

# THE EVIL IMAGINATION

## Understanding and Resisting Destructive Forces

*Roger Kennedy*



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## About the author

**Dr Roger Kennedy** is a consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist and an adult psychoanalyst. He was an NHS consultant in charge of the Family Unit at the Cassel Hospital for nearly thirty years before going totally into private practice twelve years ago. He was chair of the Child and Family Practice in Bloomsbury and is still a director there.

His work includes being a training analyst and seeing adults for analysis and therapy, as well as children, families, and parents at his clinic. He is a past president of the British Psychoanalytical Society, and is well-known as an expert witness in the family courts. He has had fourteen previous books published on psychoanalysis, interdisciplinary studies, and child, family, and court work, as well as many papers.

## CHAPTER 1

### Terrains of evil

There are many terrains of evil, too many. How often one has heard the refrain “never again” after yet another series of genocidal killings or other acts of extreme cruelty have come to light. Yet there are always new instances of dehumanising human cruelty involving what I will describe as the “annihilation of the human subject”, where human otherness and agency is psychologically denied and/or physically eliminated. At such times, the human subject becomes invaded by the other, subject relations are cancelled, and there is a denial or destruction of the gift of otherness with the carrying out of evil acts such as organised killings, rape, child abuse, slavery, and other violations of the subject. This notion is like that of Kathleen Taylor’s term “otherization”, which “expresses the sense of creating an increasingly impassable social gulf between Us and Them”.<sup>1</sup> However, my emphasis is more on the nature of the attacks on the human subject, driven by destructive ideas and fantasies, or what we could call an “evil imagination”, which result in, or are a consequence of, “otherization”, when humans become subject *to* excessively cruel external forces rather than subject *of* their own actions.<sup>2</sup>

I will consider what leads to the committing of evil acts, and what are the individual and social circumstances that make such acts

more likely, and whether one may be able to reduce the risk of evil acts being repeated. A main theme is that evil is here to stay, it is part of our landscape, and there should be ways of minimising or resisting its impact, but that this requires that one must try to understand evil, how it affects people and how it shatters world views and trust in others. I strongly believe that if we do not understand evil and the evil imagination, we will be ill-equipped to root it out from its various sources and thus minimise its impact in the future.

Seeing the crater from the destruction of the Twin Towers, or the piles of dead children's shoes at Auschwitz, or images of ships' holds where West Africans were piled in en route to slavery and physical and social death, or remnants of the killing fields of Cambodia, or current atrocities in the Russia–Ukraine war, the observer is made aware of the obliteration of human lives, a cold and unfeeling destructiveness. Observing the storming of the US Capitol in Washington reminds us of the ongoing risk to democracy of uncontained mob violence. With the reality of despairing victims of modern slavery, continuing genocides, persistent racism, the uncovering of ongoing child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation in its various forms, we continue to be faced by the “dark” side of human nature. One may reasonably think the modern world has failed to provide a safe haven against the worst outbreaks of human destructiveness. Compare these despairing images to the excitement of discovering ancient fossils of the footsteps of early mankind embedded in an African rock. With the latter, one can feel somehow an emotional link with our ancestors and reassured that there is another more positive side to humankind inscribed in our natures from ancient times.

The book explores with the help of a psychoanalytic perspective both a positive image of what makes for a decent society as being able to provide what I shall discuss as a “home for otherness”, where human diversity and difference are both tolerated and promoted and resistance to evil is possible, while at the same time recognising that this is impossible without facing head-on as a harsh reality that human actions are regularly destructive of the links between fellow humans. I shall be looking at the nature of this harsh reality, at various narratives of evil, and which ones may be relevant in trying to overcome contemporary societal challenges, and how past atrocities and their accompanying

traumas continue to haunt present-day societies, preventing or at least constricting attempts to promote respect for otherness.

I would suggest that part of the way that one can resist evil in its many guises is to have a clear image of what a decent society consists of. One of the lessons of history is that dangerous and destructive ideologies can take over a society when that society is in crisis, or lacks just institutions, or lacks a positive counterbalancing vision. Another lesson is that destructive ideologies are often adept at distorting or denying history for their own purposes, and that a painstaking reconstruction of past evils and the working through of their continuing impact on the present usually requires considerable emotional courage and persistence, essential elements in creating a decent society.

In this introduction I shall offer a general view of the territory to be covered from a multidisciplinary viewpoint before examining issues in more detail. The latter will consist firstly of a review of the science of evil, including evidence from neuroscience and social psychology, then psychoanalytical studies of individuals and groups, and next an overview of some of the main themes of the philosophy of evil. These opening chapters, along with the addition of information from historical and social studies, will inform an understanding of evil in action through examining the nature of genocide, with a focus on the Holocaust and what I have called the “Nazi Imaginary”, the way that German society created an imaginary political community with which millions of ordinary Germans identified. I will also consider the evil practices of British-American slavery. I call the latter by this mixed title as, though slavery was not a British invention, and the West African–Atlantic trade in slaves involved several European and African nations, one can argue with good reason that it was the British who had a main role in institutionalising slavery for its vast profits and laid the basis on which the US then established its own institution of slavery.

A main reason for focusing on both these areas is their continuing relevance for understanding contemporary society and issues. The Nazi past continues to disturb, and as Mary Fulbrook writes,

... its resonance seems if anything to be growing with time ...  
The Holocaust has become a defining feature of contemporary  
self-understandings and values, and the more generic notion

of genocide has become a controversial catchword for mass violence in a wide range of contexts.<sup>3</sup>

While, as Paul Gilroy argues,<sup>4</sup> the politics and social fabric of Western society, reliant as it was on slavery as a foundation of economic wealth, continues to be haunted by the inability to process the harsh reality of slavery and its continuing after-effects. Current arguments about whether to display statues of past influential figures whose wealth and standing were reliant on the proceeds of the slave trade are just the tip of this particular iceberg.

I will also discuss how Shakespeare's evil characters encapsulate how the evil imagination can develop and take over a person's inner world, revealing "a deep, poetic, psychology or metaphysics of the birth of evil",<sup>5</sup> and how people can become "bewitched" by evil into performing or colluding with dreadful actions.

The final chapter will summarise the main themes and will also look at those who have resisted evil and what we can learn from them if we are to have a society that can resist the forces of evil in the future.

### What is evil?

The term evil has a long history, much of it connected to various religions, some aspects of which remain relevant even in a predominantly secular age. Evil in the religious tradition often involves some sort of rebellion against God or the gods and includes some kind of war against the moral order and the forces of goodness, offering instead an alternative moral universe, where sin, or indulgence or the exercise of power is given free reign. Redemptive religions such as Christianity would even seem to require the existence of evil and unrighteousness so that humanity can then be redeemed by faith.

Much theological thought has then gone into puzzling how an all-powerful God could allow the flourishing of such an alternative moral dimension, and the existence of intense human suffering and moral evils—the so-called problem of "theodicy". Whether or not there is any answer to such a dilemma, this very issue has led to complex and deep moral thinking which remains relevant. For example, the thought of Kant, which I shall discuss later, provides some key themes relevant for understanding human evil.