The Nature of Good and Evil

Today, on Thinking with Somebody Else's Head,
Philosophers have written about it voluminously. Religions have discussed ... religiously. Politics has used it politically. And most of us have never even thought about it. I'm Richard Lloyd Jones. Today on Thinking with Somebody Else's Head, the Nature of Good and Evil.

There is a persistent and pernicious idea in the world today that good and evil are opposites, necessary for balance. Zoroaster, 600 and some years before Christ, introduced this idea of the endless battle between good and evil in the world's first religion. Plato adopted the idea. Hegel influenced thinkers like Marx with the idea that thesis and antithesis are reconciled in some sort of compromise or syntheses. It wasn't much of a leap then to materialize that into the battle between communism and capitalism, somehow ending in a synthesis. This dialectic of "yin" and "yang" is around even today, and it affects profoundly our view of the world. But, what if it is wrong? Which it most certainly is.

There is no battle between yes and no! Right and wrong. Good and evil. Evil is the absence of good. The destruction of it. Not it's opposite. There is no doubt, a consideration of this erroneous thinking is fundamental to understanding what is real and what is not.

To help us understand this, we need to move to the world of metaphysics. To help us with that today, here is my good friend Cesar Sóos, metaphysics researcher and mining engineer, here from the International Society of Analytical Trilogy in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

R: Cesar, how would you describe the big problem that we've had in this area of considering the nature of good and evil?

C: Well, I think the greatest mistake we made was to give the same value to evil as we did to good, to goodness itself. And you know, the objective of the study of metaphysics is the being, which is the origin of all things. Mental illness, for example, in philosophical terms, begins when we are evolved in the process of non-being. And so, being must be good in its essence because if our essential being were a mix between good and evil, we would be and not be at the same time. And this is impossible, you see?

R: And what is the result of this Cesar? How should we be looking at this?

C: Look, we haven't study properly the issue of good and evil. We never asked this kind of question: does evil really exist in essence? Everybody knows that evil exists. We face it every day, we see it everywhere. This is one thing. But metaphysically we would consider whether evil has an essence. Evil actually is the destruction of good. It doesn't exist on its own. If we stop creating it, which we do by destroying something good, it seizes to exist. Evil is something that depends on good, not the other way round.

R: OK, I think it's coming a little clearer, now. Do you have an example that might illustrate it better?

C: If you have an ulcer for example, you first need to have a healthy stomach, which becomes corrupted. You develop the ulcer on top of a healthy organ, so to speak. You cannot think of an ulcer on its own. It always exists in relation to a stomach, but you can certainly think of a stomach without an ulcer, can't you? This simple example reveals that health or goodness, if you want, exists on its own. But disease, evil, doesn't.

R: It seems that now you're talking about the base of goodness that exists by itself, as some of the ancient Greeks proposed. And this is something that Dr. Norberto Keppe, the Brazilian psychoanalyst and social scientist we both study with, asserts, rather vigorously actually, in his profound and expansive work. How can you help us to understand this a little bit more?

C: One of my students asked me the other day: "Why do I have to be good? How can you convince me that goodness is the best thing for me? Maybe bad things will get me better results." And then I said to him: "Well, your actions must follow the laws which are evident and universal, otherwise you will suffer because you cannot change a universal law. For example, when you go out in the street, you don't see people hitting each other or stealing things. This happens of course, but it's not the norm." Most people have to understand that they need to treat each other well and have respect for each other's belongings. This reveals that the basic behavior everywhere is not evil, it is goodness, respect, sensibleness. I cannot adopt a destructive attitude because this is contrary to the essential goodness that we have inside. You do see criminality, but this is not the common thing of all human beings. Actually it is contrary to the impulse in most of us.

R: You might think of it this way: no person tries to form a relationship of any kind based on lies. I mean, you don't see a man starting a new relationship and saying to his girlfriend: "Ok honey, I want you to lie to me every chance you get. And I'm going to do the same for you, ok? That is going to be the basis of our relationship." When people lie to you, it's something that you don't like. So we know that honesty, truth is the basis of all human function. We, of course, can destroy that, as you suggest, but the basis is trying to do something honest and right and good, and if someone tell us a lie we don't like that.

C: Yes, yes, we have a sense of living together correctly. We have a desire for progress. When some thinkers have tried to suggest that we also have a desire for war, for destruction, they haven't understood this dialectic. Evil is the destruction of our essence. Not a part of it. If we want destruction, this is an attitude, not a part of our essential nature.

R: And so, we are led to consider something we seldom pause to consider in our hectic, and frankly, too selfish lives. A discussion of the nature of good and evil strikes to the very essence of what it means to be human. And this is very good. I'm Richard Lloyd Jones.