

The Root of All Evil

By Bradley Jarvis

Our ability to objectify other people is both a source of great power and the root of all evil. Converting personal information into abstractions allows us to organize resources and people toward common goals, but it also allows people to ignore the value of the individual, causing harm without feedback about the personal toll.

War is the classic example of the abuse of abstraction. When we identify others as objects, killing takes on the significance of snow removal. We have “taken out” the “obstacles” to getting “what” we want. By dehumanizing “the enemy” in our minds, we can psychologically escape the consequences of ending lives every bit as valuable as our own.

In a more subtle way, bigotry makes it feel okay to deny rights to people who differ from us in trivial ways (relative to our common humanity). The “other” is in some ways less valuable than we are, their lives (and quality of life) less of a concern than the people we identify with.

One possible explanation for our possession of the ability to devalue other people is an *inability* to process the necessary amount of information fast enough to make timely decisions in crisis situations, or assuage our apparent need for instant gratification. We could compensate by slowing down, taking the time to fully consider the impact of our actions. By doing so, we could increase our efficiency and restrict some of the external forces that bring about crises (such as the negative reactions of an environment filling too fast with waste).

If individuals have a hard time slowing down because of the immediacy of their problems, our leaders must do so; we do after all protect them from harm so they can take the time to consider the long view and point the rest of us in the right direction. Leaders, who instead act viscerally and without regard for the value of others, are, with the combined power of those who follow them, capable of doing the greatest evil.

Evolution is another explanation for treating people as less than human. Traits propagate best in small groups, so a predilection for mating in such groups would itself be selected for. People outside one’s group would be less attractive, and if there was a limited common resource, considered a threat.

Communications and transportation technology, coupled with the cultural evolutionary tool of business, are turning the entire planet into a single community. As a result, xenophobia has become a hindrance, and arguably dangerous to the entire species.

To continue evolving, it may become necessary to intentionally fragment humanity, such as sending small groups to other planets. Fragmentation may happen unintentionally if

our global economy cannot be sustained due to more expensive energy (oil depletion) and the rapid degradation of natural systems (so fast that technology cannot compensate).

Evolution provides another, darker use for objectifying people: the suppression of maladaptive mutations. If a mutation doesn't favor the survival of future generations, it will not propagate. The easier we can spot someone with "bad genes," the less likely we will mate and attempt to pass those genes along. There is a very basic value judgment involved, and it is grounded in long term survival of the species.

I would argue that this kind of judgment is acceptable, because it ultimately favors life. Unfortunately, we are far from good at it, because the environment we find ourselves in is very different from what we evolved for. For example, intellectual prowess, which stereotypically accompanies physical unattractiveness, may be far more useful for survival than it was hundreds of thousands of years ago. Also, it is one thing to be picky about your mate; and quite another to make the decision for others: racial prejudice and genocide, based on the misguided assessment of genetic fitness, are some of the greatest evils perpetrated by humans.

Because we are not omniscient about the future and how others can change it, the prudent and ultimately right thing to do is to value all life equally, and react to threats only when they are imminent and obvious. Whatever the causes for our ability to consider other people as objects, they do not justify our mistreatment of anyone.

Another source of evil built into our natures involves the objectifying of our environment. When we look at the environment primarily as a collection of resources to be consumed, used, and then disposed of, we ignore at great peril the interconnectedness of living and non-living processes. We are not just supported by the environment, we are a part of it, and it is a part of us.

The greatest threat facing humanity does not come from war and violence. It comes from our systematic sabotage of Earth's natural systems and the other species whose lineage we share. Humans have initiated one of our planet's greatest mass extinctions, caused by both our ignorance and lack of respect for the web of life.

Science is removing our ignorance, while some religions and philosophies have long promoted respect. Unfortunately, our innate desire for immediate gratification is very difficult to overcome; and our economic systems, among the most efficient creations of mankind, have evolved to take advantage of that desire and feed it. As any addicted person will tell you, guilt and the threat of negative consequences in the future can only go so far. We can turn a deaf ear to the best information, hungry for any justification to keep pursuing the pleasures that civilization offers (even if it comes from industry lobbyists camouflaged as scientists).

It may seem paradoxical that science depends, for the good that it does, on the objectifying of Nature. Coupled with mathematics, and aided by technology, it enables us to convert vast amounts of information into usable forms, and to make reliable

predictions of the consequences of our actions. It is the most useful tool we have to cope with the complexity of the Universe.

The evil of objectification comes from our confusion of abstraction with reality. Phenomena too complex (or different from experience) for us to grasp, with our senses and mental apparatus for processing sensory input, are all too easily relegated to the status of objects; and we naturally deal with objects by manipulating them. When those “objects” are other people and species, we can inadvertently hurt or destroy them.

Spirituality, often maligned by people who are comfortable with abstraction (until recently, me among them) can bridge the gap between the personal and the impersonal. Often defended as the “source of values,” spirituality (and its cultural manifestation, religion) allows us to as much as possible internalize the rest of Nature, partly by accepting, on an emotional level, the value of the parts of it that we cannot comprehend. It uses (and nurtures) faith, which, in this context, is the ability to live fearlessly with the unknowable.

While it can inspire respect of people and other species, spirituality also can be used for evil. When we objectify the unknown as good or evil, as many religions are prone to do, we end up only respecting the “good” parts, and isolate or destroy the “bad” parts.

I would argue that the terms “good” and “evil” should only be applied to our TREATMENT of people or species, not to people or species themselves. My use of the term “evil” therefore involves the hurt or destruction of others, not the character of the people doing the hurt or destruction. To brand any individual or group (of people or species) as good or evil is to assume that they will always behave as they did when the label was applied, and leads to uniform treatment of them which, more often than not, will be inappropriate and possibly damaging (that is, evil).

A perceptive reader might counter that this discussion exposes the most important aspect of evil, as a set of actions rather than a characteristic of people, which implies that objectifying people and species is okay as long as you include an accurate portrayal of their actions. If abstractions could be made perfect, this would be a valid argument, but as history can attest, even the most rigorous models of physical reality are merely caricatures, focusing on a limited set of characteristics with predictive power that involves non-trivial degrees of probability. Put another way, we can say, based on our abstractions, what MIGHT happen (with some quantifiable level of confidence), but not what WILL happen (with total confidence).

Given the fact of uncertainty in our models, we must keep from acting solely based on our expectations. Spirituality, in its purest application, enables us to respect everyone and everything enough to minimize our own evil.

Respect for others can be generalized to a respect for complexity and our limitations in dealing with it. When we think of a situation in fewer variables than it has in real life, we

risk unintended consequences which may be harmful to people in that situation (committing evil).

An excellent example of this is the U.S. approach to terrorism. President Bush seems to think of people as “good” or “evil,” identifies groups in these terms, and casts every human activity as a conflict between such groups. There are at least two problems with this perspective. First, there are no good or evil people, just good or evil actions (actions which help or hurt people). Second, behavioral traits are built into the entire human population; they cannot be stamped out by destroying the people who demonstrate them.

Whether or not people will use fear as a tool to achieve political objectives (practice terrorism) depends on, among other things: their personality; the availability of (and their familiarity with, and confidence in) alternative approaches; and their degree of desperation. We can control conditions and awareness, but not inheritance (genetic engineering notwithstanding). Culture (including religion) has been proposed as a way to screen people who might practice terrorism; but it only preconditions them, and not uniformly.

President Bush and others who would objectify people in order to protect themselves would do well to consider the fundamental sources of historical success in preventing violence: screening of behavior, not people; education; and reduction of poverty and persecution. When you screen behavior (through laws and law enforcement), you discourage the actions themselves, forcing people to consider acceptable alternatives. When you educate people, you give them the tools to find those alternatives. And when you reduce poverty and persecution, you reduce the desperation that drives people to act before they adequately consider the consequences of their actions.

On a personality basis alone, some 25 percent of the population will be reactionary and limited in the people they care about; they treat people according to their “gut” emotional response to them. If they feel a resonance with someone’s rhetoric and general approach to life, they will generally agree with the person. Someone they have a negative response to will either be avoided or be considered an enemy (especially if they feel threatened).

Roughly half of these people will be incurious about their world, unwilling to challenge their assumptions about the world. These people will follow the lead of people they like, loving who their leaders love, and hating who their leaders hate, as long as they can continue to identify emotionally with those leaders.

The kind of objectifying that is practiced by people who operate primarily on emotional response, care about a limited number of people, and do not challenge their assumptions, can lead to the most horrendous evil, exemplified by the persecution and genocide of the Jews by Hitler’s Nazis. In the United States, we see a similar trend beginning to develop relative to the Muslims in the Middle East, and the Mexicans entering our country illegally, who are perceived as a threat based on very limited evidence.

Of course, I am speaking statistically here. Every individual is different, and should be judged by what they do. Those who advocate killing people sharing some obvious characteristics with a small group of demonstrated murderers should not, themselves, be judged as murderers.

To summarize my main points about evil, the study and communicating about the behavior of groups of people requires that we be abstract. To translate the resulting understanding into action without hurting the subjects of that understanding, we must respect them as real people whose value is equivalent to that of the people we know directly, and as much as possible treat them as individuals. The alternative, identifying others as objects and acting accordingly, can easily cause harm – or worse.

Evil is not a characteristic of people, it is a characteristic of actions. People are capable of changing their behavior, and only in a limited way (through exploration), themselves. The seeds of evil are built into our genome; given the right circumstances, anyone can commit acts of evil. Therefore, people must be held accountable for what they do, not who they are.

Spirituality provides one way of limiting the evil people do, by instilling the basis of respect for others on an emotional level. But it can also have a negative effect, by allowing people to become too comfortable with their assumptions. Education and collective investigation (exemplified by science) can help, by providing a means of checking those assumptions and sharing the results, but it too has a down side: facilitating the development and dissemination of harmful technologies. Together, spirituality and science can be used to harness the positive power of abstraction, while limiting its great destructive power.