

Naming Evil: Malignant Narcissism, Dark Triad, Dark Tetrad, and Lower H

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Abstract

Psychologists tend to avoid qualitative personal descriptors, especially *evil*—even though it's one of the most heavily discussed topics in the history of discussing anything. What is evil? Is malignant narcissism "the quintessence of evil"? In the 21st century, some researchers have begun to describe it in terms of three overlapping personality features for which some measurement instruments exist: psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism at their most extreme, maladaptive levels—together known as the *dark triad*. The person who scores high in all aspects of the dark triad, though exploitative, might still fall short of Fromm's "quintessence of evil" if that person does not actively enjoy cruelty for its own sake. So to the dark triad, some researchers added one more item to form a *dark tetrad* and maybe describe evil a bit better.

In psychology, we tend to avoid qualitative personal descriptors—especially *evil*, even though it's one of the most heavily discussed topics in the history of discussing anything. *What is it?* While some authors say actions can be evil but people cannot, much of the world disagrees with that latter notion. Most see evil people, maybe many or maybe few, but evil in most eyes nonetheless. Can a person, not just actions, be good or evil? In terms of individual personality, what do these primal concepts really mean?

Malignant Narcissism

Psychologist Erich Fromm, who fled from Nazi Germany before World War II, spent much of his career trying to understand evil. While struggling to make sense of why normal people frightened by the Great Depression allowed the Nazis to rise to power, he decided that the most basic human dilemma is the conflict between freedom and security and that people will give up one to reclaim the other, more easily surrendering liberty to feel safer even when safety is little more than an illusion (Fromm, 1941; 1955).

That notion, which is perhaps his best known idea, began by looking at those who gave their freedom over to evil, but he did not stop there. Fromm stared into the evil itself. Eventually, he coined the term *malignant narcissism* to describe extreme, exploitative selfishness, "the most severe pathology and the root of the most vicious destructiveness and inhumanity" which he considered to be "the quintessence of evil" (1964, p. 37). Psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg (1970) followed up on this, viewing the malignant narcissist as a sadistic psychopath.

Dark Triad/Tetrad

Objective assessment of these qualitative concepts could be elusive. How do we measure evil? In the 21st century, some researchers have begun to describe it in terms of several overlapping personality features for which some measurement instruments exist:

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psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism at their most extreme, maladaptive levels—together known as the *dark triad* (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

Psychopathy

Whereas diagnosticians assess the DSM diagnosis of *antisocial personality disorder* based mostly on overt antisocial actions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), some clinicians find it more useful to look at *psychopathy*—a broad personality dimension involving the underlying lack of empathy, lack of remorse, and lack of the emotional aspects of a conscience (Cleckley, 1941/1976). However, a psychopath indifferent to the feelings or fates of others might not actively want to inflict harm or control them either, so psychopathy is not by itself all-encompassing evil as most people would see it.

Narcissism

More than mere vanity, the maladaptive form of self-obsession that people usually mean by *narcissism* is epitomized in the DSM's *narcissistic personality disorder*. This goes beyond merely thinking highly of oneself. This egotistical, grandiose sense of oneself includes inordinate self-fascination. A massively egotistical person could still have a conscience, though, even if shortsighted and self-centered. A psychopathic narcissist would be super-egotistical without a conscience to hold him or her back.

Machiavellianism

Named for Nicolo Machiavelli, who wrote about the manipulative nature of politics, *Machiavellianism* refers to a detached, calculating attitude regarding manipulateness. The Machiavellian takes a practical, pragmatic view of morality, with a cynical view of moral concerns. The main test for this trait, the MACH-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970), identifies attitudes about pragmatism and manipulation rather than manipulative ability itself.

Sadism

As awful as a manipulative egotist who lacks a conscience might be, that person might still take no delight in other people's pain. Cold indifference is not pleasure. The person who scores high in all aspects of the dark triad, though exploitative, might still fall short of Fromm's "quintessence of evil" if that person does not actively enjoy cruelty for its own sake. So to the dark triad, some researchers added one more item to form a *dark tetrad* and maybe describe evil a bit better: sadism (Book et al., 2016; Chabrol et al., 2009; Međedović & Petrović, 2015).

Sadists enjoy hurting others. Named for the Marquis Jean-Baptiste François Joseph de Sade, *sadism* means deriving pleasure from other people's suffering. When the manipulative egotist who lacks a conscience also gets thrills from making people suffer, when that person enjoys ruining lives and will hurt people for the sheer fun of hurting them, that is the person more people will view as evil. If all four of those overlapping qualities are so deeply, persistently ingrained in the personality that the combination defines who that person is, even professional psychologists might find it hard not to call someone with that mixture evil.

Factor H

Gordon Allport, often called the father of personality psychology, identified thousands of terms used to describe personality (Allport & Odbert, 1936). Personality psychologists trying to detect order in that chaos observed that certain traits tend to group together in *trait clusters* (Cattell, 1943), constellations of characteristics that are commonly related to each other. Trait clusters are whole groups of characteristics that correlate together in positive and negative directions. They are better known as *personality factors* because *factor analysis* identifies the groupings. Personality researchers sought to identify which personality factors are fairly *universal* (meaning that the traits will cluster together in any group of people measured) and *orthogonal* (statistically unrelated to each other). For example, one of the earliest to emerge was the dimension of extraversion/introversion (Jung, 1921; Loo, 1979). Over the course of many studies to determine how many factors best sum up personality, the number that turned up most often was five (e.g., Fiske, 1949; Goldberg, 1982; Tupes & Christal, 1961). In an extensive review and meta-analysis of the published research, personality researchers McCrae and Costa (1987) concluded that this number best fit all the available evidence. They gave their version of the *five-factor model* the acronym OCEAN for the names they assigned to the factors: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism.

They left out good and evil. Researchers identifying trait clusters or personality factors usually followed Allport's example by omitting qualitative terms, any words that essentially judged people favorably (e.g., faithful, generous, honest, loyal, modest, sincere) or unfavorably (e.g., untrustworthy, stingy, dishonest, disloyal, arrogant, insincere). Lee and Ashton (2012) called this missing good/bad factor Honesty-Humility or simply the H Factor, for the positive side of this good/bad dimension. They gave their *six-factor theory* a name that reads like a spell-casting company or alien gas station, *HEXACO*: Honesty-Humility, Emotionality (essentially Neuroticism), eXtraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Openness. The model has become increasingly popular among researchers. As it turns out, the low end of factor H correlates with all four selfish, overlapping parts of the dark tetrad (Book et al., 2006; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Međedović & Petrović, 2015).

A Lingering Question

Factor H for good and the dark tetrad for evil both remain controversial, with plenty of researchers debating their validity as empirically testable constructs (e.g., De Raad et al., 2010). If good and evil themselves were easy to define, members of the human race would not have spent thousands of years contemplating and debating them. Their intangible nature does not make them any less important in our lives. Dismissing them as abstractions that we have difficulty trying to define does not make them go away.

Not every fiend will fit the dark tetrad description. Not every abuser, bomber, mass murderer, or other human monster will meet all four criteria, but when all four are present, persistent, and pervasive, their victims tend to suffer the worst. That, we name evil.

Biographical Sketch

Travis Langley is a professor of psychology at Henderson State University. Born in Arkadelphia only a few blocks away from HSU, he earned his B.A. from Hendrix College and his M.S. and Ph.D. from Tulane University, all in psychology. *Necessary Evil*, *Legends of the Knight*, *Superheroes Decoded*, *Visionaries: Robert Kirkman's Secret History of Comics*, and other documentary programs have featured him as an expert interviewee. PsychologyToday.com carries his blog, "Beyond Heroes and Villains," and he is one of the ten most followed psychologists (#2 psychology professor) as @Superherologist on Twitter. Travis has been a child abuse investigator, expert witness, author of the book *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight*, editor and lead writer for nine books (with translations in five languages and more books in progress) using popular culture to discuss real psychology, and undefeated champion on the *Wheel of Fortune* game show. Mountain Dew is his fuel.

Author Note: This article weaves together content that previously appeared in print (Langley, 2016a; 2016b; 2016c) and online (Langley, 2016d).

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