Evil acts not evil people: their characteristics and contexts

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Abstract: The problem of evil has vexed philosophers and theologians for centuries and anthropologists, sociologists, psychoanalysts and analytical psychologists in more recent times. Numerous theories have been proposed but there is still little agreement on such basic questions as the nature of evil, what constitutes and motivates an evil act, and how we resolve conflicts between individuals and groups in which evil acts are being committed.

I am proposing that evil should be used as an adjective, and not as a noun. As such it should be employed to qualify acts of persons rather than their character. This change would enable us to eschew foundational explanations of evil and, therefore, to examine evil acts in their contexts and so better discern their nature and motivation.

I will contend that evil acts begin when an individual makes, or members of a group make, assertions about the 'naturalness' of their own acts and, correspondingly, the 'unnaturalness' of the acts of others. I will suggest that this results from the anxiety that ensues when they cannot adequately signify their experience of these acts. When this occurs, those so treated are dispossessed of their 'personhood', allowing members of the 'natural' group to violate their 'boundaries' with impunity. These violations can range from the relatively innocuous such as being ignored to the extreme such as genocide. I am asserting that all these acts should be termed evil as they derive from the same semiotic process of 'naturalizaton'.

I will discuss ways of preventing individuals or groups from embarking on the process of 'naturalization' and describe the types of contexts that might reduce or eliminate the commission of evil acts by those already engaged in their perpetration. To demonstrate these ideas I will use examples from my personal experience, from analytic theory and from the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland.

Introduction: Evil as a noun or as an adjective that qualifies an act?

How to set up the problematic—the ideological presuppositions in which a particular problem is formulated and discussed (Allthuser 1971)—of 'evil' has bewildered humans since they first emerged as a species and began to signify their 'worlds'**(1)**. Up until recent times, the problem of evil has been investigated within a foundationalist problematic in which 'knowledge' is derived from *a priori* postulates without reference to historical or contemporary contexts. As a result, the 'knowledge' obtained is given the cloak of universality and permanence.

When formulated in terms of this problematic, the word 'evil' emerges as a noun giving it the reality of a 'thing'. Via this usage, the perpetrator of the destructive act is assumed to have an 'evil' nature or be under the influence of 'evil' forces that are irremediable. A

particularly egregious example of this usage in the contemporary Western vernacular is the foundationalizing by the threatened Western states of the destructive acts of Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups. Firstly, this was designated by these states as a war on the particular groups involved to prevent them from committing further destructive acts, but shortly thereafter it became a war on Islamic terrorists—a qualified noun. Later it mutated into a war on Islamic terrorism—a qualified abstract noun and finally it became a war on terror—an unqualified abstract noun.

In contrast to this view, I'm proposing that evil should be conceptualized within a hermeneutic phenomenological (Schnadelbach 1984, Dreyfus 1998) problematic in which 'understanding' emerges via interpretation from the relevant historical and contemporary cultural contexts. 'Understanding' in contrast to knowledge is context dependent and, therefore, always provisional. From this problematic evil comes forth as an adjective that describes the characteristics of destructive acts rather than the character of the perpetrators of such acts. I'm going to contend that this change in the part of speech from a noun to an adjective qualifying particular types of acts allows us to understand the contexts from which evil acts materialize and those that prevent their appearance.

Analysts have not been immune to the creation of foundationalist views of evil. In fact, Freud, Jung and Klein, the principal originators of analytic theory, in most of their conceptualizing espouse a foundationalist problematic that leads to ideas that place evil as a 'force' within human beings. For example, in his final theorizing on destructiveness Freud said: 'The power of the id expresses the true purpose of the individual organism's life. This consists in the satisfaction of its innate needs' (Freud 1938, p. 5). At the bottom of the same page, comparing the two basic instincts of Eros and the destructive instinct that he postulates as constituting the 'innate' needs, he goes on to say:

the aim of the second [the destructive instinct] is, on the contrary, to undo connections and so to destroy things. In the case of the destructive instinct we may assume that its final aim is to lead what is living into an inorganic state. For this reason we call it the death instinct.

This postulate, derived from the implicit demand of the foundationalist problematic that there must be a basis for knowledge, places the origin of destructiveness within individual humans in the form of an 'instinct'. However, in 'Group psychology and the analysis of the Ego' published 17 years earlier, even though he had already begun to develop the concept of the 'death instinct' (1920, pp. 93–95), Freud discusses the causes of group conflict saying:

In the undisguised antipathies and aversions which people feel towards strangers with whom they have to do we may recognize the expression of self-love—of narcissism. This self-love works for the preservation of the individual, and behaves as though the occurrence of any divergence from his own particular lines of development involved a criticism of them and a demand for their alteration. We do not know why such sensitiveness should have been directed to just these details of differentiation; but it is unmistakable that in this whole connection men give evidence of a readiness for hatred, an aggressiveness, the source of which is unknown, and which one is tempted to describe as an elementary character. (1921, p. 34)

In this excerpt Freud has one foot in a foundationalist problematic when he refers to his

temptation to attribute aggressiveness to some elementary— basic—influence. However, the bulk of the excerpt is framed in a hermeneutic phenomenological problematic in which the *phenomenon* of people's antipathy and aversion towards those with whom they are unfamiliar is what most strongly impacts him. He gets a 'feeling of what's happening' (Damasio 1999), that affects him in such a way that 'it matters to him' (Heidegger 1962, p. 176) and, as a result, this guides his interpretive understanding (Bion 1962, p. 6, 7) that strangers via their deviance threaten the stability of the identities of the members of any group. His interpretive capacities falter at this point since, even though he is affected by the phenomenon that arouses group members' hatred, he cannot understand this in terms of other phenomena and so abandons the hermeneutic phenomenological problematic and, as a result, reverts to the foundational assertion that the causative factor has an 'elementary character'.

Like Freud, when discussing the conflict in the mind between evil discourses and the 'ego-personality' in the passage that follows, Jung initially uses a foundationalist problematic by speaking of a functional concept of the ego and also of the idea of the personality as a stable set of dispositions.

The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for one cannot become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self knowledge, and it therefore, as a rule, meets with considerable resistance . . . Closer examination of the dark characteristics—that is, the inferiorities constituting the shadow—reveals that they have an emotional nature, a kind of autonomy, and, accordingly an obsessive or better, possessive quality. (Jung, 1948, para. 14)

However, Jung goes on to use a hermeneutic phenomenological problematic when referring to the emotionality and autonomy of the shadow that, he says, '*possesses* the ego-personality with its characteristics rather than acting on it as a force conceptualized as a *drive*' (Jung 1948, para. 19) and continues to write in hermeneutic phenomenological problematic by saying that in the above passage he is referring to the 'relative' evil of human nature that can be mediated— changed into a less pernicious discourse—in analysis.

He then relapses into a foundationalist problematic when, a few paragraphs later, he maintains that in the mind of all humans there is an 'absolute evil' that resists mediation. This implies that there is a sort of innate 'substance' in the human that is intrinsically evil. Even more dramatically in *Answer to Job*, Jung (1952, para. 747) makes the ultimate foundationalist claim that 'absolute evil' is inherent in the nature of the divine.

In making this assertion, Jung was challenging Christian theodicy that, in light of the work of Augustine (1972) and Aquinas (1948a), held that evil had no *substantial* reality and, therefore, could only be defined as the privation of good—*privatio boni*—in the way that blindness can be seen as the privation of sight. Jung had a long and sometimes acrimonious correspondence with the Catholic theologian Victor White (Lammers 1994) over this issue. However in this correspondence, Jung never seemed to understand that Augustine and Aquinas were making metaphysical assertions about the primacy of God as 'good' (Aquinas 1948b) and not disaffirming the reality of destructive acts. In fact Augustine concluded that 'evil' must originate from the free will of humans manifested

as acts of concupiscence—self involvement—and Aquinas basically followed suit by defining evil actions as those that had variable amounts of privation of 'goodness'.

Klein in an early paper, like her predecessors Freud and Jung, starts her examination of the destructive aspects of children in a hermeneutic phenomenological problematic by saying:

But in the small child we come across a super-ego of the most incredible and phantastic character. And the younger the child is, or the deeper the mental level we penetrate to, the more this is the case. We get to look upon the child's fear of being devoured, or cut up, or torn to pieces, or its terror of being surrounded and pursued by menacing figures, as a regular component of its mental life; and we know that the man-eating wolf, the fire-spewing dragon, and all the evil monsters out of myths and fairy-stories flourish and exert their unconscious influence in the phantasy of each individual child, and it feels itself persecuted and threatened by those evil shapes. (Klein 1933, p. 239)

However, on the same page Klein moves into a foundational problematic to explain children's phantasies as follows:

In penetrating to the deepest layers of the child's mind and discovering those enormous quantities of anxiety—those fears of imaginary objects and those terrors of being attacked in all sorts of ways—we also lay bare a corresponding amount of repressed impulses of aggression, and can observe the causal connection that exists between the child's fears and its aggressive tendencies. (ibid.)

On the next page, Klein assumes that she is dealing with what Freud had called the death instinct by saying:

In order to escape from being destroyed by its death instinct, the organism employs its narcissistic or self-regarding libido to force the former outward, and direct it against its objects. (ibid.)

In a paper on the cause of criminality and, by inference, evil acts published shortly afterwards, Klein says, 'It is because the criminal feels persecuted [by his death instinct] that he goes about destroying others' (Klein 1934, p. 260). However, in a paper close to the end of her life Klein suggests the presence of a mitigating effect on the death instinct by saying, 'For when the ego is supported by an internalized good object, it is more able to master anxiety and preserve life by binding with libido some portions of the death instinct operative within' (Klein 1958, p. 239).

In addition to their contributions to an overall foundationalist clinical approach, Freud's, Jung's and Klein's overall formulations of psychic structure imply that humans have an 'evil nature'. In Freud's theorizing 'evil' tendencies are kept in check by an ego that is altruistic by virtue of its socialization, in Klein's by the mediation of a good internal object and in Jung's by the effects of the 'good' aspect of the divine. These views have been partly appropriated by psychiatric theorists (*DSM IV* 2000) who have adopted the category of antisocial personality disorder, the sufferer from which has no 'conscience' and, therefore, performs evil acts under the influence of his/her presumed innate evil dispositions.

As a result of their use of a foundationalist problematic, Freud, Jung and Klein all imply that evil is a noun. By contrast, second generation analytic theorists such as Fairbairn (Grotstein & Rinsley 1994), Winnicott (Phillips 1988) and Bion (Symington & Symington 1996) in their mature theorizing consistently use a hermeneutic phenomenological problematic in which in Fairbairn's and Winnicott's case destructive internal objects are not conceptualized foundationally, and in Bion's reasoning the growth of nonfoundational thought takes the place of the resolution of conflict between internal objects. For example, Fairbairn says:

the internalization of bad objects represents an attempt on the part of the child to make the objects of his environment 'good' by taking upon himself the burden of apparent 'badness', and thus to make his environment more tolerable. This defensive attempt to purchase outer security is purchased at the price of inner security, since it leaves the ego at the mercy of internal persecutors; and it is a defence against such inner insecurity that the repression of internalized bad objects arises. (Fairbairn 1952, pp. 164–65)

In a similar vein Winnicott says:

Under favourable conditions the infant establishes a continuity of existence and then begins to develop the sophistications which make it possible for impingements to be gathered into the area of omnipotence. At this stage the word death has no possible application, and this makes the term death instinct unacceptable in describing the root of destructiveness. Death has no meaning until the arrival of hate and of the concept of the whole human person. (Winnicott 1960, p. 47)

Finally, Bion problematizes the cessation of open-ended analytic discourse as a result of the analyst's anxiety by saying:

Now it is clear that if the psychoanalyst has allowed himself the unfettered play of memory, desire and understanding, his pre-conceptions will be habitually saturated and his 'habits' will lead him to resort to instantaneous and well-practiced saturation from 'meaning' rather than O.

When the psychoanalyst anticipates some crisis, and especially if he has, or thinks he has, good grounds for anxiety, his tendency is to resort to memory and understanding to satisfy his desire for security (or to resort to 'saturation' to avoid 'unsaturation'). If he gives in to this tendency he is proceeding in a direction calculated to preclude any possibility of union with O. (Bion 1970, p. 51)

Bion defines O as a phenomenon that 'does not fall into the domain of knowledge or learning save incidentally; it can 'become', but it cannot be known' (ibid., p. 26).

In these two quotes, Bion is no longer prioritizing the interpretation of the vicissitudes of internal and external object relations as the mutative centre of psychological change. Rather, he is privileging the development of thought itself (Horne, Sowa & Esenman 2000). Contrary to their application in contemporary semiotic theory where they are used, in contrast to knowing and facts, to describe the mode of and the result of the creation of an open ended discourse (Schn¨adelbach 1984; Danesi & Perron 1999; Chandler 2002), Bion uses 'understanding' and 'meaning' pejoratively to refer to the process and result of the closing down of discourse.

Despite this usage, in these quotes he is referring to the processes of apprehension that

are responsible for the origination of meaning. Interestingly, Bion's description of the role of the analyst in closing up meaning-filled discourse is identical to the role played by an individual or members of a group in the abortion of a discursive process about the 'other(s)' that below I will be suggesting creates the context from which 'evil' acts emerge.

Defining evil

In the above section I have been suggesting that the meaning of evil when used as a noun, both in some versions of psychoanalysis and in the contemporary vernacular, is multifarious and vague. As a result, it might be more evocatively seen as ametaphor referring to the subjective experience of sensorimotor arousal that we have as a result of witnessing, in person or at a distance in the news media, various types of destructive acts (Lakoff & Johnson 1999).

Perhaps a more enlightening definition of evil can be obtained from its etymology. It is derived from the Old English *yfel* that was changed in spelling to the Middle English *evel*. Its original meaning was 'up or over' and from this beginning it gradually came to be used as an adjective meaning 'exceeding due measure' or 'overstepping proper limits' (*Oxford EnglishDictionary* 1992). The contemporary OED definition however assumes that evil is a noun as it defines it as 'the antithesis of good in all its principal senses' which, as this depends on a prior definition of good, seems to be essentially meaningless. However, I think that the original definitions give us a feeling for what is involved in an evil act by hinting at a meaning that, in contemporary parlance, we would call a personal boundary violation that is non-normative for the particular culture in which it is being committed. Most interestingly, and what I will develop further below, is that with this definition of evil, an act that is not egregiously destructive, could be still considered to be evil.

If I am correct that evil is an adjective that refers to the characteristics of particular acts and not to the character of the perpetrators of those acts (Badiou 2001, p. 67), then it is important to discern the types of discursive contexts from which evil acts emerge. In two previous papers (Horne 2004, 2007), I have emphasized the reality of the inherent instability and impermanence of discursive contexts that, when overlooked, can allow them to become foundational (Horne 2007). When this occurs they take on the truth claims of 'the laws of nature' that govern the material world (Barthes 1992, pp. 109–59; Badiou 2001, p. 58). As a result, they become 'natural laws' similar to those promulgated by fundamentalist religious organizations (Simon 1992).

'Naturalization', therefore, occurs when we assert that we have determined the context that provides the final explanation for a given phenomenon and/or of the characteristics of particular individuals or groups (Bauman 1991; Barthes 1992; Danesi & Perron 1999; Chandler 2002b; Hinton 2002, 2005; Horne 2004, 2007). The result of any 'naturalization' process is the creation of the 'natural', and the corresponding 'unnatural' individual or group. Once this abstract binary is established, the 'unnatural' individuals or groups become 'things' or non-persons as they no longer emit what the 'natural' group considers to be the signifiers of human 'normality'. As a result, this group is thought of as being 'impure' and itsmembers are therefore shunned. This is because social, or, in some cases, literal contact with them is feared as it may cause 'contamination' that may defile the members of the 'natural' group through the 'imbibing'

of the 'impurity' of the non-persons of the 'unnatural' group (Ricoeur 1967; Parkin 1985; Girard 1986; Douglas 2004). This amorphous fear of 'contamination' by an 'unnatural' group can be so profound that it sometimes leads to drastic remedies such as genocide (Hinton 2002, 2005).

In the daily interactions of the 'natural' with the 'unnatural' group it is, however, the observable phenomena such as eating habits, skin colour, adornments, child rearing behaviours and religious practices that make the potential for 'contamination' manifest. It is these dissimilarities of the 'unnatural' group that, via their literal differences, adumbrate the chaos that is felt can imperil the 'natural' group's stability if any of their members were to manifest these propensities (Eliade 1963). It is the effects of these alien characteristics that have the enigmatic significance expressed via the metaphor of contamination that 'is terrifying because it reveals the truth of the system [of the 'natural' group], its relativity, its fragility and its mortality' (Girard 1986, p. 21). I am suggesting that this 'heart of darkness' at the core of all individuals and groups is inevitable as it reflects the unsignified residues of our early infantile trauma and of the unsignifiable aspects of all our 'worlds'; it is signified via the metaphor of 'contamination' and is experienced as our personal 'evil'.

The identity schism that creates a group of 'unnaturals' that due to their potential for contamination are seen as being equivalent to dangerous 'things', gives the 'natural group' the warrant to ignore, shun, or in the worst cases, persecute or kill them (Foucault 1965). I am suggesting that all these actions of exclusion from the trivial to the egregious are evil. I am taking this position because I am going to assert that 'naturalization' is the quintessential evil act in that it turns into 'things' those humans that have characteristics—signifiers—that are considered 'unnatural' (Horne 2004). It is when humans become 'things' that a licence to commit evil acts towards them becomes culturally sanctioned.

The importance of the adjectival concept of evil that I am proposing is that such a perspective can provide the basis of a framework for individuals and groups who perceive themselves to be 'natural' to change their attitudes towards individuals or groups that they have previously considered to be 'unnatural'. This may occur once they see that the contexts in which they are embedded have indeed changed from 'unnatural' to 'natural' as a result of their signifiers of 'unnaturalness' acquiring a 'natural' cast. A recent example of this change is the gradual naturalization in several Western cultures of the overall social behaviour of persons who have a homosexual orientation.

Finally, I am going to suggest, as I mentioned above, that not only is there the susceptibility for humans to represent unsignified infantile trauma as personal 'evil' but there is also an ubiquitous tendency for us to name as 'unnatural', and, therefore, signify as 'evil', those phenomena such as birth and death, gender, the body, and the non-human processes of nature. These realities resist signification absolutely or are signified in ways that create naturalized discourses which are either unstable or which fail to reduce their traumatizing effects (Bion 1970, pp. 41–45, p. 58; Badiou 2001, p. 86; Zizek 2006).

I am claiming that both personal trauma and the trauma created by unsignifiable natural phenomena create an 'otherness' that is the primary stimulus for human anxiety and it is to reduce this disquiet that they are named—signified as the noun 'evil' instead of

qualified by adjectives such as frightening or puzzling, thus leaving them 'open' for further understanding. These 'unnaturals' are the 'things' that represent the heart of darkness, of which we are only dimly aware, in all social groups and in their individual members. In Freudian terms they are the material of primary repression (Freud 1926, p. 94; Kinston & Cohen 1986) or the uncanny within (Freud 1925). As discussed previously, in Kleinian terms they are internalized persecuting objects or the manifestation of the death instinct, and in Jungian parlance they are the 'shadow' aspects of the personality or absolute evil.

On a more contemporary basis, Lacan would say they are the manifestations of the 'Real' which is 'what has not yet been put into words or formulated' (Fink 1997, p. 49; Zizek 2006, p. 66). Laplanche (1999, p. 229), another French analytic theorist, describes them as 'the enigma[s] of his [their] originary situation[s]' which occur in relation to an internalization of the 'address' of the other who does not entirely know what he [she] is saying'. This can be paraphrased as 'human subjectivity results from the infant's attempt to read the enigmatic messages that are continually bombarding it' (Stack 2005). Bion calls this a state of 'nameless dread' that occurs when the mother cannot accept the infant's projection of the feeling that it is 'dying' and thus strips this feeling of 'such meaning at it has' (1967, pp. 116–17). Winnicott sees it as the mentally unmetabolized effects of the traumatic breakdown that has already happened in infancy (1960, 1963, 1970) and Tustin (1987, pp. 61–69) and contemporary theorists of primitive mental states (Hopper 1991) propose that it is the 'encapsulation' of the sensate/feeling impact of trauma.

Contemporary theorists such as Kristeva (1982, Ch 1) call this 'the abject', about which she says, 'It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order'. Bollas (1995), examining serial murder, suggests that it represents the murder, via projection into the victim, of the already traumatized childhood self of the murderer and Eigen (1984, p. 92) hypothesizes that 'the organizing capacities of the ego may undergo disruption and deformation in early life to the extent that the very I-sensation, the sense of self, may feel tainted . . .'.

I am suggesting that all these hypotheses are different formulations that speak of the traumatic residues of infantile trauma and of the ongoing trauma of adult humans' immersion in the 'unsignifiable'. We attempt to reduce the impact of this in our 'worlds' by naming it prematurely in the attempt to make it 'natural'. These efforts, however well meaning they may seem, are what create the 'evil' 'strangers, Gods and monsters' (Kearney 2003) that then reside, tenaciously resisting re-signification, creating a 'heart of darkness' in the person and in the social groups to which they belong.

Cosmos and chaos: the natural and the unnatural

Since their earliest recorded cosmogonies humans have envisioned the cosmos, the world regarded as a complete harmonious system that is the location of 'good' forces or substances, as a region created by a beneficent deity from out of a primordial region of chaos. This latter is conceived of as a condition of complete disorder that results in utter confusion and that is thought to be the origin of evil forces or substances (Eliade 1963). Most strikingly the cosmos is seen as having 'being' or 'existence' and the chaos is conceived of as a region of 'non-being' or 'non-existence'. Despite the philosophical

impossibility of conceptualizing 'non-being' since all entities are 'there', humans still make this distinction between aspects of nature and themselves and most chillingly between their own kind by giving some humans the status of 'persons' that have 'being' and other humans the status of 'things' that have no-being (Dower 1986, Ch. 4).

The metaphorical rather than the phenomenological usage of these categories is illustrated by the fact that cosmos and chaos are perpetually in an unstable relationship, as exemplified by the chaotic acts of nature and of humans that disrupt cosmos from within and from without, thus showing that what it signifies does have a potent actuality. These attacks often result in the performance by the inhabitants of the cosmos of ritualistic forms of defence against the destructiveness of chaos. In addition, they instigate periodic renewals of their cosmos by ritualistic or sometimes literal destruction of what they consider to be a vulnerable entity. They then follow this by a facilitation of its re-emergence, ceremonially or in actuality, from the chaos that they themselves have created. Contemporary ritualistic examples of this transfiguration are the New Year's Eve festivities in countries of European origin in which the decrepit, mistake-filled old year is banished, chaos ensues, and from this emerges a pristine new year that the participants imagine is full of potential for new enterprises, unsullied by the chaotic mistakes and tragedies of the recent past (Ricoeur 1967; Eliade 1963; Kirk 1970).

From these original cosmogonies in which the Universe is created by some version of a cosmos/chaos split, cosmologies have emerged in which the 'worlds' of the original members are divided into 'natural' and 'unnatural' types of humans, places, natural phenomena and objects. The 'unnatural' entities are seen as such because they defy adequate signification by the members of the cultures involved (Pocock 1985, pp. 54–55). Living under these attributions people can easily slide into the category of impurity. As a result, the danger of contamination and subsequent defilement can lead to people, such as witches and lepers in the middle ages or members of the untouchable caste in India, being seen as having a basic 'fault' and, therefore, as being 'taboo' (Ricoeur 1967, pp. 25–46; Macfarlane 1985, pp. 59–60). Rites of purification were and occasionally still are used to cleanse those who come in contact with these 'unnatural' people (Ricoeur 1967; Douglas 2004).

I am proposing that this division between cosmos and chaos is more usefully and philosophically correctly understood as being one between the signified and un-signified elements of the experiences of individual humans. For example, the frightening internal and external fantasies of young children seem to be representations of the mass of un-signified elements into which we are all 'thrown' at birth and from which with the variable help of our caregivers we carve out an island of meaning that we call 'ourselves' (Heidegger 1993a). The witches and monsters of our childhood appear to be 'evil', but this attribution is a function of our incomprehension and resultant terror brought about by the experience of their presence. It is not the witch nor the monster, just as it is not 'chaos' that is intrinsically 'evil'. Like the word evil, chaos is best used in its adjectival form 'chaotic', describing acts, events or ongoing situations and their contexts. If this approach is taken, the various human responses can be better understood and ameliorated in the light of their complexity and uniqueness.

My witch and I: from conflict to rapprochement

The house of my childhood was 'bewitched'. The stairs to the second floor bifurcated at

a landing, the right-handed branch going to my parents', my brother's and my bedrooms and the left-handed branch going to my mother's sewing room and the storeroom where dusty, discarded relics of my parents' lives were sequestered. The left-handed staircase was narrow, leaving little space for the dim light on the landing to penetrate its upper reaches. In this darkness lived a witch, sombre and menacing. She never left her dreary abode but I felt her presence every night when I traversed the landing on my way to bed, shivering as I imagined her shrouded in a black hooded robe. As I lay in bed in fear I wondered if she had found out what a bad boy I was, in ways that I could not specify, and had come to punish me for my faults.

I was five when I saw Walt Disney's version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and was transfixed with horror to see 'the witch', driven with envy of Snow White's beauty, give her a basket of poisoned apples. 'The witch' now had a shape; she was very tall with a pale face, thin black eyebrows and a furrowed angry brow. Now embodied, she emerged from the storeroom in the early evening and lodged under my bed from where my dad shooed her back to her abode while I trembled under the blankets, occasionally muttering, 'Leave me alone, I'm not a bad boy'.

In my twenties I began an attempt to conquer chaos in general by playing rugby for my university as well as entering medical school. With this newfound ability to subdue the opposing teams and physical suffering and death, witches dissolved into an amorphous fear that occasionally awoke me at midnight, the witching hour, quivering as if I was still a five year old. In my thirties, I was pitched into analysis as a result of more frequent bursts of nocturnal anxiety, when my omnipotence dwindled as a result of the bafflement induced by the difficulties of raising two young children and of developing a private practice.

As my analysis progressed, my anxiety evolved into a guilt-ridden malaise. However, after a considerable time floundering in this confusing disarray, the witch, whom I thought I had vanquished, appeared in a dream. I was my current age and was crossing the landing in my childhood home. Suddenly I felt that familiar terrifying presence and hurried forward just in time to avoid a pair of black hand shears—that are used to shear sheep—dropping from the direction of the storeroom above and landing point first in the carpet just a foot behind me. But for one foot it would have been the end of me! In my imagination I felt like a shorn sheep beneath the shears, with all the terrifying vulnerability that entailed.

On this occasion, my analyst, instead of shooing the witch back to her lair as my father had done, took an interest in her 'appearance' and invited her into my analysis. The witch and I were now in a somewhat shared context and, as a result, she took on the semblance of something that 'existed for me'. For the next couple of years I had frequent dreams in which, in the middle of the night in an attempt to vanquish my witch, I would leave the safety of my childhood bed and tremulously creep up the left-sided stairs and, with a mighty effort to ward off my fear, push open her door only to feel her presence surge from the tiny room leaving me relieved that she had gone but frustrated that I had failed to 'see' her.

This nocturnal attempt to meet *my* witch, as she now seemed to have become, ended when in my dreams she re-located to the attics of a variety of houses in the old parts of cities and small towns. I was never able to locate her haunt but with every repetition of

this oneiric ritual my fear became less overpowering. I was discovering that she was truly everywhere.

We finally came together when, about four years into my analysis, I dreamt that I was in a three storey wooden country house sitting in a large room on the second floor looking out of picture windows onto sun drenched fields and forests. I was in a 'large' space with a 'spacious' view. My witch was somewhere in the house but I was unafraid and felt no impetus to leave the beautiful spectacle before me to confront her. My witch and I were now in a *common* space in the sense of it being both quotidian and shared.

At the beginning of my fifth year of analysis I had two final witch dreams. In the penultimate dream I was a member of a racing four rowing slowly over a smooth expanse of bright blue water that continued from horizon to horizon. The water was very clear and quite shallow. I looked down into it and saw a pair of shears with one black blade and one silver blade stuck point first in the sand. I dived off the boat, swam down and retrieved them. I associated these shears with the paradox of 'being here'; the intimate connecting of life and light with death and darkness; the situation before the division of 'world' into cosmos and chaos.

In my ultimate witch dream, it was early evening and I was in the main square of an old European town. I felt the witch was in one of the houses but I had no urge to seek her out. Suddenly, she emerged from a doorway on the opposite side of the square. She was very tall and regal and wore a dark blue cloak. As she approached me I saw that her expression was thoughtful. I stood without fear watching her draw near. Suddenly, when we were almost close enough to touch she metamorphosed into a large silver cockatoo that flew upwards until it was just a dot of light in the darkening evening sky. It seemed as though my assumption of active responsibility for our encounter had allowed the 'light' imprisoned in her darkness to emerge.

In my description of the forty-year struggle between my witch and I, I am suggesting that we see represented in my tribulations the parameters of our 'worldly' entanglements with 'evil'. Uppermost is that, as evidenced by my witch's transformation from a presence that terrified me to a person with whom I could be involved, evil was an adjective that qualified her acts and not a noun that defined her nature.

We often experience frightening 'presences' in dreams and via projection in settings such as darkness and/or when we are unaided, as I did in my first encounters with my witch. The seemingly incomprehensible nature of these experiences provokes fear, anxiety and terror. We attribute the cause of our intense emotions to the presences themselves rather than to the fact that they disrupt our ability to 'explain' them via signification (Laplanche 1999). As a result of our need to explain and restore an illusion of control, we give these emotional 'presences' the ontological status of nouns. This results in our often calling them either the 'force' of evil or the 'substance' evil. By contrast, as shown by my discovery of the silver and black shears, 'evil' is present in all of us and is inextricably bound to 'good'. It is a quality and not a substance.

Despite the disappearance of my witch at the height of my egoic omnipotence during young adulthood, she returned in my analysis when my analyst established a third position (Ogden 1994; Schoenals 1996; Britton 2004), from which he could oversee negotiations between us, the commencement of which she announced when she flung the black shears into the fearsome landing. With this gesture she seemed to be telling

me that 'I'm real and you have to deal with me'.

Just because I couldn't signify the meaning of my experience of her, no longer could I make the distinction that she was 'unnatural' and, therefore, that I was 'natural'. I was forced to admit that my ability to signify a phenomenon did not make it 'unnatural'. She was not 'evil', but my conscious self initially treated her as such.

After the many false starts that typically occur between parties that are trying to start negotiations, my witch and I arrived in the 'fruitful' ground of the country house which seemed to represent a space that provided a subtly active containment like the Khora described by Plato that 'supports' and brings forth a myriad of possibilities (Plato 1971). Although we didn't share the same room or speak to each other, our sharing of the same space seemed to indicate that I had tentatively given her 'natural' status and she had forsworn her desire to destroy my 'natural' prominence. As a result of this 'peace conference' the silver and black shears that she left points first in the sand seemed to indicate that she realized that we were both cut from the same mettle. She was a legitimate part of my 'world' and I of hers.

Legitimating my witch by granting her 'natural' status and, thus, allowing us to dwell as persons in the same house and in the same 'world' was the turning point in our rapprochement. My analyst had achieved his mediating task and so had vacated the third position leaving it free to be occupied by either my witch or myself as the need arose. As a result, we were no longer in each other's thrall as 'natural' and 'unnatural' and so were able to meet in the town square with her appearing with the embodied 'presence' of a person—a whole object (Horne 2004). We were now released from our pasts and, as a result, free to go our own 'ways' by following the individual possibilities that would open a 'space in space' and so allow us to have a future (Horne 2003).

Why do we commit evil acts?

Despite the fact that I eventually discovered that my witch was not possessed by an evil substance nor was she essentially evil, in my first encounters with her I felt this must not be so. She had a presence that I could not comprehend as it resisted my attempts at signification and so was intrinsically frightening in that it seemed that she—an unsignifed 'thing'—was committed to the erasure of my personhood. However, I was complicit in the creation of her 'evilness' since I had not developed the capacity to place her in an open-ended discourse in which her 'presence' could remain comfortably unsignified. In order to preserve my personal survival in the face of something I could not name—or so it seemed—I gave her an 'unnatural' status. In this mode, I considered her to be *essentially* 'evil' as did my forebears in Europe placed in the similar circumstance of an inability to signify the 'worlds' of certain marginalized groups of women in the Middle Ages (Macfarlane 1985).

In the case of my witch, her 'throwing down the gauntlet' of the all black shears perhaps illustrated the adjectival quality of one who was committing evil acts in my psychological life. That is, by this act she was 'saying' that she was not 'essentially' evil. However, I had given her that status so as to avoid the personal implications of her presence.

My assertion is that we all contain an 'evil' fault, a pocket of 'primary repression', the 'heart of darkness', that is intrinsic to our being as meaningmaking creatures whose infant brains cannot adequately signify our 'worlds'. Could it be that 'evil' acts are the

expression of this *nidus*—the breeding ground of our personal 'unnaturalness'—which we perennially attempt to 'purify' by the elimination of the 'unnatural' in our 'worlds'—the chaos of that which resists signification—with its 'impurity' that threatens to contaminate and defile our pretence of 'naturalness'. In light of this and contrary to traditional European writing on the subject (Badiou 2001, pp. 58–67), 'evil' acts need not be the extremely violent and/or large scale brutal acts we see depicted on television news programmes every night. Rather, I am suggesting that they start as ordinary everyday speech acts in which we make decontextualized assertions about, rather than remain open to, the unsignifiability of 'otherness' (Foucault 1977). When we are involved with our fellow humans in this way they become objects of scrutiny whom we 'measure' to see whether or not they come up to the 'standards' by which our respective culture certifies them as 'natural' (Bauman 1991; Hinton 2002).

As well as being perpetrators of this type of 'evil', we also experience its denaturalizing effects almost everyday when we are, for example, the 'victims' of a snub from a busy check-out person at the supermarket, or the negative assertion about our behaviour by a colleague in a meeting, or the irritation of an overwhelmed spouse or partner whom we want to listen to our account of 'difficult day' when we arrive home.

Despite these dangers of the objectifying stance, it is a critical pre-condition for detached reflection—the assumption of the 'third' position—on others or oneself. It is the reification by a closed rather than open discourse—a group of speech acts—by the scrutinizing person that creates the natural/unnatural binary. Once this is established there is the risk that it will lead to physical acts against those deemed now 'unnatural', that range all the way from various forms of exclusion through violence towards individuals to genocide (Bauman 1991; Hinton 2002, 2005).

Evil face to face: the troubles in Northern Ireland

In the summer of 2001, my family and I, on our first visit to Ireland, were driving north from Dublin along the north-east coast towards Belfast. We had just passed the peaceful scenery of the Mourne Mountains making their long gentle descent to the coast when we came around a sharp corner of the road into a small village festooned with Northern Ireland national flags and with the road gutters painted with the flag's colours of red, white and blue. My wife and I wondered aloud what special holiday was being celebrated. However, as we drove further, through towns similarly emblazoned, we noticed that the flags were tattered and the markings on the gutters were scuffed indicating that these'decorations' were permanent.When we reached Belfast we were told that these were Unionist towns and the signifiers were a warning to Nationalists to stay out.

Figure 1 Get Out!

In Belfastwe hired a neutral—neither Unionist nor Nationalist affiliated—taxi driver to take us on the long journey down and back up the parallel Shankill and Falls Roads. Here there was no romantic Ireland. Five minutes into the Unionist territory of the Shankill Road our driver stopped and, advising us not to get out of the car, recounted what had recently happened on the corner opposite where we were parked. The previous week in the early morning a group of Provisionals had from a car shot a group of Unionist paramilitaries in the knees as they were standing outside their office. The taxi driver went on to say that the previous week on the same spot a group of Unionist paramilitaries, monitoring a 10 pm curfew, had shot a young Unionist man in the knees as he returned home at 10.05 pm from his fiancee's house on the eve of his wedding.

Figure 2 Stay Away!

Figure 3 You're Unjust!

Figure 4 They're All Animals!

These incidents, and hundreds like them that we later heard about during our visit or subsequently read the fates of in the history of the troubles (Hennessey 1997, 2001), were evidence of 'equal opportunity evil' where those considering themselves to be 'natural' wreaked varying degrees of havoc on others they considered to be 'unnatural'. This was despite a peace process between the main parties that had been in effect since 1985 (Hennessey 2001). This natural/unnatural binary was violently maintained by threatening signifiers combined into murals on the ends of the housing projects in both Unionist and Nationalist areas. Further emphasizing the 'differences' between the two groups the British government has erected an extremely tall concrete fence that ran between the two roads from top to bottom.

This was not Ireland's first conflict. Rather it had been racked with troubles since the

invasion of the English Normans in the 12th century. However, unlike what occurred in the Norman invasion of England, the Irish populace retained both their Gaelic ethnicity and their Catholicism despite numerous attempts to erase one or both (Foster 1989). Following various Protestant invasions, most notably that of Cromwell and William III in the 17th century, Scots and English Protestants were 'planted' in various parts of Ireland, most numerously in the Northern Counties. This set the stage for the 'troubles' which began with the partition of Ireland in 1920 and burst forth throughout Ulster in 1968 largely because of Nationalist grievances over their deprivation of a variety of civil rights by the Unionist majority (Foster 1989; Hennessey 1997). However, unlike the majority of contexts in which evil acts are committed, the antagonists were of equal strength as, although the Unionists were the dominant party on the ground in Northern Ireland and had the support of the British Government, the Nationalists had the tacit support of the Irish government and the active support of a variety of political and paramilitary groups on the Nationalist side of a porous border. As a result, there was 'evil' face to face.

As occurred with the initiation of my involvement with my witch, the transformation of the evil acts of both groups of protagonists seemed to begin with the forming of a 'third' position as a result of the agreement in 1985 by Irish and British governments to cooperate in a 'peace process' (Hennessey 1997, 2001). With the 'third' position established, both the British and Irish governments withdrew their unilateral support for the Unionists and the Nationalists respectively thus engendering a situation in which the groups had to negotiate directly with each other. As a result of this withdrawal, the leaders of the two major factions now had to accommodate to the numerous minor factions with which they were both involved. The complex context in which the conflict operated was now more apparent to all concerned as the silver and black shears that were stuck in the sand of my dream had made plain to me. With a less nationalistic (Kearney 1997) and, therefore, more inclusive context established, the issues at stake, although extremely complex, could now be more easily clarified (Gormley-Heenan 2007).

A long period of 'coming together' ensued which was promoted by 'off site' events conducted by, amongst others, the newly established South African government and non-governmental and governmental bodies in the United States. These events allowed the multiple leaders of the two groups to divest temporarily themselves of the rigid positions they espoused for their home audiences and 'meet' in a common space, as did myself and my witch in the country house, to share, as 'naturals' such prosaic activities as meals and drinks at the bar (Gormley-Heenan 2007).

This process of involvement evolved in minuscule steps culminating in the Belfast agreement in 1998 in which both groups renounced violence (Hennessey 2001). However despite this agreement, the commission of evil acts still continued as most governmental functions were still being performed by the central Unionist-dominated authority resulting in an ongoing sense of disenfranchisement amongst the Nationalists. This was resolved by the St Andrew's agreement in 2005 when the responsibility for activities such as policing, justice, education, and traditional aspects of local government were devolved.

This process of rapprochement culminated in the election of a multiparty government in

2007 with Ian Paisley, whose rhetoric had inspired his supporters to commit many evil acts during the 'troubles', being designated by his colleagues on both sides to become First Minister. The change in attitudes towards their adversaries by Paisley and many other leaders on both sides is reminiscent of that of Menachem Begin who was transformed by differing contexts from being one of the leaders of the Jewish terrorist attacks on British installations in Palestine to Prime Minister of Israel and a partner in the Israel/Egyptian peace accords of 1979. These, and other similar metamorphoses of leaders from 'terrorist' to 'statesperson' that occurred during the Northern Ireland peace process, provide compelling evidence for my assertion that evil should not be used as a noun but as an adjective that qualifies acts.

Conclusions

Many analysts of differing persuasions have suggested that there is a sense that something that is ourselves and yet is subverting us and at times others seems to lie at the heart of our 'being here'. Such acts are 'committed' by figures such as the witch in my dreams and by members of the Unionist and Nationalist paramilitaries during the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland. I am contending that these 'unnatural' presences are the sensate/affective effects of the unsignified and unsignifiable events in the 'world' of one's infancy and the 'world' of one's ongoing existence respectively . Furthermore I am proposing that the naming of these entities as 'evil' inhibits the mature ego's involvement in the 'world of one's adulthood' and therefore the capacity to signify more fully its meaning.

I have described above the observations and attempted formulations of this aspect of human 'being here' by the numerous psychoanalysts who have noticed the phenomenon. In this concluding section, I'll only summarize once again the work of Winnicott as I think that he has given us the most pertinent description of its characteristics (1960, 1963, 1974). He defines infantile traumas as the disintegrations in conscious functioning that are experienced by an infant when there is a breakdown in the facilitating environment that is constituted by caretaking—and therefore holding and meaning-making—adults. I am contending that this breakdown is characterized by the inability of the infant's caretakers to signify with the infant the impact on him/her of the unsignified and unsignifiable elements of aspects of his/her 'world'.

It seems that residues of the trauma of the failures of caretakers to signify various aspects of infants' involvements in their 'worlds' are inevitable. I am contending that humans universally seem to have a tendency to represent these unsignified and unsignifiable residues in their cosmologies as chaos and in their involvements with human and material 'otherness' as the 'unnatural'. The sense of 'disorder' that these representations point towards is experienced as a frightening, omnipresent ambience— both 'in' and 'outside' the mind—that is encountered as though it were an entity. These entities and situations later take on connotations of 'evilness', represented, for example, by a witch that appears in a dream or by a member of a paramilitary group belonging to the 'other' side. When thus finally named, the trauma is no longer seen as an evil process but as an entity that *is*—has the being of—evil.

I am suggesting that the relative 'virulence' of such a *nidus*—this point around which something potentially destructive develops—determines one's capacity to tolerate the chaos/evil of 'worldly' involvements and to transform them into cosmos/meaning. Of

course, as outlined above, this primal material can never be fully signified. However, the result of working with this *massa confusa*,2 like the fruitful struggle of the witch with myself or of the Northern Ireland peace process, is that we can 'get our feet on the ground' (Horne 2004) sufficiently to enable us to signify more fully our 'worldly involvements' and so allow meaning to more frequently 'emerge' from trauma.

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Acknowledgments

Footnotes

(1) The concept of a lived-in world characterized by the meanings of humans' involvements with things, other sentient creatures and each other. Examples are the 'world' of my family or my work 'world' (Heidegger 1962; Dreyfus 1998).