PART I

INTRODUCTION AND CORE CONCEPTS
1 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

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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,
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.

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. 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
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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. 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. 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 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. 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. Wilson 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,” leaving open the possibility of varied types of actions that may accomplish this goal. This is realistic, in line with much