

Preface

In the 1990s, while working in a high-security psychiatric hospital in the United Kingdom, two colleagues, Dave Mercer and Joel Richman, and I undertook a series of research projects relating to the care and management of mentally disordered offenders. These projects were approved by both an academic research committee and an ethics committee. During the course of one of the projects, the notion of “evil” emerged from the discourse of the subjects (hospital staff) as a corollary to our investigation. In no way were we attempting to evoke or elucidate this concept at the time. Simply stated, this was a research finding. The fact that the subjects were forensic psychiatric practitioners who claimed a high degree of professionalism is a point of academic interest. However, what intrigued us was the way in which their commentary on “evil” impacted their practice.

There are some who may claim that psychiatry is a science (and a few may even make the claim for forensic psychiatry) and as such is based on empirical knowledge obtained through the testing of hypotheses with conclusions drawn from *a priori* relationships. These relationships may be statistically expressed or otherwise represented but, nonetheless, the claim is for a science of psychiatry. In this perspective, it is usually argued that the notion of evil is at best a question for theologians or moral philosophers and at worst, a concept that is irrelevant to psychiatric practice. Certainly, some maintain that “evil” does not exist in any real physical sense, but it most assuredly does as a metaphysical reality within the spheres of human action and social consciousness. No judgments of right or wrong are offered here; merely an acceptance of and respect for another’s belief. One aim of this book, therefore, is to challenge the notion that psychiatry as “science,” and “evil” as either divine or secular, are mutually exclusive constructions.

Others claim that although psychiatry may not be a science in the true sense of the word, the concept of evil is not helpful to our understanding of the aberrations of human thinking and behavior. In this view, there is an implicit message that those mental health professionals who do not dismiss the idea of evil as irrelevant in psychiatric practice are somehow engaging in a lesser

degree of professionalism, are entertaining a negative judgmentalism, or are unable to “bracket out” personal feelings in their professional lives. Others may counterclaim this moral position by asserting it to be sophistry based on narrow-mindedness and a limitation in thinking capacity. Whatever the perspective, it may be useful to point out that to dismiss other social constructions, such as marriage, family relations, and religion, in the quest to understand the ravages of the human mind may be somewhat naïve. Therefore, another aim of this book is to offer a balance to those who have the ability to reflect on alternative thoughts and who are able to be responsive to the possibilities and potential in the points of view of others.

Thankfully, only a few see psychiatry in such narrow terms and for people who do, it is highly unlikely that any text in itself will produce any real change in their thinking. One purpose of this book, therefore, is to offer material for others to challenge those with such restricted views.

Fortunately, the majority of professionals working in the field of forensic psychiatry appreciate that their craft is inchoate and that they need to respond to the issues that are raised in a reflective manner. In *Forensic Psychiatry: Influences of Evil*, the relationship between forensic psychiatry and evil has been dealt with from various and diverse disciplinary perspectives. The rationale for this approach is that both forensic psychiatry and the notion of evil are part of our developing society, and we should not be afraid of embracing these divergent viewpoints in our quest for understanding. Thus, another aim of this book is to open up further the debate on forensic psychiatry and its incorporation of extremes of aberrant behavior in relation to its social function. Therefore, this book should not only be relevant for all those working in these varying disciplines, but also be pertinent for many others in society at large who may well have given some thought to the problems of evil and its medicalization.

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