

## The Experience of evil: It's archetypal and sensual dimensions

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### Introduction

It is not uncommon, today, for thinking people to want to avoid the use of the concept of evil. While it has a place in popular culture, they argue, it has no place in the practice of psychiatry, psychology, psychoanalysis or law.<sup>1</sup> For such thinkers, evil expresses some conflict with God so should remain exclusive to the domain of theology.

I disagree. I see evil as a useful term, precisely because it captures a world that is not clearly divided in two. Rather it is a world in which the sacred and secular meet and mingle.

It will be my argument, tonight, that evil is what will not be contained in any proper place. It has a way of seeping out. Evil is a boundary violator.

The French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, writing in *The Symbolism of Evil*, best describes evil as a loss of wholeness resulting in what he calls loss of root and coherence. The experience of evil is a loss of boundaries, the way in which inside and outside are no longer distinct, and the feelings of dread and total horror that this loss incurs.

American psychoanalyst, Thomas Ogden, in talking about the experience of evil writes that it cannot be located or contained, that it is viscous or slimy.

This imagery is primordial, mercurial. It is imagery that links the archetypal with the immediately sensual. This is not a pleasant topic. Rather, by its nature it is upsetting and transgressive.

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## Recent history

Over the past 40 years it has been generally accepted in the fields of psychology and history that ordinary people can do very evil things.

In psychology there were the obedience studies of Stanley Milgram in which well-adjusted adults, participating in a bogus memory experiment, proved willing to deliver electric shocks of murderous magnitude to another person who posed as a 'learner'. Then there was Philip Zimbardo's prison experiment in which young adults, randomly assigned to be guards in a simulated prison, adopted their roles with such brutality that the study had to be halted before it was half-way through.

From history, we have the work of political theorist Hannah Arendt whose 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, hypothesizes that evil in history, and the Holocaust in particular, were not executed by fanatics or sociopaths, but rather by ordinary people who thought what they were doing was *normal* and *accepted* as "the way things are done."

What struck Arendt as she sat in on the trial of Adolf Eichmann was not how evil he appeared but, on the contrary, how utterly normal he was. He came across as a bland, passionless, simple man. This, for her, was a truly frightening thing, because it meant that Eichmann could not be dismissed as so mad that his actions were incomprehensible but that he was really no different from us. In Arendt's words, the lesson of the trial was that of the "fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil".

Initially, when trying to make sense of this phenomenon it was thought that the perpetrators of evil suspended their capacity to make informed moral judgments and relinquished responsibility to those in authority. Or, if it was not to an authority it was a blind allegiance to what was expected of them as an active group member.

Today, we have a more nuanced appreciation of what might be happening. Both historical studies and recent psychological work have concluded that: Ordinary

people commit evil, not so much because they are under the influence of leaders and groups and are thus powerless in the circumstances.

No. People commit evil, not because they are unaware of what they are doing but because *they consider it to be right.*<sup>2</sup> *Because, they considered it to be right.* Let's pause for a moment and let this statement sink in!

How can this be possible? Well it is possible when they actively identify with groups who have a belief system that gives them authority, especially a religious, faith or spiritual authority, one which both sets them apart and is conceived as somehow superior to any other. However, it is not restricted to a spiritual authority as the same argument can be made for psychotherapy wherein a psychological authority can be assumed.

Once it is accepted that a person might commit evil because they consider their actions to be right, then using creativity and imagination to invent new humiliations, a phenomenon observable in situations of abuse and exploitation, becomes understandable.

### **My emphasis**

My emphasis, tonight, will be on the *experience*, in one's body, of evil.

My hypothesis, following James Hillman<sup>3</sup>, is that evil anesthetizes the heart. It is as though we take it into our body and, as a consequence, our heart or part thereof, no longer reacts to what it faces.

Evil can be archetypal as when our soul longs for, desires, a divine encounter and meets only a closed-off heart. Evil, in both archetypal and bodily forms, is particularly present when the divine and the sexual are conflated (collapsed into one). While this inappropriate union might well be unconsciously motivated the results are devastating. The experience of evil is akin to a possession, psychic or diabolical. In almost a theatrical manner, the sacred and the profane are sordidly intermingled.

The experience of evil will be illustrated by two 'events' from clinical experience, specifically, the clerical sexual exploitation of adults and therapeutic sexual abuse. Two commonly experienced consequences of the experience of evil are: binge eating and psychic possession.

### **Evil in art**

Two great works of art much loved by Jung, and we know this because he referred to them frequently, are Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle (from the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (from the 17<sup>th</sup> century). One based on the ancient Germanic myth and the other, the more recent Christian story.

Both these great works of art centre their attention on the relations between the divine and the human.

Jung was greatly influenced by Wagner "... the prophet of love, whose music runs the whole gamut of feeling ... from incestuous passion ... to sublime spirituality..."<sup>4</sup>.

I mention these two artistic expressions because, firstly, they underscore, in dramatic fashion, the huge divide between the gods and us humans and, in the same breath, the fascination and difficulty that each has with the other.

Secondly, I use them as a means of setting the stage for tonight for they refer to the terrible consequences that greet us when the divide that separates the human and the divine is transgressed.

When there is an attempt at union of the divine and the human it is expressed as a transgressive violation of all that we hold sacred and sacramental.

In archetypal language, it is an incestuous union that is the quintessence of evil: As if the father was impregnating his own daughter. The monstrous child of this union is death to the spirit of life.

The evil resides in the failure to choose human love and human fate over ideals and abstractions.

I wanted to use Milton and Wagner to help us hear what it might sound like to fall into a place, a disposition, of evil.

It is not a matter of deft coloration or subtle melody, this is drama of transgressive violation, of good and evil being confused and conflated with horrifying and long-lasting consequences.

### **Evil in mythology**

A key archetypal image in Greek and Western mythology is the tale of young Narcissus.<sup>5</sup> The theme of this mythologem is the impossibility of Narcissus uniting with his love-object. James Frazer, The Scottish anthropologist and mythologist, and contemporary of Jung, argues that the Narcissus story reflected the long-held superstitious belief that water spirits lurk about pools and streams and are capable of stealing the soul (i.e., the reflected self-image) should it fall into their reach. The psychoanalytical position has been that the Narcissus story is an illustration of the consequences of violating the other-directed impulses of loving, thus offending Eros himself.

Frazer's view is that a narcissistic act is a soul-less act. The perpetrator of evil has lost his soul to the water-spirit; he has died from within. So fascinated has the perpetrator become with an ideal, an image of how things should be, that he forgot the danger and lost his soul-image to the lurking water-spirit.

The narcissus lily originates near rivers and springs; was the lily named after the youth, or the youth after the lily? In any event, both are loosely associated with water and we can, through amplification, associate the water-spirit with the youth's mother. Narcissus becomes an example of the *puer* who loses his life to a mother-anima possessor. Many will say that this sort of Jungian psychologising is pointless at best and sexist at worst, and I would agree except that there is at least anecdotal evidence that perpetrators have, as it were, never left home.

The name Narcissus, like 'narcotic', derives from the Greek *narke*, 'torpor'. Both the lily and the youth are beautiful and short lived. The flower is sterile and has a soporific perfume and is poisonous. One can say that these attributes describe the state of consciousness that both Narcissus and the perpetrator embody: dreamy, sterile, and poisonous. One gets the impression that this *puer* figure is redolent with psychological passivity.

What the Narcissus story lacks is anything about the heroic journey out into the world, away from home, meeting life with all its conflictual and ambiguous emotions. The Narcissus story flirts with life, with death, with eroticism, it longs for an embrace but avoids, as a life style, the complex reality of just such an embrace. Ego development is diminished. Narcissus does not know that he is in love with his own image.

When you are in love with an image, and do not know it, consciously, you think that it is a love that is object-orientated. What you think is love, is love of an ideal, an image, you think that it is a love-object that you are in love with, but in day-to-day experience, it is a love of your own image. But because it is a love of an ideal it gives you a sense of authority and this gives a sense of certitude to your love. An internal voice is saying: *This is a love that is good for me and for the other*. But in reality it leads to destruction and death.

The perpetrator of evil has a profound unconscious drive toward ouroboric self-absorption, toward loving itself as it catches a glimpse of itself reflected in the eyes of God or some similar authority. To look, over-long, at an ideal is to look away from the here-and-now, for us humans it is both fascinating and tempting.

Narcissus is in love with his reflection but not a reflection of his ordinary and everyday engagements; rather, he is in love with the reflection in its purest form, as an abstraction. It is this abstracting that offers authority, and offers a certain rightness to the actions that, one way or another, follow.

The story is a warning not to leave the world but to live fully *in* the world, in the ways of the world. It is a story warning us against intra-psychic incest. Narcissus

essentially kills himself by refusing to eat. This anorexic suicide is motivated by desiring the ideal over the real; the lover caught in his/her ideal will be disappointed by what reality has to offer, and will begin to further disparage all that ordinary love is capable of.

In psychological language, the perpetrator of evil does not, cannot, love the ideal because what he loves is really a reflection of an aspect of himself of which he is unconscious; it is his desire to love that he is in love with and which always lets him down. There is nothing consensual here, it is all terribly one-sided. The price that a narcissus has to pay is the unleashing of archetypal retribution. We hear it in Wagner's *Ring* cycle and we see it in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

The love of a narcissus character is seemingly so close yet unattainable. Listen to what the Roman poet Ovid says in his *Metamorphoses*, 111, 453-58:

*He longs*

*For my embrace. Why, every time I reach*

*My lips towards the gleaming pool, he strains*

*His upturned face to mine. I surely could*

*Touch him, so slight the thing that thwarts our love.*<sup>6</sup>

This ideal of perfect harmony is not what we experience in daily living. There is no perfect synchronization of thought, feeling, action. So perfect is this ideal, this union with the divine, that it is not of this world.

What the perpetrator is unable to do, but he or she would need to learn to do, is to live *through* the fantasy of the ideal, the projection, by using it to enlarge consciousness and to make connection between psyche and image by a worldly engagement with reflection (reflection of reflection).

Freud, in talking about the lack of engagement of the libido with the outside world writes that "The charm of the child lies largely in his narcissism, his self-sufficiency and inaccessibility ...".<sup>7</sup> The risk of such a disposition, as lived out by an

adult, is to be totally unconscious of its archetypal origins. The perpetrator of evil, the one who believes in some authoritative world view, lives in a literalistic image of the world. His or her relationship to the divine is a literal one rather than an imaginative one, an image-making one.

In Jungian language, the story of Eros (Amor) and Psyche is paradigmatic: Psyche (soul) is smitten by love and motivated by this to undertake the journey, the journey of life, and endure the tribulations which in the end lead her into the realm of the Gods. And what are these tribulations, the tribulations of everyday life?

The first task that Aphrodite, the goddess of love, gives Psyche is to sort, before midnight, a huge pile of mixed seeds. If she fails this task the penalty will be death.

The second of Psyche's tasks, again given by Aphrodite, is to cross a raging river and bring back some of the golden fleece of the rams that pasture there. She is to be back by nightfall on pain of death.

The third task is to fill a crystal goblet with the water from the river Styx.

And finally, she must go down into the underworld and obtain from the hand of Persephone herself a jar of her special beauty cream.

Each one of these tasks is seemingly impossible to accomplish. They are psychological more than physical in nature. Not to see them as such is to certainly fail them. They are, in fact, the work of the soul.

We stay in the world of daily living by being responsible for completing the tasks required of us. To live in a world of fantasy or idealism is to fail to learn from Psyche's tribulations.

### **Patriarchy**

Before addressing two specific examples of interpersonal situations that have as a consequence of their playing out, the experiences of evil, I want to talk about the

phenomenon of 'patriarchy'.<sup>8</sup> In calling it a phenomenon I'm stressing the unconscious reproduction and perpetuation of assumed domination. Not necessarily an espoused domination or superiority of male ways over female ways, but, rather, an unconsciously assumed one.

Not all perpetuates of evil are male, not all recipients of evil are female; what there is as a common denominator, however, is the unconsciousness and consciousness of assumed authority.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century we have the story of Abelard and Heloise. It is a story of theology and passion, one which is often described as romantic but which was characterized by violence and abuse. We have Abelard writing to Heloise: "Even when you were unwilling, and resisted to the utmost of your power, and tried to dissuade me, as yours was the weaker nature I often forced you to consent with threats and blows." Such was the 12<sup>th</sup> century expectation that violence, both emotional and physical, accompanied love that despite his harsh treatment of her, Heloise repeatedly professed her love for Abelard.<sup>9</sup>

Thomas Aquinas, the early 13<sup>th</sup> Century theologian and philosopher and major shaper of the Christian church's attitude to women right up to the last century, argued that: If evil is a falling away from full being, and woman is a falling away from normative (male) being, then 'woman' is inevitably associated with evil, a conclusion Thomas believed to be scripturally supported by Eve's initiation of sin in the world.<sup>10</sup>

This is the evil of patriarchy. An evil that equates with exploitation.

### **Psychotherapy and transgression of boundaries**

By way of an illustration of evil I will talk briefly of the experience of sexual abuse at the direction of a therapist who believes in, or more importantly wishes to believe in, his or her legitimacy as an authority of the soul. The evil in this situation, which is most often articulated, and thus justified, as consensual sex, is the therapist's unconscious desire to remain unconscious; essentially,

unconscious of the power of the transference experience; its power to corrupt the therapeutic relationship.

This is particularly so because we are talking about archetypal images being projected. And, we know, that such images conceal a source of energy that the patient finds very convincing and the therapist, very disturbing. Both parties will experience resistance to making these energies conscious.

There is always a pattern to sexual abuse in therapy. There is always a story to tell. The therapist, verbally or non-verbally, offers a reassuring story to the patient.

The intention, the desire, might be largely unconscious but it is there just the same. The first time it happens it might catch both parties unawares but for the perpetrator it can easily become habitual.

Freud always understood psychoanalysis as an experience of unfolding desire. Initially, he understood the unconscious desire directed toward the analyst as an obstacle to achieving the goals of therapy. Quickly, however, he saw the mutual experience of desire, of emotion (the transference and counter-transference) as being at the heart of constructing a bridge to reality.

Working with the transference facilitates the withdrawal of the projection, even, on occasion its transcendence (as in individuation). It is also a vulnerable event in therapy when both therapist and patient are at a most unprotected place. Joseph Henderson, himself analysed by Jung, relates that “Whenever his (Jung’s) analysands seemed to be too powerfully transferred to him he would send them to his assistant, Antonia Wolff ...” from whom they would receive reductive analysis (quoted in Fordham, p.49).<sup>11</sup>

I speak of this situation primarily to stress the importance of learning how to consciously work with the process with an open heart and an open mind, rather than give in to the unconscious potential and thus to fall into evil.

As I said at the beginning of this talk, evil anesthetizes the heart. So, when the transference of powerful emotions is not worked with, then our hearts no longer reacts to what they face. The consequences of this denial are deep and troublesome.

### **Adult clergy sexual abuse**

By way of a second illustration I will refer to the experience of sexual abuse by a clerical or religious person of high standing. By 'high standing' I mean one who espouses a deep and abiding faith and has been granted a role of authority in a community of believers.<sup>12</sup>

Again there is always a pattern. Seen from the outside it is as consistent as it is extraordinary. As with the sexual exploitation in therapy, the first event is, most probably, unconsciously motivated but perhaps that is an over-generous judgment. We know that the pattern has the following elements:

The religious person makes the *other* feel 'safe':

*I am here to 'care' for you!*

*This is how I show my care for you!*

*... perhaps, for some reason, the Lord has brought us together for friendship and support.*

It is a step-by-step wearing down of resistances. But more importantly it is a failure to accept responsibility.

The experience of adult sexual exploitation by such a religious person results in *complex*<sup>13</sup> psychology trauma. This is not the consequence of a single traumatic incident but of a whole range of traumatic experiences, the trauma itself is multifaceted. The experience of evil is divisive, corroding of self, and confusing to the depth of one's being.

This is an internal enactment of an external situation in which it is continuously implied that the recipient is responsible for what is happening. The silence, the lack of negotiation is manipulated into a felt agreement.

The internal enactment becomes an internal phenomenology; it is experienced as one part of the body (or psyche) becoming 'bad' and an object of hatred by the self. The self feels the need to preserve its wellbeing by attacking the evil part of the body.

Such is the internalization of evil that hatred and contempt toward oneself is the inevitable outcome.

What a travesty of justice this is! It is no wonder we want to use 'abusive' or 'exploitative' as the most fitting descriptor of this situation, especially when it is ongoing.<sup>14</sup>

There are two common consequences of the experience of evil, namely, feeling like I am possessed and feeling like I need to eat as a means of managing my anxiety.

### **Psychic possession as an experience of evil**

In the past, evil was personalised in the devil (many devils actually). Cultural historians tell us that 17<sup>th</sup> century France epitomizes the glacial shift from a religious language to a secular language; from sacred imagery to social imagery. Possession might have finished in 17<sup>th</sup> century France but evil didn't.

At all times the experience of evil remains constant. What we have is a psychological move from 'good' and 'bad' being cosmic forces to 'good' and 'bad' being inner responsibilities. What *was* an invading force from 'out there' *is now* 'in here' and ... *It's all my fault.*

Historically, what was experienced as an open war between heaven and hell was played out in the body of the possessed. It is the same today. Now we have a covert 'play of power' in which one is the perpetrator and the other the recipient. And once again it is played out as an invasive power in the body.

Part of the self has, as it were, been taken over by an alien power and is now attacking itself. In Freud's words: The experience is one of "turning against the self in hatred."

It feels like a 'possession' because how else can we explain to ourselves this self-destructive experience.

I see it as an expression of evil because what was an idealised object that was desired, passionately longed for, such as the union of heaven and earth, divine love and human love, has been inverted as an invasive power that takes over one's autonomy, even to the extent of questioning one's identity.

### **Eating myself to death: an experience of evil**

Feeling bad, constantly and deeply feeling bad, leads to looking for food. A common experience is to feel oneself in the grip of daemonic forces, a daemonic voice telling you to eat, to eat more, to keep eating more! The eating seems to convert unmanageable anxiety into a manageable form.<sup>15</sup>

What was an idealized object of desire is now a bad internal 'me' that needs to be alternatively punished and soothed. The vicious cycle is as perverse as it is sustaining.

The level of psychic pain has become so intense that episodes of binge eating have become the only form of emotional relief.

The eating takes on an addictive pattern in which food is used not for nutrition but rather to change and negate distressing states of mind.

As a means of coping with the felt emptiness and emotional hunger one would resort to binge eating and the guilt that would inevitably follow.

Clearly the same applies to other forms of self harm such as cutting, fasting, and purging. The nature of this damage to oneself is archetypal as well as immediately of-the-body.

### **Conclusion**

The experience of evil is a form of soul murder.<sup>16</sup> This is especially so when carried out in the name of love. It is even more so when it is perpetrated under the guise of an authority, be it a religious organization or a therapeutic one. In truth, what we desire when we open our heart to an 'other' is a liberating conversation: One which is freely given and freely received.

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<sup>1</sup> Levine, M. L. (2000). See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil: psychiatry, psychoanalysis and evil, *Psychoanalytic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Haslam, S. A. and Reicher, S. D. (2008). Questioning the banality of evil. This article can be found on: <http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> Hillman, J. (1993). *The Thought of the Heart and The Soul of the World*, Dallas, TX: Spring. P. 64.

<sup>4</sup> Jung, C. G. (1971). Psychological Types, *CW 6*, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, para 408.

<sup>5</sup> For my thoughts on this myth, I have heavily drawn on Murray Stein's paper Narcissus, in *Spring* (1976), pp. 32-53.

<sup>6</sup> Ovid, (1986). *Metamorphoses*, Trans, A. D. Melville, Oxford World Classics, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Havelock Ellis (1828) in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Vol. 7, Philadelphia, p. 359.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, E. (1992). Ed. *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A critical dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell.

<sup>9</sup> Miles, M. R. (2005). *The world Made Flesh: A history of Christian thought*, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 153.

<sup>10</sup> Miles, M. R. (2005). *The world Made Flesh: A history of Christian thought*, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 172-3.

<sup>11</sup> Fordham, M. (1978). *Jungian Psychotherapy: A Study in Analytical Psychology*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

<sup>12</sup> Flynn, K. A. (2003). *The Sexual Abuse of Women by Members of the Clergy*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

<sup>13</sup> Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and Recovery*, New York: Basic Books.

<sup>14</sup> For a chilling award-winning documentary on the sexual abuse of children by clergy see Berg, A. (2006). *Deliver Us From Evil*, Lionsgate.

<sup>15</sup> Kalsched, D. (1997). *The Inner World of Trauma*. London: Routledge.

<sup>16</sup> Shengold, L. (1989). *Soul Murder: The Effects of Childhood Abuse and Deprivation*, New York: Columbine.