

Research in Context (ADAD5003)



(What If Evil Does Befall Me?, 2018)

As we approach the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, it seems an appropriate time to reflect upon the events of the 2nd World War. With that in mind, critically discuss and respond to the idea that *evil* can be explored through the practice of semiology?

Word Count: 2535

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Ted Bundy, Harold Shipman, H.H Holmes – these men were notorious killers. But were they born evil?

“No one is born evil, just like no one is born alone. They become that way, through choice and circumstance. The latter you cannot control, but the former...” (Aveyard, 2016).

This quote resonates with me because I believe that as a newborn, you have not been influenced by any external factors which could lead you to be evil. However, it may be that a person's genetic nature leads them to perceive the world more negatively than others.

Swedish scientists have studied criminals who have committed the most heinous crimes, and have discovered genes that they believe could promote violence. This finding indicates that actions of evil are not inhumane, but very much human.

“Brian Masters, who has written biographies of several mass murderers including Rosemary West and Dennis Nilsen, says that every human being has the capacity to commit wicked acts. The purpose of society is to curtail evil and without that influence – such as in Nazi Germany, where mass murder was encouraged – every human could commit terrible deeds.” (Wood, 2016)

Going back to the first quote, this topic has for centuries sparked debate between many philosophers on whether humans are born good or evil. The struggles that philosophy has faced with evil over several hundred years has been addressed in the book “Evil in Modern Thought,” (Neiman, 2002). Neiman talks about how different philosophers had their own interpretation of evil: Hegel explained that evil was necessary to make progress; Nietzsche claimed that humans brought evil upon themselves; whereas another view argued that evil was a moral category of its own. Neiman insists that these different ways of thinking were all destroyed by Auschwitz. Post-Auschwitz, it is believed that all acts of evil are born of malice.

“Precisely the belief that evil actions require evil intentions allowed totalitarian regimes to convince people to override moral objections that might otherwise have functioned” (Neiman, 2002)

Responding to this quote, I believe that a person's loyalty to someone or something can influence them to commit a heinous act, without them questioning their morality. Which leads me to write this paper.

Is evil a socially constructed concept?

It is vital for me to express where I believe evil originated from, as this plays a role in me believing whether evil is socially constructed or not.

Coming from a Christian background, I have been taught that the roots of evil are firmly from religion. This becomes more apparent when I look at the range of narratives and symbolism that are prominent in Western culture. For some religions, the origin of evil begins in Eden, where the primordial man Adam and his wife Eve were free to consume fruit from any tree apart from the Tree of Knowledge (often known as the Tree of Evil). However, the serpent tempted them into eating the forbidden tree's fruit (generally depicted as a Tempting Apple). This defiance led the pair to be expelled from the garden, which essentially condemned their descendants to burdened lives.

In this paragraph, I will be looking at how the depiction of the Garden of Eden can be explored through semiotics. Semiotics is the study of how signs and symbols create meaning. Through semiology, we can look at the garden's imagery to analyse how the signs and symbols depicted in them create meaning. The importance that the Garden of Eden had in the Fall of Man has given this idea that the garden was idyllic, which became a symbol of temptation.



(Original Sin, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden , n.d.)

In this image, the predominant signs and symbols that stand out to me are the Tree, the serpent, Eve picking the Tempting Apple, and the reflection of the consequences. In the Bible, the exact appearance of the tree itself and the fruit it produced is unknown. In this image, the Tree appears to be lively and fresh with bright red apples growing off it. A semiotician might say that an apple is a complex symbol with a variety of meanings depending on its context. An apple symbolises love, knowledge, wisdom, and death. This could be why the fruit depicted on the Tree is often an apple since it's the Tree of Knowledge. The apples are red, which is often associated with danger. The serpent is wrapped around the Tree with the face of the Devil. Historically, serpents are symbols of rebirth, transformation and healing, however, serpents are commonly represented as being evil and destructive due to the belief that Satan was disguised as a serpent. My perception of these symbols being evil have been influenced by my beliefs on Christianity, but does that mean you would perceive these symbols as being evil too?

In relation to where I believe evil originated from, for numerous Christian denominations, the fall of man is closely associated to that of original sin. Many Christians believe that because Adam and Eve disobeyed God, this brought sin into the world. The Roman Catholic Church believe that due to the fall of man, everyone is born sinful. Conversely, the Eastern Orthodox Church rejects the idea that original sin is passed down through generations. In Ezekiel 18:20, it states that "The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child". The concept of the fall of man and original sin has caused many to debate: **Are we born good or evil?**

Despite the fact that I briefly talked about this topic in my introduction, this question has produced many answers to it, however, can any of these answers be 100 percent correct? The answer is no. How we respond to this question will most likely be influenced by how we have been brought up as individuals, and therefore, everyone will have their own opinion on whether you can be born evil or not.

Although there are many views as to whether we learn to develop our morality and that we are all born as amoral humans, or if newborns are a moral blank slate, there are two main sides of the morality debate. Thomas Hobbes believed that society and rules improve our bad nature, whereas, “Rousseau repeatedly claims that a single idea is at the centre of his world view, namely, that human beings are good by nature but are rendered corrupt by society.” (Bertram, 2010).

A Kantian philosophical perspective on evil is that humans have free will, which suggests that evil comes from within us. It is apparent that evil is something we are all capable of. In Dr. Julia Shaw’s book “Evil: The Science Behind Humanity’s Dark Side”, she discusses the fact that she believes that evil has been rooted in to our cultures. “What one may consider normal, like sex before marriage, eating meat, or being a banker, others find abhorrent. And if evil is only in the eye of the beholder, can it be said to exist at all?” (Shaw, 2019).

Taking what Dr. Julia Shaw said about evil, could evil really be a socially constructed concept across societies? “Social construct: an idea that has been created and accepted by the people in a society” (Social construct, 2019)

“To say of something that it is socially constructed is to emphasize its dependence on contingent aspects of our social selves. It is to say: This thing could not have existed had we not built it; and we need not have built it at all, at least not in its present form. Had we been a different kind of society, had we had different needs, values, or interests, we might well have built a different kind of thing, or built this one differently.” - (Boghossian, 2001)

Although I talked about how someone’s genetic nature could lead them into viewing the world negatively, I have no doubt that it is impossible for us to be born into this world with any form of actual evil within us. This has led me to deduce that culture is the most influential factor in someone developing evil attributes.

“A key emphasis of social constructivism is the value of cultural background. Every human develops in the context of a culture; thus a child’s learning is affected by the culture of their family they are brought up in. According to social constructivism, culture gives the child much of the content of their thinking, that is their knowledge. Secondly it provides the child with the cognitive tools needed for development, thus culture can teach children both what to think and how to think. Adults in the child’s environment are conduits for these tools, which include language, cultural history, social context and more recently electronic sources of information.” - (Draper, 2013)

It is important to identify we often overlook evil and good as it is persistent. We as humans are inclined to categorising everything as it helps us understand and make sense of different things. This enables us as a community to share the same meanings, in order for us to communicate better with each other. Each and every culture has different opinions about what constitutes evil. What may be identified as being evil in some cultures may well be normal for others, the reason being that evil is a subjectively formed social concept. A certain culture’s ideas on evil will most likely be different to that of another culture depending on that culture’s beliefs and morals. For example, in our Western world, we often associate ghosts or spirits with being scary and evil. On the other hand, various cultures do not agree with this belief as they view spirits as being forces of good. For example, in certain sects of Judaism, non-living entities are known for being supportive in aiding the living. It is believed that if someone is struggling with a certain situation, then the non-living entity attaches itself to that person, up until they have been able to overcome their problem. This example makes it apparent that we regularly take “evil” for granted, as we think that there is a shared view on what is evil and good. In reality, there is no actual global view on how evil is composed since it is created by the range of beliefs in any given culture or society.

I personally believe that you are influenced by what or whom you look up to. I feel this way because if you are loyal to a certain culture/society or a specific group/person, you are more than likely going to follow their instructions as you would not want to disobey them. This could lead you to do something that you might not think is morally right, but that you carry out because you have been brainwashed by that higher figure.

One of modern psychology's more infamous experiments by Stanley Milgram revealed that if an authority-figure tells us to hurt others, then we will do what they say. This was later confirmed by the Stanford Prison Experiment, which proves that without necessarily being evil, anyone can act it under the right circumstances. The Stanford Prison Experiment was carried out in 1964, and showed that personality predicts your obedience in a Milgram paradigm. This study indicated that humans who tend to normally be friendly actually acted the worst, and those who are more anti-social were more likely to challenge authority.

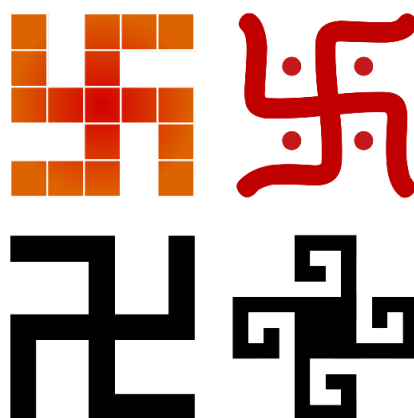
An example of this statement is how Hitler ruled Germany through the swastika.

The swastika (as a character, 卐 or 卐, respectively) is a geometrical figure, which depending on your culture, is associated with many meanings, making it a polysemy.

The swastika is an icon, widely found in both human history and the modern world. Numerous Indo-European religions associate the swastika with being representations of the thunder god and the king of the gods. From its earliest interpretation, the symbol has always been seen as being positive.

"It has been used by cultures around the world for myriad different purposes throughout history: as a symbol in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism; as a stylized cross in Christianity; in ancient Asiatic culture as a pattern in art; in Greek currency; in Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque architecture; and on Iron Age artefacts. While the symbol has a long history of having a positive connotation, it was forever corrupted by its use in one cultural context: Nazi Germany." - (Hogeback, n.d.)

Prior to the 1930s, most conceptions of the swastika were fairly positive. That was until it became a feature of Nazi symbolism as an emblem of the Aryan race. Pre-WW1 in Europe, the swastika was adopted by several organisations. It was then later adopted by the Nazi Party and Nazi Germany before WW2. The Nazi Party used it to symbolise German nationalistic pride, and as a result of WW2 and the Holocaust, many Western countries now associate it with Nazism and racial supremacism.



(Dosbin, 2017)

Going back to my belief that loyalty can make you agree with or even perform evil actions, this is a perfect example of that. How can a symbol hold that much evil within it? Looking at these variations of the swastika, I have noticed that two of them are red. Although red can symbolise love in many Western countries, it is also often associated with death and danger. Could this be why these images feature a red swastika? I do not think that the swastika itself is evil, however, when it was introduced to the Nazi Party, everyone who supported what they stood for became familiar with this symbol. I believe that this meant that once Hitler started using it during World War 2, supporters of the Nazi Party were loyal to this symbol and therefore followed Hitler's instructions, which encouraged them to do evil acts even though they may have been against their moral values.

This has led me to the conclusion that evil is in fact socially constructed. I strongly believe that although there may be genetics where someone acts more negatively towards certain situations, no one has evil built into them when they are born. I believe that whether you are religious or not, everyone has their own beliefs, which can result in them seeing certain things differently to another person's beliefs. I think that we are all influenced by higher figures in our lives who can control the way we act if we are obedient to them.

If a certain culture/society can create their own ideas about evil, and have others follow their beliefs, then signs and symbols can do the same. Through the exploration of semiology, we can study the meaning of a sign or symbol from a range of factors (e.g. the colour and the shape). How one culture might perceive a symbol to another culture is down to what it was used for and the time it was used. I personally believe that culture itself may be the root of evil, however, we have also contaminated it even more with our own free-will. Humans need to examine themselves to eradicate evil from our cultures, and in order to do this, we need to avoid evil practices in our cultures.

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