

The Four Pillars of Evil: A Depth-Informed Model



[Craig Chalquist, MS PhD](#)

Whoever goes to save another with the lie of limitless love throws a shadow on the face of God....Do the hardest thing of all: see your own hatred and live!

-- Arthur Miller, *After the Fall*

The following model of the psychological genesis of evil combines four key dynamics to provide a working framework for understanding how and why people harm one another malignantly. I teach this model to graduate students of psychology and have found it useful for understanding my years of counseling work with violent men and women, a population that included rapists, child molesters, batterers, gangsters, ex-cons, the occasional assassin, and special operations veterans in dire need of help and healing.

What Evil is Not

Before explaining the model, it might prove useful to discuss very briefly why some of the better-known explanations of evil fail to do the reality justice.

The first is that evil is somehow not real. When people assert this I assume they mean "less real than other things in life" because the alternatives are either denial or lunacy. An example of this "less real" idea is the Christian *privatio boni* doctrine that evil is an actual absence of good. Jung frequently criticized this doctrine but may have misunderstood it. Whatever its faults or merits, however, it

does not explain what people get out of doing evil things to each other. It is not psychological and can therefore be set aside for this discussion.

An explanation often favored by psychotherapists is that evil behavior is a form of unconsciousness. This is an update of the Socratic doctrine that evil is the result of ignorance. Work with perpetrators tends to dispel this pleasant notion. It requires a tremendous amount of consciousness to stalk a victim or plan a murder. The Nazi V2 program required the dedicated labors of entire teams of scientists, some of whom came to the U.S. to work on the budding rocketry program. Unconsciousness certainly characterizes certain aspects of evil, but equating the two leaves the element of deliberation entirely out of account. It also fails to recognize that many unconscious actions and slips never cause evil to anyone.

According to the Analytical Psychology of [C. G. Jung](#), evil is as inherent to the deeper levels of psyche as good is. Everything contains a mixture of both. Evil occurs when the evildoer projects his *shadow*, his denied aggressions, onto a suitable opponent. Like the equation of evil with unconsciousness and the Christian belief in an evildoing devil, the Jungian explanation diminishes the sense of personal responsibility into little better than a claim that the daimon made me do it. How was the daimon aroused to begin with? More to the point, who is responsible for arousing it?

Finally, the idea prevalent among those who cannot be bothered with any psychology at all lays the burden of evil squarely on an unredeemable perpetrator, who commits it because he or she is simply bad. "What you have to understand," Dick Cheney insisted about the prisoners held indefinitely at Guantanamo, "is that these are bad people." How did they get that way? Were they born so, trained so, possessed of faulty wiring? The "bad people" explanation eventually reveals itself as a justification to split the world into good guys (the splitter always happens to be one of these) and evildoers who like causing harm. It would be odd that religious hierarchies of power should emphasize irredeemability so much--did not Jesus, Muhammad, and Buddha claim otherwise?--if there wasn't so much ideological cash value in preventing the inquiry from going any deeper.

Evil: A Working Definition and Model

If evil is not unconscious, supernatural, or agreeably one-sided, what is it? Where does it come from?

A standard psychotherapeutic objection arises to even using the word "evil": that it implies a non-clinical value judgment, whereas evil should be regarded as a type of pathological behavior. I am following the example set by Stephen Diamond in his important book on *Anger, Madness, and the Daimonic* by calling things what they are. Rape, murder, torture, and sadism are not regrettable

personal failings. In fact, evil's spread depends on people who refuse to face and name everyday examples of it. Evil's best ally is self-willed innocence, as when Americans talk about Third World problems without acknowledging Third World horrors in every North American metropolis. James Hillman refers to this as "teddybearism" after the cute stuffed animals stacked in pathetically shallow commemoration of the World Trade Center disaster in New York City.

The Four Pillars model defines evil this way: *Evil is an unnecessary and self-divisive parasitism whose goal is to enhance the perpetrator's sense of self by diminishing the selfhood of other beings.* This takes evil out of the untouchable position of a metaphysical substance and locates it where it always resides: in relational misuses of human consciousness. Animals can behave with unbelievable ferocity, but they are incapable of real evil. A landslide that buries a home is a tragedy but is not an example of evil. Genuine accidents aren't evil, nor is causing harm unintentionally. Evil comes into being in destructive interactions that cause harm either consciously or are lied about to oneself, as when cheery neighborhoods ignore the concentration camp standing next door. At bottom its intent, whether conscious or not, is to benefit oneself or one's group by diminishing someone or something else.

In the natural world, parasitism serves useful ecological purposes. The parasitism of evil does not. It is malignant, destructive, jarringly unnatural, and inherently self-splitting, substituting as it does a harmful psychological dependency on its victims for the felt realization that hurting someone hurts oneself as well. Evil externalizes one's unowned, wounded victimhood by seeking to recreate it in helpless victims. Perpetrators *need* victims to avoid facing their buried victimization. The more helpless suffering they create, the more powerful and significant they feel. Deep down they really feel neither.

The Four Pillars is a "necessary and sufficient" model of evil's dynamics. All four "pillars" must hold up the structure of evil for it to occur. They are as follows:

Pillar 1: *woundedness*, deep, unhealed psychological injury whose unaddressed fermentation generates rage. This kind of rage characterizes what therapists refer to as narcissistic wounding: wounding of the kind that not only hurts deeply, but malforms the structures of selfhood.

Pillar 2: *dysdaimonia*, an old Greek term for being out of touch with the transhuman world. Those who do not fathom the power of mythological forces set loose in human affairs should read Jung's essay on Wotan and National Socialism. Expressed more personalistically, *dysdaimonia* means being profoundly self-alienated from any felt ground of being, from the wellsprings of the deep psyche. It replaces the integrity of self-rootedness with intolerable feelings of emptiness and fragmentation.

It should be noted that the first two pillars are vastly strengthened by the forces of cultural injustice and monolithic control. Evil societal pressures like authoritarianism, patriarchy, and anonymity contribute to weaknesses that generate evil.

Pillar 3: *recreation* of the originally wounding circumstances, but this time with the former helpless victim as the perpetrator. The injuries inflicted mirror the former ones, but the roles have changed. At bottom this represents an unconscious attempt to heal the wounding, but by inflicting it on others it only makes it worse while adding to the swelling self-contempt of failing to take on the task of healing.

Pillar 4: *self-deception* of the kind Jean-Paul Sartre called *bad faith*, or willful self-blinding. A deliberate refusal to see what one is doing. An example is when batterers claim they are disciplining their children by beating them. As Sartre points out, this is not simple unconsciousness: instead, it is consciousness that inflicts bad faith, deliberate lack of focus, on itself. Samuel Clemens referred to the political equivalent as moral cowardice. Hypocrisy is another frequent manifestation of bad faith. Racism and sexism also exhibit it.

Notice the shift from discussing evil as a thing--a character, conditioning, instinct, or daimon--to evil as a mismanaged set of relationships. This implies that just as evil cannot be a substance, neither can there be evil people. The evil emerges from what they do with their wounding. A person with the same degree of wounding, rage, and psychopathology can make very different choices to produce very different results. In my practice I often saw quite murderous clients decide one day to try out other options. The idea that a person can be evil in the same way a chair can be red is clinically untenable and should be abandoned as nothing more than name-calling.

If wounding, dysdaimonia, and the urge to recreate an injury are all present, and bad faith prevents self-honesty about what is about to happen, evil will be the predictable result as a cycle of needless suffering begins another round.

Beyond the Cycles of Evil

The Four Pillars Model suggests that the cycle can be undone by reversing the sequence.

The first step is admitting to oneself that things are not what they seem; that a capability for injuring someone or something unjustly is at hand. This aspect of the problem is squarely a matter of choice, as is the act of looking away. No deterministic allusions to relative health or illness will ever explain it. Profoundly ill people make use of it while their healthier counterparts bypass it, not "until they are ready to grow," but because they choose to let fear block maturation. If a schizophrenic man can do it, or a woman with multiple aggressive personalities, then a much higher-functioning perpetrator of evil certainly can. It is not a matter

of facing the full impact of deep wounding, at least not yet, but of stopping for a harder look at one's behavior as a first brave step on the path out of the terrible cycle.

Taking responsibility for examining the potential for harm in one's behavior suspends its use in recreating the original trauma with a new chosen victim (in fact, one reason for the recreation is to prevent its sources from entering consciousness). This in turn produces a newfound state of *eudaimonia*, or self-relatedness, that momentarily suspends some of the deep self-alienation and dissociation on which doing evil depends. An old Arabic saying touches on this psychological truth: "Take one step toward Allah, and Allah will take two steps toward you." Forces for healing begin to percolate upward into consciousness.

The stage is now set for the last step: dealing with the wounding that drives the entire dynamic. Clinical experience demonstrates every day that healing deep psychological injuries diminishes rage and makes destructive acting out far less likely to occur. Perhaps its greatest utility is in promoting the natural processes of maturation that guard naturally against chronic outbursts of evil. (Jung expressed it well by insisting that we do not "work through" entrenched inner conflicts so much as outgrow them.) The power to do evil is indeed an aspect of human intentionality, as when a good man decides one day to do something rather mean, but *there is no such thing as a psychologically mature perpetrator*.

It should be noted in conclusion that this model does not offer high-precision philosophizing or metaphysical rigor, neither of which has done anything to diminish the amount of evil in the world. After millennia of bloodshed and legions of victims, it is past time to ask whether something about the nature of overmanaged organizations and hierarchical systems of thought increasingly divorced from the natural world that birthed us set up the helplessness, powerlessness, rage, and control addictions in which evil acts flourish like mutating viruses. Ultimately, the wall humans first raised against wild earthly places, the wall raised by the oppressor to externalize the victim, the wall of bad faith between intention and deed, the wall between nations, between family members, between sides of the heart are all the same outmoded, soul-dividing wall of fear and disembodiment pretending good grounding and efficient strength. There it sways, in us and between us, ever on the verge of falling down to crumble back into the Earth from which the fearful first summoned it forth. Manage the fear and the barrier collapses.

A model that emphasizes both personal and transpersonal factors has the potential to hold the doer of evil firmly accountable while addressing the psychosocial injuries that fuel and mechanize the cycle--and whose dismantled defenses let in the healings that make for lasting change and redemptive reconciliation.



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