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# Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty

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## Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty

by Roy F. Baumeister, Ph.D.; New York City, W. H. Freeman and Company, 1996, 417 pages, \$24.95

Leigh W. Jerome, Ph.D.

Why is there evil? The question resonates with more than academic curiosity. People struggle with this issue because when violence and cruelty are encountered in daily life, one's fundamental assumptions about the world are challenged.

Roy Baumeister's book explores the roots of evil, offering an examination of the subject apart from moralistic musings. When evil acts are encountered, moral outrage is a natural response. Identification and empathy with the victim's point of view are automatic. Baumeister urges the reader beyond this vantage point, seeking to discern the essential nature of evil. To accomplish his task, Baumeister incorporates historical, political, and psychological factors into the analysis as well as examining the perpetrator's point of view. He combines provocative inquiry with colorful stories, producing a highly readable volume.

Evil is a construct that is prone to stereotyping and exaggeration. Baumeister carefully outlines two related phenomena that limit an accurate understanding of evil. The first lens through which evil is filtered is the "magnitude gap." The magnitude gap describes the discrepancy between the importance of an evil act to the victim and the importance of the same act for the perpetrator. The importance is almost always greater for the victim. Someone who has been the victim of a cruel or violent event is likely to have a more substantial emotional response than does the perpetrator. The discrepancy shades the interpretation of what has taken place. What has been traumatic for and is considered evil by the victim may be a relatively minor memory for the perpetrator. So, surmises Baumeister, evil is in the eye of the beholder.

The second phenomenon, the "myth of pure evil," is the contention that there are people and forces that seek to do harm, without motive, to innocent victims—gratuitously deriving enjoyment from the suffering and chaos that are inflicted. This perennial image of evil is perpetuated by individuals, the media, and religion.

Baumeister clearly presents the magnitude gap and the myth of pure evil as defensive strategies enabling people to separate "us" from "them" and find reassurance when evil threatens a comfortable world view. This perspective presses the reader to reevaluate and confront the nature of evil from an objective stance. It is the strength of Baumeister's work.

Baumeister moves the book along by sketching interesting stories to illustrate his points. Unfortunately, the scientific value of the book is compromised by his frequent use of anecdotal evidence rather than a reliance on empirical research. For instance, Baumeister points out the necessity of considering the role that victims may play in the perpetuation of their own violent cycle. This consideration is potentially a valid one, but the author overstates the case. He asserts that instances of innocent victims' being harmed are relatively rare. Rather than providing statistics that may bear out his assertion, Baumeister cites personal stories and anecdotal accounts as proof for these suppositions. Certainly, there are many accounts of muggings, incest, burglary, and societal oppression that would support the opposite belief. That is the danger of anecdotal evidence.

In addition, Baumeister's assertions often rely on generalizations, simplistic definitions, and flawed logic, which reduces the viability of his arguments rather than confirming them, even when the essence of an argument has an intuitive validity. Al-

though many weighty issues are considered in this book, they are discussed selectively, when they support a particular assertion, and are not pulled together in a satisfying way. Consequently, contradictions and loose threads abound.

For example, Baumeister speaks in one chapter about the danger of responding passively to an evil act. Passivity has the effect of condoning evil and thereby perpetuating it. In a later chapter, however, when the author condemns the tyranny of China, he does not discuss the passive stance taken by the United States. Moreover, in several instances a nationalistic bias is noted at the expense of consistency.

The author's discordant style is most disturbing when he denounces self-esteem as a major component of evil. Again, Baumeister begins with an interesting point for consideration: that people who commit evil acts tend to have unrealistically high opinions of themselves and when they are attacked, they respond with disproportionate retaliation. Rather than presenting a deeper analysis of these troubling characteristics, Baumeister arbitrarily labels this cluster of traits as "high self-esteem." In doing so, he lumps together discrepant character styles. He does not significantly discriminate individuals with narcissism, sociopathy, and grandiosity from individuals who maintain an internal locus of control and a well-integrated, stable sense of self. An absence of guilt and the flourishing of high self-esteem are declared causal agents in the perpetuation of evil.

Baumeister supports this view with the indictment that a sharp rise in African-American violence toward Caucasians is seen to coincide with movements aimed at raising pride and self-esteem in the black community. Not only does Baumeister confuse correlation with causality and markedly oversimplify the issue, but he does not demonstrate that the variable labeled self-esteem is the same factor that is being discussed in both instances. The author does not allude to the complexities inherent in

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class struggle, address global economic forces, or entertain alternative explanations. He muddles the issue by defining high self-esteem as equaling inflated, fragile, and unrealistic self-evaluations and then holds up this definition as proof that high self-esteem leads to increases in rape, violence, and evil in general. He concludes that as long there are efforts to raise self-esteem in the

United States, the country will have a high rate of crime and violence.

Baumeister raises some thoughtful and provocative questions, and his stories are compelling. However, as the author himself sternly counsels, objectivity is paramount in the consideration of this difficult topic. In the end, the preponderance of flawed logic and selective reasoning overshadows the value of Baumeister's book.

## Neurobiology of Violence

by Jan Volavka, M.D., Ph.D.; Washington, D.C., American Psychiatric Press, 1995, 398 pages, \$54

Dale E. McNiel, Ph.D.

Scientific understanding of biological aspects of aggressive behavior has grown substantially in recent years. In this single-author book, Dr. Jan Volavka reviews major areas of research in the neurobiology of violence. Dr. Volavka is well qualified for the task, having published extensively on the topic for more than 20 years. He brings both extensive research experience and a depth of understanding of the clinical aspects of evaluation and treatment of violent patients.

The book begins with a discussion of definition and classification of aggression and violence, followed by a lucid review of aggression among animals. Subsequent chapters cover contributions of neurochemistry, neurology, neuropsychology, and electrophysiology to understanding violence. The author then reviews congenital, developmental, and demographic issues. The remaining half of the book summarizes research on psychopathology and violence, including personality disorders and impulse control problems, psychoactive substance abuse, and violent behavior of mentally disordered persons in the hospital and in the community. Finally, psychopharmacological treatment of violence is discussed.

Each chapter covers several major

topics. In each domain, Dr. Volavka briefly describes main issues that have been the focus of research, followed by description of two or three representative studies, leading to a few summary statements. The author does not attempt to make a detailed review of the literature in any of the areas, but he references such reviews for the reader interested in more specific and detailed information. His presentation of the strengths and weaknesses of research in each area is balanced and thoughtful, giving consideration to conflicting research findings. He avoids the simplistic generalizations that sometimes plague authors who are primarily identified with particular biological or psychosocial approaches to violence.

As Dr. Volavka acknowledges, research on violence has been impeded by the absence of a general unified theory. However, research investigating more specific and limited domains, such as neurotransmitters or personality disorders, has been quite productive. This book reviews many of the areas in which a significant body of knowledge has accumulated. Of course, one book cannot cover all areas of study. For example, Dr. Volavka curiously omits the recent work of sociobiologists (1), who posit an understanding of human violence based on evolutionary theory, and he largely neglects family violence research. Nevertheless, he does touch on nearly

all of the most productive areas of neurobiological research on violence of the last 20 years.

*Neurobiology of Violence* is clearly written, interesting, not overly technical, and well organized. The single-author format affords a continuity of writing style that is absent in most major recent books on violence, which are edited works with multiple authors. The book will be of interest to a broad audience including both health professionals and those involved with the justice system who wish to be introduced to the main topics and findings of recent neurobiological research on violence.

## Reference

1. Daly M, Wilson M: Evolutionary social psychology and family homicide. *Science* 242:159-524, 1988

## Tinder-Box Criminal Aggression: Neuropsychology, Demography, Phenomenology

by Nathaniel J. Pallone, Ph.D., and James J. Hennessy, Ph.D.; New Brunswick, New Jersey, Transaction Publishers, 1996, 401 pages, \$39.95

Danny Wedding, Ph.D., M.P.H.

Pallone and Hennessy's *Tinder-Box Criminal Aggression* is a fascinating, provocative, and challenging book. It is also likely to be a controversial work insofar as it attempts to link recent developments in the neurosciences with contemporary criminology to produce a comprehensive model for criminal aggression. In short, the authors propose a "stepwise progression from neurogenic-based impulsivity to criminally aggressive behavior."

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