is done by comparing the degree to which relatives with greater and lesser hereditary similarity (identical twins, fraternal twins, adopted children and their adoptive versus birth parents) are more or less alike in particular behaviors, like alcoholism or aggression. Using heritability statistics is an appropriate strategy, but difficult to do correctly, since alternatives to a genetic explanation often exist. An obvious one is that identical twins are not only more genetically similar but are also treated more alike than fraternal twins. One way to properly establish hereditary influence is to compare

identical twins and fraternal twins who have been separated early in life by adoption.

The most relevant heredity-based characteristic for goodness and evil seems to be temperament. Children differ in how active they are, how intense are their emotions, how comfortable they are with new places and people, and how easily they can learn to regulate their feelings and control their impulses. Some children, given their intensity and impulsiveness (that is, speedy reactions to stimuli around them), need more guidance to learn to be gentle in relation to others.

Certain temperamental characteristics of children can elicit reactions from parents as well as other people that lead to problems in their development. Very intense, impulsive children may evoke impatient, harsh reactions that shape them to become more intense and aggressive, rather than temper their temperament. But this does not have to be so, and many parents and adult caregivers offer children with more “difficult” temperaments – a somewhat unfortunate term used by early temperament researchers¹⁵ – the love and patient guidance they require for optimal development.

Our shared human genetic makeup provides every child with the potential for caring and hostility, helping and aggression. But do all children have these potentials to an equal degree? So far, while there is some research showing differences in the heritability of aggression,¹⁶ and to a lesser extent of helpful behavior, there is no evidence, at least in my view, that either aggression or altruism is directly inherited, that something other than differences in temperament are the sources of heritability. The best explanations for differences in people’s inclinations to help or harm others are their experiences in life, and this book will focus on them. Until future research shows otherwise, the best hypothesis is that to the extent heredity plays a role in inclinations toward either kindness or cruelty, it does so through temperament, an indirectly related characteristic, which exerts its influence to a large extent through the reactions it creates to the child.

A shared genetic influence in humans is human needs, or what I have called “basic human needs.” Like other human needs theorists,¹⁷ I assume that all human beings share fundamental psychological needs. There is substantial overlap in the needs different theorists focus on. I have assumed that basic needs include needs for security, a positive identity, a feeling of effectiveness and control, positive connection to other human beings, autonomy, and a “usable” comprehension of reality. Basic needs are not directly linked to altruism or aggression; they exert influence in combination with experience. Experiences that constructively fulfill these needs make caring about other people more likely. Experiences that persistently frustrate them create vulnerability and generate negative feelings and hostility toward people (see Chapter 5).

Repeatedly in this book I will suggest the usefulness of a basic needs perspective in understanding goodness and evil in individuals and groups. The influences that I will describe as contributing to harm-doing and violence, or to their prevention and to caring and helpfulness, are not dependent on a basic needs perspective. But understanding the reasons why these influences have the effects they do will be enriched by considering how they fulfill or frustrate basic needs.

Humans also have an inclination to differentiate between “us” and “them,” people they identify with, who are part of their group, and those outside the group. Identification with groups is rooted in both thought (perceiving oneself as a member of the group) and in feelings of connection that are often intense. The group may be defined by ethnicity, religion, nationality, race, family, political affinity, or in other ways. The differentiation between us and them is central to kindness and cruelty. Seeing others as them has an important role in violence by groups against others and seeing people as us contributes to empathy and caring.¹⁸

The inclination to differentiate us and them is based, in part, on aspects of our nature. One aspect is the infant’s attachment to caretakers, accompanied by fear of strangers, which is a rudimentary form of the differentiation between us and them. Another is that our mind works by categorization, with those inside the group and those outside put into different categories.

This differentiation probably also has to do with basic needs. Being part of a group helps people feel secure. If one likes and respects one’s group, membership provides a positive identity and positive connection to others in the group. The worldview propagated by the group is absorbed by its members. It is a natural, even inevitable basis of individuals’ comprehension of reality.

ARE GOOD AND EVIL CULTURALLY RELATIVE?

Are goodness and evil relative, a matter of the norms and standards of behavior in particular societies? Or are certain actions good or evil even if they are not regarded so in particular societies?

One of the most surprising discussions I ever had with students took place many years ago, very early in a semester, when I lectured on and we discussed how we might infer or interpret an action as aggressive or cruel. The students argued that the behavior of a mother who is standing on the sidewalk next to a busy street and is spanking her very young child is always aggressive and unjustified, even if she had been explaining to her child a number of times on different occasions not to step into the street, the child had just done so, and her intention was not to hurt her child but to make sure that the child “gets it” and won’t get killed. They insisted that the mother must find other ways to influence her child. In contrast, they said, we cannot make any judgment about the actions of Nazi Germany

deliberately and methodically killing many millions of people, including Germans in their so-called euthanasia program, because they have their own culture and have the right to follow their own standards. I believe that the students' views were strongly shaped by prevailing perspectives at the time, at least in their environment, asserting on the one hand that we have no right to judge other cultures, that judging others is a presumption on our part, and on the other hand that hitting children is wrong (which I strongly agree with, although absolutes rarely hold in raising children and there can be exceptions).

Philosophers like Immanuel Kant and others have proposed universal standards of morality because societies (including small ones like families) can develop cruel, immoral standards of what is acceptable conduct. Cultures vary greatly, of course, in many ways. Much of this variation has nothing to do with kindness and cruelty. But some conduct, by groups toward other groups, and within groups, may have become normal for a group, even though it deeply harms human beings, whether by killing, inflicting physical pain, degrading people or in other ways frustrating basic needs. Societies also vary in goodness, in the extent to which they show respect and consideration for the welfare of human beings.

Goodness and evil may be regarded as endpoints of a dimension. When a group, whether a society or a family, has developed practices that make people suffer physically or psychologically, or inhibit their growth and development as persons, I would regard that society as on the evil side of that dimension. This is true even, or perhaps especially, when such practices are deeply ingrained and integrated into the life of the society. It is important to respect and value cultural variation and not regard one's own society as the standard by which to see and judge others. But it is also important to recognize when certain cultural practices persistently diminish and harm people.

In studying the extent to which rape exists in nontechnological societies, one anthropologist described rape-prone versus rape-free societies. In the former rape may be performed ceremonially, women who are accused of adultery may be gang-raped by their husbands and the husbands' friends, young men may be initiated into sex by finding women to rape.¹⁹ Perhaps in such societies, since the practice is so deeply ingrained, it is not harmful. Perhaps women in such societies enjoy being raped or at least are not harmed by it. Such a possibility is made less likely by the generally antagonistic relation between men and women this anthropologist found in rape-prone societies.

Societies that treat people well and promote the fulfillment of their individual and human potentials are on the good end of the dimension. For example, in some societies children are treated with warmth and affection. They are well nurtured. In some others they experience much harshness. Such cultural practices persist because children, when they

become parents, tend to treat their children in the same way, especially in societies in which there is substantial uniformity in behavior and standards. In the United States, with great cultural variations, children who are physically punished or abused by their parents are more likely to do the same with their children. But many such children realize that the treatment they received was wrong and engage in valiant efforts not to treat their children the same way.

GOOD AND EVIL AS OPPOSITES

An essential reason for studying goodness and evil and aggression and altruism together is that they are opposites of each other, in a variety of ways. Influences that lead to goodness inhibit evil and those that lead to evil inhibit goodness. Good actions enhance, evil ones diminish, human well-being. They are also opposite aspects of morality, which refers to actions that relate to human welfare and principles and rules that guide such actions.

Morality is our conception of how humans ought to behave. Moral rules and principles prescribe good (beneficial) actions and prohibit evil (destructive) ones. However, good and evil acts are not only guided by principles, rules, or values, but also by feelings – of connection to, versus disconnection from, other people, of affection, caring, and empathy versus anger and hostility. These feelings give rise to motives to help or harm others. As personality develops with experience, some people will be more inclined to feel empathy, others to feel anger or hostility. Thus, good and evil actions are opposites not only in their effects, and in our conception of what is right and wrong, but also in the feelings, values, and psychological processes that lead to one or the other.

In an early study, researchers found that among very young children, being empathic, feeling what another feels, did not diminish aggressive behavior toward peers. Young empathic children were very active socially and perhaps as a result their behavior was indiscriminate. They may not yet have learned to control their expression of anger. However, as they got slightly older, more empathic children became less aggressive.²⁰ In addition, some research studies have shown that feeling empathy when witnessing someone's need – especially the kind of empathy researchers have called sympathy, in which there is a feeling of concern for the other – is associated with more helping by children, as well as adults.²¹

My students and I studied a personality characteristic that I have called *prosocial value orientation*. This consists of a positive view of human beings, caring about other people's welfare, and a feeling of personal responsibility for others' welfare. People who possess a prosocial orientation are likely to be empathic. But they go beyond empathy, feeling something because another person feels it, and even beyond sympathy, which includes the

special element of concern for the other person. They also believe and feel that they themselves have a responsibility for others' welfare. (However, some researchers see sympathy as including a feeling of responsibility.)²² As selections in the book will show, we found in a series of studies that people with a greater prosocial value orientation help more. This is true when someone is in physical distress, with stomach pains, or in psychological distress, such as a woman having been left by a boyfriend after a serious relationship. It is true with self-reports of many different kinds of helping. We have also developed a version of this test for adolescents and found that aggressive boys have less of a prosocial value orientation than boys who are not aggressive.²³ Other relevant characteristics, such as advanced moral reasoning, have also been found to decrease aggression and increase helping.

Since people respond to circumstances, and since all of us have many and varied values, beliefs, goals, and relationships, which join with circumstances in complex ways, a generally kind and helpful person may at times harm others. A normally cruel and aggressive person may at times be kind. But different and opposing psychological states and processes are likely to be active in leading to one or the other kind of action.

I have already mentioned another pair of opposites, us versus them. We are more likely to help people we regard as us, see as similar to us, part of our community or group. We more easily harm people we define as them, different and separate.

GOOD AND EVIL IN INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS

The same motives can lead both individuals and members of groups to be aggressive, or helpful. But a member of a group may also be aggressive, or helpful, because of his or her relationship to others in the group or the group as a whole, rather than due to personal motives. A person who would tend not to be violent (or helpful) on his or her own may become so as a member of a group.

A young person may join a gang not because he or she wants to harm others, but because being a gang member may satisfy needs that do not get satisfied elsewhere, like the need for security, positive connection to others, a positive sense of self, or a feeling of effectiveness. These are basic needs for everyone but especially powerful needs for adolescents. Once a member, if the gang engages in violence, this person is likely to participate due to his or her connection to other members and commitment to the group.

The same is true with regard to ideological movements. In group violence, particularly genocide and terrorism, ideologies have a central role. People may join for varied reasons, only one of which is an already existing affinity to an ideology, a vision about ideal social arrangements. Others

include the need for connection, support, and the hope that an ideological vision offers in difficult times. A readiness to obey authority and/or a need to relinquish responsibility for their own lives, to give up a burdensome individual identity for identity as a group member, can lead people to join closely knit groups with authoritarian leaders.

With regard to violence by groups, the focus of this book is on mass killing and genocide. However, understanding the roots of these forms of group violence also enlightens us about other kinds of violence and harm-doing by groups, ranging from discrimination, to persecution, to terrorism. The preceding paragraph, which describes why people join and follow ideological movements that lead to mass killing or genocide,²⁴ also accurately describes why people join terrorist groups.²⁵

People may also be *selected* for membership in an extreme group, which in turn shapes them. For example, Greek torturers at the time of the dictatorship of the Colonels in the 1970s were selected from members of the military police based on their anticommunist ideological orientation and their obedience to authority.

Once they are members, the group socializes or resocializes people through the ideas it propagates, through their relationship to others in the group, and through the actions they engage in as members. They may change toward goodness or toward readiness to destroy an "enemy." Socialization into the group may occur as a natural outcome of group life, or may be deliberate, such as indoctrination against an enemy. The Greek torturers underwent elaborate training. They themselves were tortured, in part to further develop their obedience to authority.²⁶

Members of the reserve police battalions that were sent behind the German front to kill Jews had at least three kinds of preparation. First, the characteristics that led them to choose a police career prepared them. The second preparation was the change and evolution that all Germans underwent in the course of the increasing persecution of Jews in Germany in the 1930s. The third one was the change and evolution that police officers may undergo in the course of police work, which at times involves the use of force.²⁷ A fourth kind of preparation, described by Richard Rhodes, was prior participation in violence and killing in the service of the Nazi system.²⁸

In the report by Christopher Browning about one of the police battalions, the first time they were ordered to gather and shoot groups of Jews, the power of the group was evident. Even though they were told they could excuse themselves if they felt they could not fulfill this task, and even though many later reported inner struggle and some claimed they avoided shooting the first time, they did not ask to be excused. It would have distanced them from the group, might have diminished them in the eyes of their fellow members, and in spite of the "permission" to excuse themselves, might have led to later punishment. Over time, shooting people

became quite normal for them.²⁹ (Note, however, that in another report, Daniel Goldhagen³⁰ claimed that the members of this police group were cold-blooded killers from the start.)

The power of the group has also been shown among terrorists and suicide bombers. Terrorists often act for both “cause and comrades” (see discussion of this in the Conclusion to the book). Palestinian suicide bombers are often very young. While they are volunteers, once they accept their mission, they are usually continually surrounded by other group members, to limit their exposure to anything that might change their minds.³¹

We don’t know how frequent it is in the realm of helping and harming that people act because they are entrapped in a group, disagreeing with the group’s actions but facing a combination of practical and psychological circumstances that stop them from freeing themselves. In spite of the difficulty and even danger of doing so, many recruits do leave terrorist groups. Since groups are powerful socializers, this is more likely to happen early, before the group resocializes them. However, as circumstances change, differences in seemingly monolithic groups emerge. Chinese Red Army soldiers, fierce fighters in Korea, began to split into communists and anticommunists in POW camps and to fight each other.³²

In what Sam and Pearl Oliner have called “normocentric” rescue behavior by some people during the Holocaust, helping was based not on individual motivation, but on group membership. In Poland some priests and leaders of partisan groups led their members to save Jewish lives. Others, however, led their members to help the Germans kill Jews.³³ In Belgium, leaders in exile and church leaders at home influenced the population to help Jews. In European countries in general, the more anti-Semitic the leadership the larger was the percentage of Jews killed. However, when there was more anti-Semitic leadership there had usually been a history of anti-Semitic institutions and practices,³⁴ which shaped the population and prepared them to follow anti-Semitic leadership at the time of the Holocaust.

It can happen, of course, that an individual joins a group that turns out to be, or becomes over time, greatly at odds with his or her beliefs, values, and inclinations. Since such groups are difficult to leave, a person may stay, perhaps remaining internally opposed, perhaps changing. Or the values of the individual lead him to oppose what the group does. However, as a number of the selections in this book will show, members of children’s peer groups, ethnic groups, and nations are frequently passive. Some of the selections examine what is required for people to oppose their group when they realize that it is moving toward or engages in evil acts.

A group, even a temporary one like a mob, can exert powerful influence on people. Still, the psychological processes and motivations leading

individuals and groups to help and harm others can be quite similar. Both in individuals and groups self-interest (for example, wanting to make a good impression, or to gain friends, or to bring about reciprocal helping), empathy, a feeling of responsibility for others' welfare and commitment to moral principles are important motives for helping. Both individuals and groups harm others because they feel hostility, or want to protect themselves from attack, whether real or imagined, or desire revenge, or because they hope to gain something through aggressive actions.

However, groups can activate, give direction to, enlarge as well as add motivation. Ideology, a central motivator, is essentially a group phenomenon. As members, people can participate in group action automatically, guided by their embeddedness in the group. They may become "deindividuated," momentarily losing their identity so that they are guided not by their own but by the group's values and beliefs. They may experience a "contagion" of emotions that spreads through the group, for example, in case of mob violence, whether it is a lynching mob, a riot in inner-city violence in the United States, or soccer "hooligans."³⁵ They may be inspired by leaders, by group ideals, or may obey authorities. They may be motivated by the desire for status in the group, or to enhance their careers – a motivation among communist functionaries as well as SS members.³⁶

SPIRITUALITY, GOODNESS, AND EVIL

For many people goodness and evil have spiritual meanings. What might such meanings be from the perspective of this book? One spiritual meaning of goodness may have to do with people finding meaning and purpose in their lives and in life in general. Another important meaning is service to others. I will describe, as a high-level basic need, the need for transcendence. This means going beyond the self, beyond a focus on one's own material and psychological needs and desires. Usually this becomes possible when other basic needs have been constructively fulfilled in a person's life. Transcendence can take varied forms; an important one is altruistic action to benefit other people.

A spiritual relationship to evil may mean the acceptance of evil in the world. This does not mean passivity. Instead, it has to do with how we orient ourselves to evil deeds and to the people who harm others. Can we learn from witnessing them, can we make some kind of peace with their existence, can we grow from an awareness of them? While the emphasis in this book is on both understanding and acting to prevent harmful, violent behavior, a spiritual perspective has great value. Given the amount and intensity of violence and harm-doing in the world, it is easy to despair. A spiritual perspective can help us find some inner peace even as

we engage in the difficult and slow process of promoting goodness in the world.

THEMES OF THIS BOOK: ORGANIZATION BY TOPICS

This book attempts to answer several central questions. They include:

What personal or group characteristics, what specific circumstances and what psychological processes and states that arise from them, lead individuals and groups to commit either acts of goodness or acts of evil?

What childhood experiences, especially what kind of socialization by parents and schools, give rise to the characteristics that make it likely that individuals engage in caring, helpful acts, or hostile, violent acts?

What combination of conditions in a society and characteristics of cultures, institutions, political systems, and psychological processes these generate, produce destructive or helpful actions by groups?

How can people heal from past victimization? How can groups that have harmed each other reconcile?

How can the evolution of violence in individuals and groups be prevented and caring and helping be promoted? How can goodness become an organic outgrowth of children's upbringing, the personality they develop, the nature of societies?

The content of this book is organized into a number of sections or parts. The first section introduces the book. Following this introduction, there is an article from the *New York Times* Science Section by Dan Goleman on my work on bystanders. This is followed by a book chapter in which I briefly review my work, as well as describe some of my life experiences, from surviving the Holocaust in Hungary as a young child, to escaping from Hungary and coming to the United States, and much later beginning to address the impact of my early experiences. The combination of these experiences and a seemingly natural progression in my work shaped my concerns over time. This is followed by a discussion of my conception of basic human needs and their role in altruism and aggression, a perspective that has increasingly provided a framework for my thinking. Also included in this section is a brief discussion of the meaning of the term "evil."

The second part of the book is about the roots of people helping others or remaining passive in the face of others' needs. This part explores the influence of both circumstances and personal characteristics in helping. Many forms of helping are addressed, with emergency helping, people responding to others' sudden and intense need, a form of helping on which I and others have done a great deal of research, receiving some added attention. Most of the research on helping behavior and altruism in adults, my own and others', was done from the end of the 1960s to the mid to late 1980s (although one of the selections is from 1990). As a result, the material in this part of the book is older than the rest (much of which describes my

latest work and thinking), but it identifies what I consider very important influences in leading a person to help others – or remain passive.

The third part looks at how caring and helping, in contrast to aggression, develop in children and youth. I discuss child rearing by parents and in schools and to some extent the influence of social conditions and culture. I look at peer relations, especially negative behavior by peers such as bullying, its sources, consequences, and the role of bystanders in it. In research in collaboration with Darren Spielman we used a method to reduce aggression in boys that included instruction about basic needs, with participants role playing both destructive and constructive ways of fulfilling needs. I also describe practices to create “caring schools” that develop in children a caring, helpful, and nonaggressive orientation to others. Included in this section is also a brief selection on the origins of father–daughter incest.

The fourth part of the book describes the origins of genocide, mass killing and other collective violence like violence by mobs and the police. In this part I describe the many influences leading to such extreme violence, and how it evolves step by step, with actions leading to changes in individuals and groups that make increasing violence possible and probable. The examples that are described in most detail are the Holocaust – the genocide against the Jews – and the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda.

I also examine the role of the United States in relation to collective violence, as perpetrator, passive or complicit bystander, or active helper. I focus on the United States both because this is my home, my country, to which I am committed and would like to see playing a constructive role in the world, and because of the power and tremendous potential influence of the United States. The material in this section also informs us about the roots of lesser harm inflicted on groups, like discrimination, persecution, and torture, as well as the roots of intractable conflict that can turn into severe violence. One of the articles also provides a summary of some of the research on and my conception of the behavior of rescuers, people who in the midst of the horrors of genocide endangered their lives to save others.

The fifth part of the book concerns itself with the prevention of genocide and mass killing. I discuss what the international community – organizations and nations – can do and needs to do to halt violence once it begins and, ideally, to prevent it before it begins. I and Laurie Anne Pearlman also describe healing and reconciliation that are necessary after intense conflict and violence between groups has taken place, in “war-torn” or “post-conflict” societies, to prevent new violence, together with our work in Rwanda on healing, forgiving, and reconciliation. I also explore why mass violence did not happen, or was limited, in some places where the conditions for it existed. In this part I also examine the NATO intervention in Kosovo, the experience of children of Nazi perpetrators, the experience and needs of refugees, and the spirit in which the United States and the

world ought to act and the kind of actions they ought to take in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, to combat terrorism and create a nonviolent world. I also discuss the constructive potential of Holocaust education, which has become widespread in schools and education centers. It has a constructive potential for everyone, children and adults, and especially for people who have suffered themselves, whether from mass violence, persecution, or violence in the inner cities.

In the sixth, final part of the book I discuss some aspects of creating caring, morally inclusive societies. I further consider what makes bystanders passive and how might they be transformed and become active. I consider the seemingly universal principle of reciprocity in human relations and the creation of systems of positive reciprocity. I address the important question of the relationship of the individual to the group. In doing so, I focus on “constructive patriots” who, in contrast to “blind patriots,” are capable of a critical consciousness, an exploration and questioning of their group’s actions, and are led by their love of their country to question and oppose destructive policies and practices. I examine what the ideal university might be like and the kind of students it would shape. In the conclusion to the book, which like the introduction (and some other selections) I wrote specifically for this book, I briefly explore some further issues, like terrorism and moral courage. I then summarize and extend the exploration of what is required for the evolution of goodness in individuals, and cultures and societies. My aim is to summarize what is required for creating caring, nonviolent, peaceful societies that nourish the human spirit and promote the optimal functioning of individuals, their capacity to grow and fulfill their human and personal potentials.

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