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The End of Evil?

Neuroscientists suggest there is no such thing. Are they right?

By Ron Rosenbaum | Posted Friday, Sept. 30, 2011, at 4:24 PM ET

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Anders Behring Breivik, suspect in the Oslo killings, leaves the courthouse in a police car
Photo by Jon-Are Berg-Jacobsen/AFP/Getty Images.

Is evil over? Has science finally driven a stake through its dark heart? Or at least emptied the word of useful meaning, reduced the notion of a numinous nonmaterial malevolent force to a glitch in a tangled cluster of neurons, the brain?

Yes, according to many neuroscientists, who are emerging as the new high priests of the secrets of the psyche, explainers of human behavior in general. A phenomenon attested to by a recent torrent of pop-sci brain books with titles like *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain*. Not secret in most of these works is the disdain for metaphysical evil, which is regarded as an antiquated concept that's done more harm than good. They argue that the time has come to replace such metaphysical terms with physical explanations—malfunctions or malformations in the brain.

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Of course, people still commit innumerable *bad actions*, but the idea that people make conscious decisions to hurt or harm is no longer sustainable, say the new brain scientists. For one thing, there is no such thing as "free will" with which to decide to commit evil. (Like evil, free will is an antiquated concept for most.) Autonomous, conscious decision-making itself may well be an illusion. And thus intentional evil is impossible.

Have the new neuroscientists brandishing their fMRIs, the ghostly illuminated etchings of the interior structures of the skull, succeeded where their forebears



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from disciplines ranging from phrenology to psychoanalysis have failed? Have they pinpointed the hidden anomalies in the amygdala, the dysfunctions in the prefrontal lobes, the electrochemical source of impulses that lead a Jared Loughner, or an Anders Breivik, to commit their murderous acts?

And in reducing evil to a purely neurological glitch or malformation in the wiring of the physical brain, in eliminating the element of freely willed conscious choice, have neuroscientists eliminated as well "moral agency," personal responsibility? Does this "neuromitigation" excuse—"my brain made me do it," as critics of the tendency have called it—mean that no human being really *wants* to do ill to another? That we are all innocent, Rousseauian beings, some afflicted with defects—"brain bugs" as [one new pop-neuroscience](#) book calls them—that cause the behavior formerly known as evil?

Are those who commit acts of cruelty, murder, and torture just victims themselves—of a faulty part in the head that might fall under factory warranty if the brain were a car?

The new neuroscience represents the latest chapter in a millennia-old and still divisive cultural conflict over the problem of evil, the latest chapter in the attempt by science to reduce evil to malfunction or dysfunction rather than malevolence. It's a quest I examined in [Explaining Hitler](#): the way the varieties of 20th-century psychological "science" sought to find some physiological, developmental, sexual, or psychoanalytic cause for Hitler's crimes. (One peer-reviewed paper sought to trace Hitler's evil to a mosquito bite—to the secondary sequelae of mosquito-borne encephalitis which were known to cause profound personality changes as long as a decade after being contracted in the trenches of World War I.)

It would be consolatory if not comforting if we could prove that what made Hitler Hitler was a *malfunction* in human nature, a glitch in the circuitry, because it would allow us to exempt "normal" human nature (ours for instance) from having Hitler potential. This somewhat Pollyannaish quest to explain the man's crimes remains counterintuitive to many. I recall the late British historian and biographer of Hitler Alan Bullock reacting to the claims of scientism by exclaiming to me vociferously: "If *he* isn't evil, then who is? ... If he isn't evil the word has no meaning."

Indeed recent developments demonstrate that evil remains a stubborn concept in our culture, resistant to attempts to reduce it to pure "physicalism." To read the mainstream media commentary on the Breivik case, for instance, is to come upon, time after time, the word "evil." Not just that the *acts* were evil, but that he, Breivik was, as a *Wall Street Journal* columnist put it, "*evil incarnate*."

But what exactly does that mean? The incarnation of what? Satan? The word "incarnation," even without explicit religious context, implies, metaphorically at least, the embedding of a metaphysical force in a physical body. One can understand the scientific aversion to this as a description of reality. But evil as a numinous force abides. It is not surprising that Pope Benedict issued a [statement](#) following the attacks in Norway calling on everyone to "escape from the logic of evil." (Although what exactly is that "logic"?)

Even if it was not surprising for the Pope to invoke evil thus, it was surprising to see a devout atheist such as my colleague Christopher Hitchens invoke "evil" in his "[obituary](#)" for Osama bin Laden. Hitchens admits wishing he could avoid using "that simplistic (but somehow indispensable) word." But he feels compelled to call whatever motivated bin Laden a "force" that "absolutely deserves to be called evil."

But what is this "force," which sounds suspiciously supernatural for an atheist to believe in? Some kind of Luciferian Kryptonite? Where is it located: in the material or nonmaterial world?

That is the real "problem of evil" (or, to use the technical term philosophers employ for conscious, freely-willed, evil-doing: "wickedness"). We tend to believe it exists: Popular culture has no problem with it, giving us iterations from Richard III to Darth Vader; politicians use it promiscuously ("the axis of evil"). But even religious thinkers continue to debate what it is—and why a just and



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loving God permits evil and the hideous suffering it entails to prevail so often, or even—if they shift the blame to us (because God gave man free will to sin)—why God couldn't have created a human nature that would not so readily choose genocide and torture. (For the record, I'm an agnostic.)

This argument has been going on for more than a millennium, at least since Augustine proclaimed that evil was in the realm of "non-being," which seems to some a great evasion. Meanwhile pop neuroscience—and its not-very-well-examined assumptions—has taken center stage in the struggle to put evil in its place under the thumb of science.

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Ron Rosenbaum is the author of *The Shakespeare Wars* and *Explaining Hitler*. His latest book is *How the End Begins: The Road to a Nuclear World War III*.

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Guest

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Post

Jeremy Beckett

I would say a few important concepts are missing. First some people do have varying to severe degrees of empathy or lack there of. However, unless someone is also cognitively severely impaired (low IQ or have a development disorder) they of course do make choices. Those with any empathy can be said to have made choice in the context of others lives and feelings matter, at least a little, but do something anyways out of anger, immaturity, environment, culture and so on. Some do these things because greed or selfishness gives rewards greater than distress of feeling others pain. These people can readily held accountable by conventional standards and punished or regulated not to do such things. A person with zero empathy doesn't feel the consequence of any distress at all or ability value other people's feelings or how they effect them. They just make rational divisions based upon the only person they love, themselves. A

singular utilitarianism. However, I would also add another dimension. That is a tribal lack of empathy or what I call tribal sociopathy. Such people have tremendous compassion and ability to relate and value the lives and feelings of others within their family, group, or nation. However, anyone not identified in this group who threatens them or stands in their way of maximizing their group's full utilitarian value is a tribal sociopath. Many nazis went home to kiss their wives and children. Hitler probably cried for many things and maybe really love German at least with white people in his own warped way. This may be unacceptable to many people to believe. But maybe there is some spectrum here. The ability to recognize the existence of lives with feelings and rights outside of their own mind, who exist for their own sake and not theirs. We are probably conditioned to be imprinted on our parents and tribe and able to compete and war against our competitors over scarce resources. We should understand horrible men like this, but also understand why average people with average empathy still joined the Nazis and shot millions of people. That's a better question. These were normal men with average empathy, intelligence, maturity, and sanity. Maybe when we understand this we can do more to expand and maximize those we identify as our tribe. I'm sure a legal system of human rights and liberties has forced many marginalized groups to be among us and to assert their rights to exist for their own sake. Law and regulations, welfare, and economic aide and trade policy can help. But maybe we can learn something new to help with this. For one, I think Goebbels did know the opposite. He new how to dehumanize and make someone think no more than like an animal butcher. I hope we do learn more of this and better condition our society and children to better empathize with everyone and see them in one tribe.

2 Hours Ago from slate.com · [Reply](#)



George Purcell

Whether free will exists or not, it is madness to contemplate a society in which it is not considered a bedrock principle. As far as "lack of empathy" being the same as "evil", nonsense. Evil is an active and considered choice.

3 Hours Ago from slate.com · [Reply](#)



himsay_this

By their own logic, then, neuroscientists do not exist.

4 Hours Ago from slate.com · [Reply](#)



la girl

I think the neuroscientists are talking about Evil, not evil. Evil as a philosophy or a metaphysic, not a set of actions. I could be wrong. The world has gotten so relativistic it's easy to see their point, but still it's a choice some people make. Or is choice obsolete too?

4 Hours Ago from slate.com · [Reply](#)



Kade Kahl

"The problem of evil—and moral responsibility—is thus inseparable from what is known in the philosophical trade as "the hard problem of consciousness." How does the brain, that electrified piece of meat, create the mind and the music of Mozart, the prose of Nabokov?"

That is NOT the "hard problem of consciousness"; it's the "soft problem." The hard problem involves the origin of subjective self-awareness -- the "inner life." From a strictly physical perspective, Mozart and Nabokov could produce their art without having a subjective experience of doing so.

6 Hours Ago from slate.com · [Reply](#)



venusdeemilow@yahoo.com

I agree with Rosenbaum: The neuroscientists like Baron-Cohen are punching way over their weight with this argument. Here's my basic problem: no one is good all the time and no one is evil all the time. Hitler, to re-use the obvious example, was kind to his dog and by all accounts was tender towards Eva Braun; if his evil were a physical malady, wouldn't he be evil all the time, "compulsively", uncontrollably evil, if you will?

Thinking of evil in this way also helps to draw a distinction between mental illness and a conscious choice to inflict harm. The mentally ill who hurt or kill (like Gerard Loughner) exhibit signs of mental illness in all aspects of their lives, all the time. As is well-recognized by our legal system, however, someone who hires a hit man is clearly not sick -- such a person never loses sight of their rational self-interest. The courts, rightfully, would deem such a person "evil."

Last point: In trying to understand what makes us tick, we sooner or later bump up against an un-breachable barrier: the specimen in the experiment (i.e., us), is also conducting the experiment, so at some basic level objectivity is impossible. The only way we'll ever be able to figure this stuff out definitively is if scientists from another planet do the research. Keep looking up at the skies, people!

6 Hours Ago from slate.com · [Reply](#)



Jeremy Beckett

Very good point. I would add however that there is no evidence that people with severe mental illness (schizophrenia and not anxiety, OCD, or depression - they know reality) are more violent than others, especially when economic, health, stress of homelessness, isolation, and urbanization are taken into account. People have actually factored these things in. My point is sometimes some people whether mentally ill or not may independently lack empathy. I would still agree with you that a man also impaired by mental

illness would be less accountable as their choices are impaired. Unless a person lacks total empathy, they do have some and thus know what they are doing to others and just value their own interests more. So we can judge this man on his character and personality make up (sociopath) alone. I don't know what to think of how we take into consideration of any mental illness or not. Schizophrenia is just chronic delusional disorder which may have hallucinations, most times its that they experience too much emotion, distress, and fear that makes them act. I don't know of any psychotic disorder, depression, anxiety, or bipolar that makes a person into a cold killer. All of these people by defition are people who experience too much emotions. In fact, people with anxiety disorders are often viewed as the opposite of a sociopath. Some people see so little value into themselves, that they put all other's happiness above theirs. Now the word psycho has nothing to do with psychotic (delusional, not violent), instead it means psychopathic or a violent sociopath. Discrimination tends to confuse the two. That's important. Most mentally people if they do commit a crime it would be a crime of passion, desperation, or against their own life. Cold killers have confidence, patience, no anxiety to give themselves away, and are not to odd to be noticed. A person prone to panic attacks make poor bank robbers. It's no surprise bank robbers are now taking paxil or ativan to help them be better criminals.

2 Hours Ago from slate.com

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dormousesaid

The term lack of empathy seems to be precise but, on consideration, gets all fuzzy. What if you want to accomplish something? Profits, celebration and purification of a particular group, winning a war, showing a deity how hard you believe [Abe to God", where do you want this killing done?"] have all been seen as perfectly acceptable goals and any suffering caused as justifiable collateral damage. Most great evil has been done with the best of intentions: Just ask the person/society/company/religion who did it. Lack of empathy seems to me to miss the mark because this question of intent and justification is denied. The only place evil happens without an intent to accomplish some "good" is in video games or bad fiction.

7 Hours Ago from slate.com · [Reply](#)



Guest

Unfortunately, though, not all evil is done to accomplish some perceived "good". Jeffrey Dahmer had no "good intentions" that I can see. And he is hardly an outlier. Many people do evil to others for their own pleasure. And that kind of evil *is* very similar to what the author is trying to define as a lack of empathy. (though I agree that there seems to be much more to it than an inability or unwillingness to empathize with others. Among the worst of the worst are those who actually enjoy the evil they inflict on others because they *know* the fear and pain they are causing. That knowledge and understanding is why they derive pleasure from it.)

Evil seems to be simply too multi-faceted to try to collectively categorize all forms as caused by a single mental defect. And as long as the "scientists" who seek a physiological answer to the problem of evil continue to conflate correlation with causation -- no scientist of any merit should make this mistake -- then we're never going to end up with any deeper understanding of evil than that which "pop science" can provide.

3 Hours Ago from slate.com

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Northwoods

Allow me to make a small change to the pivotal question in this essay:

"Are those who commit acts of cruelty, murder, and torture (vote for teabagger-style republican candidates) just victims themselves—of a faulty part in the head that might fall under factory warranty if the brain were a car?"

Now, we have something to talk about.
Let the fun begin.

11 Hours Ago from slate.com · [Reply](#)



Kevin Martin

Science is not morality. You are mixing apples and oranges for a cheap headline.

[nerdnam](#) and [NeMoelmylike](#) this.

14 Hours Ago from slate.com · [Reply](#)



Kenneth

Not at all. The author is pushing back against scientists who claim moral implications for their work. They started it.
54 Minutes Ago from slate.com

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No, My Name Is Not Required

Cohen's states his agenda is to change the nomenclature to something more "scientific" Eeeewhe. Sounds like a naked power grab to me. Leave my language alone, scientific bully. Substituting "evil" for "lack of empathy" sounds like an evolution in manipulative management-speak....useful precisely because of its lack of precision. This is the kind of process that births weasel words like "enhanced interrogation"
Cynical exploitation of academia on Slate's part. Take a half-assed idea and throw it to the wolves.....kinda evil.
15 Hours Ago from slate.com · [Reply](#)



Kaelinda

Just as science will never find the seat of the 'soul' (that part of the human person which is the 'I' or ego), it will never find the source of evil in the brain. How do you locate in the brain a lack of awareness of one's own limitations, combined with pure hubris and a lack of empathy?
17 Hours Ago from slate.com · [Reply](#)



alokpi

Can we ever discuss evil without addressing its religious connotations?

Well alright, this article discusses neuroscience as providing grossly unsubstantiated "explanations" for evil, and that is correct. Yet, to discuss evil itself, to get to the black heart of this concept so to speak, the religious origins of it cannot be ignored.

A few passing references are made to the writings of Christian theologians, but what about the perspective of the other half of the world that has no monotheistic deity and a polar opposite to form its world view around?

"Peter" has already mentioned Buddhism, but I would also add that Hinduism also offers a very different conception of the good v evil debate. When you judge actions as good or evil (as opposed to people themselves on the basis of their actions) you change the very nature of the debate. Hinduism (for lack of a better term) and Buddhism offer a completely different perspective of good v evil and it is not something neuroscience or pop-philosophy can explain so easily.
22 Hours Ago from slate.com · [Reply](#)



GG1000

I've always thought Hitler was an inappropriate example. The evil of Nazism was not that one man was completely insane, but that an entire country decided to follow this insane man and do his bidding instead of tossing him into the nearest hoo-hoo Hotel for treatment.

22 Hours Ago from slate.com · [Reply](#)



ingoflamingo

I agree. Look at Anders Breivik as mentioned here. He tried to find a fellowship in politics, on the web, even in the free masons. He found it no where, and ended up going off on his own. He did do an incredible amount of damage, but imagine if there had been even two of them, instead of one?
11 Hours Ago from slate.com

Write reply here...



Peter

I suggest you look at the teachings of Buddhism. There are no bad/evil people only people who do bad/evil things out of greed, hatred, and delusion.
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Amigo 43

Is evil over? I don't think so. We still have liberals don't we?
Yesterday from slate.com · [Reply](#)

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