
When Elmore Leonard died recently, writer Robert Ferrigno described the late author’s wicked characters as “real and scary and utterly human,” suggesting a tight connection between “real and scary” and the circumstances of being human in Leonard’s works. Beyond the world of fiction, humans who display evil behavior are often described as *scary*, but modern analysts see evil as a symptom of a deeper physiological or social disorder and not as something *real*. John Kekes, however, argues in *The Roots of Evil* that “human motivation and the contingencies of life make evil a permanent threat to human well-being.” (244) *Real*, in other words, is precisely the right word to use to describe *evil*.

John Kekes is an emeritus professor of philosophy at the University at Albany, and *The Roots of Evil* is his second book on the subject of evil. The first, *Facing Evil*, was published in 1990, a decade, as he says, before the “threat of evil was forcibly driven home to Americans by the 9/11 attack.” Unable to stop thinking about evil during the intervening period between the books, he writes that “I continue to hold the views I argued for in the first book, but I have become dissatisfied with the reasons I gave in support of them.” (xi-xii) *Roots* is his effort to update his arguments.

In this second book on the subject, Kekes’ discussion of the causes of evil centers on his analysis of six historical episodes he has selected as examples of undeniable evil. These include the bloody, thirteenth century Catholic crusade against the Cathars of France; Robespierre's nearly year-long reign of revolutionary terror; the operation of the Treblinka death camp under the supervision of the ambitious Austrian Nazi, Franz Stangl; the Tate-LaBianca murders by Charles Manson's 'family' in early August, 1969; Argentina's state-run terror campaign--the Dirty
War—in the late 1970s; and the deeds of John Allen, a psychopath who published an autobiography detailing his criminal life in 1977.

Rigorous, well-structured, and non-technical, Kekes’ line of reasoning is readily accessible to the careful reader. However, this is not a book that the reader can skim if he expects to gain a full appreciation of its claims. Kekes’ argument also recommends a close reading, since in his view evil benefits, from and is advanced by, careless or wishful thinking and a lack of pragmatic examination of this complex subject. Kekes writes, “One would think that realism about evil is taken for granted by all who think about it, but this is not so. There is long-standing opposition to realism. In fact, much of past and present thinking about evil goes to great lengths...to evade realism....” (128-129) All readers, indeed all human beings, however much they may hesitate to look evil in the face, have an interest in, and must inevitably engage with, evil on some level. And even if they have no interest in evil, to paraphrase Leon Trotsky (or Nietzsche or J.B. Priestly), evil has an interest in them.

The inevitable character of this engagement is reflected in Kekes’ choice of examples, which run from almost commonplace (acts like those committed by John Allen are repeated daily) to evil on industrial scales done by church and states. Kekes finds the evil in these episodes in “the combination of three components: the malevolent motivation of evildoers; the serious, inexcusable harm caused by their actions; and the lack of morally acceptable excuse for the actions. Each of these components is necessary, and they are jointly sufficient for condemning an action as evil.” (2)

Attempts by philosophers to explain the actions of those who perpetrated these evils often depend on providing a motive or other explanation based on appeals to “religious, political, aesthetic, scientific, or prudential considerations.” Kekes judges these excuses to be “morally
unacceptable because the malevolent motivation and the excessive harm of evil actions go far beyond what is needed to pursue any reasonable nonmoral aim.” Kekes finds it undeniable that “most” evil--indeed, it is hard to imagine any evil without human agency involved--is caused by humans. The problem, he writes, is to explain why they do what they do. (2-3)

Kekes argues that explanations of evil “inspired by the religious and the Enlightenment world views--try to explain evil by explaining it away.” (3) Both world views share “the assumption that the good is basic and evil is derivative because it is some kind of interference with the good.” His assertion--that good is basic to religion and Enlightenment--is not entirely convincing, however. Certainly arguments affirming man’s potential for evil might be made based on the doctrine of original sin or on Enlightenment philosopher Thomas Hobbes’ pessimistic view of human nature. Still, this simplification is not an unreasonable point of departure given its widespread acceptance in modern times, so Kekes sets out to demonstrate the failings of these general explanations before offering his own approach to explaining evil.

As he dismantles previous explanations in each of the six case studies, Kekes extracts elements to use later in a more comprehensive explanation for evil. Reviewing the cases, he finds no single cause for the evil these men do. Motives vary from time to time, place to place, and person to person. Indeed, circumstances play an important role--some evil actions can only be imagined to be possible when external conditions conducive to such behavior exist. Destruction of the Cathars, for instance, required the convergence of an avaricious French king with a pope willing to enable murderous behavior by providing religious dispensation. Franz Stangl needed Nazism and Robespierre needed revolution to justify killing their multitudes.

In the second part of Roots, Kekes extends his analysis. He proceeds to “classify [previous] explanations on the basis of their central elements” using “two distinctions regarding
the supposed causes of evil.” (135) The first of these distinctions is that which exists between external and internal causes. The second distinction exists between active and passive causes of evil. Kekes uses this scheme to arrange the elements into four categories. For example, at the intersection of passive and external causes of evil are “outside influences that make evil intrinsic to the scheme of things.” (136) “External-passive explanations,” he writes, “acknowledge the existence of evil and recognize that there is much of it. ...Such explanations are external because they attribute evil to a morally good order that exists independently of human beings. They are also passive because they suppose that evil actions reflect incapacities intrinsic to human beings and prevent us from understanding the workings of the morally good order and the unavoidable part evil plays in it.” (137) Similar treatment is given to each of the other categories--external-active, internal-passive, and internal-active.

Kekes’ arguments highlight the failings of each of these explanations. The problem with external-passive origins, he points out, is that “we are confined to the natural world and have no direct access to the supposed supernatural world.” In this case, if the external-passive explanation of evil is correct, “why waste time discussing it?” Kekes’ answer is to suggest a more useful strategy than wishful thinking. Evil, he writes, “may be an unavoidable part of human life,” but “coping with it cannot take the form of envisaging a possible state of affairs from which evil is absent and then trying to make it actual.” (141-142) If evil exists, then it must be acknowledged as a part of reality before efforts can be taken against it. After pursuing similar lines of reasoning for each of the other permutations, Kekes concludes that the causes of evil are varied and a satisfactory explanation for evil can only be constructed from many elements, internal and external.
One conclusion that emerges from The Roots of Evil that will unsettle many sensitive and hopeful individuals is the notion that ‘evil’ people are little different than 'normal' people. Another is that evil cannot be eliminated. Evil is part of human existence, and Kekes’ prescriptions—development of a moral imagination and swift, predictable, and severe punishment—are, at best, strategies for mitigation. They also seem to be fairly traditional responses long practiced by most societies, which might be thought a somewhat disappointing return for the time invested in reading The Roots of Evil.

Even though, in comparison with other fields, philosophy seems to lack any practical value—caring, as Bertrand Russell said, more for “useless trifling, hair splitting distinctions, and controversies on matters concerning which knowledge is impossible”—the investment of time in the consideration of evil is worth the effort and may even have practical consequences. Some scientists, unable as yet to find the source of evil (or of free will it might be added) in our DNA, and others would like to reduce evil to a consequence of chemistry, a wiring problem, or a neurological imbalance. Whether or not this outcome ultimately comes to pass, no one claiming special knowledge should be allowed, in the meantime, to prescribe for society at large; unless and until they have proven their case. To ensure this outcome, other thoughtful individuals armed with a deep familiarity with evil, and an ability to employ rigorous arguments to counter wishful thinking and careless reasoning, must stand guard. Kekes’ six cases show the danger of settling for less.

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