



Evil: The Science Behind Humanity's Dark Side

Julia Shaw

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What is it about evil that we find so compelling? From our obsession with serial killers to violence in pop culture, we seem inescapably drawn to the stories of monstrous acts and the aberrant people who commit them. But evil, Dr. Julia Shaw argues, is all relative, rooted in our unique cultures. What one may consider normal, like sex before marriage, eating meat, or being a banker, others find abhorrent. And if evil is only in the eye of the beholder, can it be said to exist at all? In *Evil*, Shaw uses case studies from academia, examples from and popular culture, and anecdotes from everyday life to break down complex information and concepts like the neuroscience of evil, the psychology of bloodlust, and workplace misbehavior. This is a wide-ranging exploration into a fascinating, darkly compelling subject.

Evil: The Science Behind Humanity's Dark Side Details

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Author : Julia Shaw

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From Reader Review Evil: The Science Behind Humanity's Dark Side for online ebook

Eric Sala says

I came across this book because i am a big fan of psychology and murder. I really enjoyed this book that talked about obsession with serial killers to violence in pop culture. The author, Julia uses case studies from academia, examples from popular culture, and compares to everyday life. Awesome fun and very suspenseful.

Antonio Delgado says

This book is an accessible approach to the problem of evil without the academic jargon but with the proper academic and responsible rigor. Offering more than answers, Julia Shaw takes us to question a priori conception(s) of evil. Simply put it, it is easy to use the later of evil than to deal with reality. Shaw challenges us to think and to have a dialogue with ourselves regarding our own capacity for committing acts that often fall into that category.

Catriona says

“When we talk about evil, we tend to turn our attention to Hitler.”

This catchy first sentence begins Dr. Julia Shaw’s excellent, up-to-date analysis. She points out that, on the internet, it seems as if “...every comment thread will eventually lead to a Hitler comparison.”

But, as ‘Hitler’ has become a synonym for ‘evil,’ the sheer volume of people and actions compared to the WWII dictator results in the weakening of the epithet as a description. Even though there are points on which most would agree, there’s no standard measure of ‘evil.’ The judgment of humans and institutions is filtered through the perspective of what is normal for each particular culture.

Can ‘evil’ be measured precisely, scientifically, medically, or legally? Dr. Shaw has endeavored to break down some pivotal events, crimes, and psychological studies in order to examine more closely what ‘evil’ means to us, in all its contexts, past and present.

The book discusses this weighty subject in a way that would be useful in an educational or professional setting. However, without dumbing down her language, she’s made the book easily understood and fascinating for ordinary readers.

Though it isn’t a religious book, religion is discussed, as well as other controversial but pertinent topics.

I thoroughly enjoyed it — as a parent, a concerned citizen, a writer, a crime fiction fan, and an imperfect human being. I still feel guilty, but I’m pretty sure that I’m not evil.

<https://catsgame.wordpress.com/2018/1...>

Emily says

I received this digital ARC from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

This title caught my attention right away, because I, like many other people, am caught up in the true crime zeitgeist. Also, I'm alive and a part of this mucky world right now, so this kind of exploration seems important.

I don't disagree with her thesis ultimately: that evil is not a useful construct through which to view human behavior. The book also has a couple of very interesting chapters on human sexuality that highlighted what the author seemed to be most interested in. Otherwise it was, unfortunately, a disappointment.

My first clue that she wasn't trying to be objective or professional in any way was a parenthetical comment she made about Jeffrey Dahmer's sentence of 15 consecutive life sentences, something like "(you know, just in case he survived the first one.)" Though she has an MS in law, she was either accidentally or purposely overlooking the fact that the multiple life sentences were not utilitarian punishments, but rather meant to establish a sense of "justice" for each crime he was convicted of. Throughout the book the author states multiple times that we are conditioned to be biased toward victims and to dehumanize murderers, so I guess that line of reasoning follows.

In between neurological studies and statistical data about how humans perceive evil, Shaw goes on several personal screeds on topics like the uselessness of airport security and the injustice of bi-erasure. Again, I didn't disagree with her opinions, but I wasn't really interested in being preached at. That's not how this book was positioned.

Though the whole book was bracketed by Nietzsche quotes, the only source that she called out as racist was Hannah Arendt of all people (I'm not saying she's incorrect, I'm just saying it was interesting that she was the only one who got this treatment). Shaw dredged up the Milgram experiment a couple of times, first using it to refute the idea that laughing at inappropriate times was inherently evil and then for its usual purpose: to talk about the banality of evil (lol). She also used the Stanford Prison Experiment for its typical purpose of illustrating groupthink gone wild while almost completely glossing over the major flaws that have caused the experiment to be discredited.

Anyway this has a couple of interesting chapters in the middle about unsavory topics. If you feel like learning some interesting statistics and attitudes about pedophilia and zoophilia, about a quarter of this book is for you.

Latkins says

This is a fascinating book about what we mean when we describe 'evil'. The author, Dr Shaw, argues that people and actions aren't evil in themselves, but only in how we perceive them, and that dismissing terrible acts as 'evil' is dangerous, as it stops us from trying to understand why they happen, and perhaps prevent them from happening. Dealing with issues as diverse as the holocaust, murder, rape, paedophilia,

exploitation and modern slavery, at times this is not an easy read but it will make you look at the world in a different way. I didn't always agree with the author, but that only made it more compelling.

Lolly K Dandeneau says

via my blog: <https://bookstalkerblog.wordpress.com/>

'Without understanding, we risk dehumanizing others, writing off human beings simply because we don't comprehend them.'

That is a loaded sentence and Evil is a strange beast, one we can't ever contain because it's slippery. The face of evil changes with time, what is evil today may be the norm tomorrow. One thing this book will do is make you squirm, because when discussing evil we remove ourselves from the equation until someone points out that ignorance is no excuse either. Oh yes, you and me too. Think about consumerism, all those things we just have to have on the backs of the broken. I have such a disgust for child abusers, but the truth is, Shaw raises solid arguments on why dehumanizing anyone actually hurts us all in the end. How can we learn and create a safe environment if we really don't understand the why of it all? How can we understand the why of anything if we rush to label a person or thing evil? End of story, you're nothing like me, you're evil! Nothing else to see here, we've decided it's just evil. I realize that is a huge mistake.

Someone thinks you are evil too, be it for your religious beliefs or lack thereof, maybe even the country you live in, or your sexual preferences. Julia Shaw's book can start some very interesting conversations and you can bet not everyone is going to agree. This is not for the light reader, the subject is very heavy. You are not meant to feel sorry for people who are attracted to children or animals, to most of us this is beyond vile, repulsive but it doesn't change that such people exist and struggle with these 'urges'. Do you see what I mean, this is a tough read! It's hard to review, because these are subjects we find downright abhorrent and, admittedly, evil. Like a dead rotting thing, we do not want to acknowledge it's there, bury it, let someone else deal with it. Tell me though, what about people who have evil thoughts but never act on them? Or their forbidden urges? How do we help them, prevent these thoughts from escalating into acts? Can we? What a slippery slope!

This book will challenge your notions of bad and good, much in the same way age blurs that line. As children, we are reared on stories teaching us morality, many meant to keep us in line or safe, to make sure we become upstanding citizens. As we age, life kicks us, we struggle, we make mistakes because we are human and flawed. We all want to be understood, forgiven our mistakes, and yet if someone's darkest deed is out in the open, it's less easy to move on because it's all we can see, an ever-present stain. Not everything should be forgiven, we have laws for a reason, but we must understand or we gain nothing. In all fairness though, often some criminals do prove that they shouldn't be trusted and commit the same crimes over and over. What about that?

Regarding our impressions based on looks (someone looks evil, weird, creepy) it is true we are biased. Surely someone who is beautiful, well-kempt, and eloquent gains the trust of many, and often to our detriment. Our visual perception is deeply flawed, just as much as we trust beauty we are put off by those with unusual deformities, unfairly so. I agree with the idea that people often feel someone must deserve their suffering, we see it every day. This made me wonder... if someone looks 'creepy' to everyone they meet, they would certainly be treated suspiciously, it wouldn't be so far-fetched to imagine it affects their interactions and sours them socially. Why not, I would certainly be sick and tired of people myself always having an adverse reaction to me based on looks I had no choice in. On the flip side, I thought the same is

true for those with stunning looks who do have depth and maybe have a hard time knowing who genuinely likes them as a person, rather than wanting them based on their beauty alone. Between the two though, people often stumble over themselves to help attractive people. I refuse to touch on mental illness and the disgusting lack of understanding the whole world over, it's such a mess even in our 'modern age'. People are downright terrified of mental illness, it's no wonder with popular culture and films, the mentally ill, if you believe Hollywood, are all serial killers. People are downright uncomfortable the moment they hear whisper of 'mental illness', much of that is due to ignorance, poor education as a whole on the subject. See, this book leads to stray thoughts. Back to evil...

Mob mentality is a beast, it certainly seems that cruelty (evil) is easier for human beings if others are chanting alongside you. We also can be downright disgusting if there is anonymity to hide behind. Is that not evil? I have a hard time reading about the differences in cultures. My beloved uncle was an anthropologist and there were many conversations about the places he traveled, the shocking (to my American sensibilities) social norms he witnessed, many I would and do consider evil and I am adamant in my refusal to change my mind even at the risk of hypocrisy. That's okay, I am human but I will listen at least, to your side.

Back to looks again, I agree we are biased in our judgements based on looks but I also believe in gut instincts. Personally, when I've ignored mine, it was a mistake. I think we have these gut reactions for a reason more often than not. Then again, I have met just as many 'beautiful people' that gave me a bad feeling. So there. The fact is, I would be the first to define someone as evil if they victimized my loved ones. It's a different conversation when you experience it firsthand, I know this book isn't about the victims, but it's my personal feeling. I understand what Shaw is saying, and why it's important but I don't have to like it.

This is a provocative book. I will say, much as Shaw does, thoughts are one thing acting on them another. I hope we do someday have a way to intervene and help those with 'unnatural urges' (please, don't bombard me with messages about what defines unnatural, we will be here for eternity and I mean murdering people, abuse, molestation, anything that victimizes another). I realize we victimize each other in small ways, but somehow taking someone's life isn't as bad as say, snapping at your child. Let's face it, call it evil or not there are extremes that have to be measured or else society falls apart. We do need to continue studying the nature of evil, because that nature is in us all. Thank God there are others invested in this science, because for me, it would be too hard. I leave it to the experts.

An uneasy read, but I think it will give you a lot to talk about. It was hard for me to review!

Publication Date: February 27, 2019

Abrams Press

Meike says

As this is a "popular science" book, I didn't expect to be confronted with rigorous academic postulations and intricate arguments that can only be understood by insiders, but this was way too shallow for my taste (and I am not an expert in any of the fields Shaw discusses). I really wanted to like this, but unfortunately, I didn't learn much, and Shaw's impulse to talk about herself and preach to her readers didn't help either - not because her statements are somehow wrong, but because they are often referring to things so obvious (don't

be afraid of mentally ill people! Don't perpetuate the suppression of women! Don't discriminate people because of their sexual orientation!) that I'm wondering who the reading audience for this book is. I know that there are people who cling to hateful and cliched ideas in order to marginalize others, but will they pick up this book and have an epiphany?

The basic problem of the book is probably that the concept of "evil" is so broad and partly subjective (what would you consider as evil, what merely as bad?) that Shaw is busy covering a lot of ground at the expense of depth: She talks about the concept of "evil" in the context of technology, power, the office, sexuality, murder, rape culture, the Nazis, terrorism, paedophilia, slavery, sadism... and yes, she herself states that this exploration is based on her own interests regarding the concept of "evil". While there are some scientific studies that I had never heard of and that I found very interesting, many cases she refers to are already well-known (how often do we have to read about the Stanford Prison Experiment?).

So all in all, I was a little underwhelmed by this book. And hey, all German speakers out there, if you want to get an impression what this book feels like, you can watch this clip in which Shaw (who is German-Canadian) does a "creepiness test" with late night host Jan Böhmermann:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_mzL...

Aaron Schmuhl says

So, this is a hard book to review. It's mostly hard because I don't want it to seem like I think it's a bad book, but the alternative is that there really isn't anything to hang your hat on with it. The cover says "The Science Behind Humanity's Dark Side," but that really isn't what the book is about. Yes, there's some science and studies referenced in the book, but a more accurate subtitle is "Why Nothing is Really Evil." So, if you're looking for a deep-dive into the psychology and biochemistry behind why humans do evil stuff, this book really isn't for you. No matter what "evil" is presented in the book, the overall goal is to explain why this is subjective and not all evil. For example, the last line of the book is "It's time we rethink evil." I get it, and the author isn't wrong, but it's not really why I wanted to read the book.

The author writes in a very pop-nonfic kind of way, which is fine and engaging, but also tends to inject a little bit too much of her personal opinion and stories about herself on various topics into a book that's purportedly about the science of evil. While she mostly does a good job of saying "I think that..." before these injections, some of them don't seem to be a good fit. She also tends to equate things that I'm not sure should be equated, (I'm hesitant to mention this, but...) for example at one point she directly compares saying that someone got a computer virus because they didn't patch their computer to victim blaming victims of revenge porn. I mean, I suppose they're fundamentally similar, but I'm not sure that those things are really comparable. Those types of odd comparisons are frequent enough in the book to make you step back and doubt much more of it.

Honestly, it's an interesting read at times (specifically when the author focuses on the science), but there's not enough in here to make me willing to recommend it. There are enough good parts where it's not a waste of time, either, which is why I'm leaning towards 2 stars.

Joseph says

There is an old illusion. It is called good and evil.

Fredrick Nietzsche

Evil: The Science Behind Humanity's Dark Side by Julia Shaw is a study of evil and an attempt to define evil. Shaw is a German-Canadian psychologist and popular science writer who specializes in false memories. She started a BSc in psychology at the Simon Fraser University. She went on to complete a Masters in Psychology and Law at Maastricht University in the Netherlands. In 2009, she returned to Canada and was awarded a Ph.D. at the University of British Columbia entitled "Constructing Rich False Memories of Committing Crime."

Shaw opens with Hitler, someone that nearly everyone considers as evil; the question is why. There was no trauma in his childhood. He did not torture small animals. Even to the last, he was kind to his dog. Yet, he is responsible for the deaths of millions. Others seem to fit this mold like Charles Manson, or Josef Stalin. They have little in redeeming qualities.

What is evil? Is there a definition that can be applied -- a tipping point for actions. Shaw does punctuate the chapters of the book with Nietzsche quotes that tend to imply that the answer is no. The Trolley Experiment is an excellent example of the sliding scale of right and wrong, and that experiment can be played on many different levels and settings. These experiments have no right answer many times. If letting a child die to save a person wrong, what about if ten people were saved, or one hundred? Where is the line drawn? Is someone who kills a person by accident or negligence deserving of the title of "murderer" the same as a serial killer? We all have a dark secret of some kind or something we are not proud of in our past. Should that label be made public and remain with us for our entire lives?

Shaw does take some twists that are unexpected such as with Jeffery Dahmer and those who commit murder. Recidivism rates for murder are extremely low, and most murders are between people who are close. Someone who kills is doubtful to kill again. Her search for why sometimes clouds the actions. However, some crimes are of necessity. Would anyone consider Jean Valjean to be evil?

Evil has changed over time. Homosexuality was considered a crime or a mental illness. Some people thought it was contagious. Some aspects of sexuality today were considered crimes in the recent past. Others remain on the taboo list. Shaw also likes using lists that make the reader feel increasingly uncomfortable to the point that each reader comes upon an action they consider evil. We all do not stop at the same point. We oppose slavery in the modern world but where is the line drawn. Paying someone a non-living wage is permissible, but slavery is evil. Killing puppies or kittens is considered evil, but the industrial slaughter of cows, pigs, and chickens is allowable.

Nietzsche said, "There is no such thing as moral phenomena, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena." Although many of us can agree that evil exists at one edge of the spectrum, how far does it extend to the center? Shaw gives examples and situations to show how large the grey area is between good and evil. Time moves the marker. Differences in our own thinking and experiences create different tipping points for each of us. We all agree that there is evil, but what is evil varies between people.

Valerie says

I won an uncorrected proof of this book through a Goodreads.com Giveaway

At last! A book addressing that most elusive of topics-- Evil. Dr. Julia Shaw, criminologist & psychologist, is quite an expert on the subject. In this devourable book, she explores evil in all its inhuman guises--sadism, slavery, cybercrime, murder, torture, terrorism, and more-- and reveals it to be infinitely human. I enjoy Dr. Shaw's conversational style as much as I appreciate her extensive research. This book is refreshing to read because it's about more than just sensationalized stories... it's about the social, cultural, evolutionary, psychological factors which influence us all, and the ways that these influences can lead us down dark paths. If you're looking for a torrid academic deconstruction of a pivotal religious concept, this isn't the book for you. This book will show you the flawed human being behind the hideous monster you call Evil. You might even see yourself reflected in its pages.

Andy says

This book offers some great insights into the psychology of what we as society today often consider "evil". It reflects on many different elements involved, from the factors that can lead to the Stanford-prison experiment and the bystander effect, to the question of what is sexually "deviant" or normal. Throughout all chapters, the language is easy to understand and all psychological terms are very well explained and put into context. Additionally, the author manages to engage the reader by offering examples of possible behavior or moral dilemmas.

Overall, I can really recommend this book to anyone interested in psychology and wanting answers for why we sometimes (or often) do horrible things to one another.

Shaela says

This book will take your concept of evil and flip it on its head, making gray all the originally black and white things you knew about both evil and yourself.

In *Evil*, author Julia Shaw illustrates the common perceptions of and beliefs around "evil" and then questions them with fresh, compelling, and stimulating arguments, case studies, philosophical questions, and scientific research. Would you kill baby Hitler, even though committing murder is fundamentally "evil"? Why does one single moment or decision define an individual as "evil"? Could our everyday thoughts, actions, or norms be categorized as "evil"?

This book is an innovative take on the subject of the human psyche. It is interesting and well written, with concepts and explanations that are very relevant and well rounded. Each page presents an uncomfortable but thought-provoking argument wrapped in a unique opportunity for introspection and novel thinking. A truly enjoyable book on quite a prickly subject.

Lynn Coulter says

I'm not confident at all about sharing my opinions of Julia Shaw's new book, *Evil: the Science Behind Humanity's Dark Side*. After all, Ms. Shaw is a senior lecturer in psychology and criminology at London

South Bank University, and I have expertise in neither field.

But I just can't agree with the conclusions she draws from case studies of serial killers and criminals. I agree with her finding that readers fascinated by evil, and I understand what she means when she says different cultures may disagree on what is actually evil behavior.

Then she asks, if evil depends on a cultural definition, does evil really exist at all? She loses me entirely when she discusses serial killer/cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer as driven by loneliness. Wait. Most lonely people don't need to freeze other humans' body parts or ingest them to deal with their emotions. Some of her reasoning just doesn't mesh with common sense. I think evil actually does exist in some people, (was Hitler just lonely, too?) and that some people are so disturbed they cross moral/ethical lines.

Then again, as I said from the beginning, what do I know? I'm not a trained scientist. But I can't accept all her theories, which seem too simplistic. The book itself is well-written.

Kristy says

Thank you to NetGalley for a free copy of Evil: The Science Behind Humanity's Dark Side in exchange for an honest review.

Dr. Julia Shaw tackles the interesting subject of evil using thorough research and evidence. Does evil truly exist? Shaw delves into topics such as serial killers, pedophiles, zoophiles, terrorists and Nazis. She argues that what most consider evil isn't simply black and white. And boy does she get into that gray area!

Bob says

As an ethics instructor, I am delighted to have read Julia Shaw's book, Evil: The Science Behind Humanity's Dark Side. Dr. Shaw does an outstanding job of elucidating the nuances of a rich bio-psycho-social perspective of despicable behavior. Now, I have a wealth of great examples, provocative research findings, and thoughtful questions for debate to share and help learners see the science and philosophy behind evil. Plus, reading this book was like a deliberate ride through a freak house wearing a lab coat. Thanks to the publisher for letting me enjoy this ride via Net Galley before it officially debuts with the public this fall.
