

The Evil of Man

«No man voluntarily pursues evil, or that which he thinks to be evil. To prefer evil to good is not in human nature” - Socrates

The citation from Socrates can have many meanings and interpretations, as can any philosophical question, but it raises a few questions that we might never get the answer to. If no man truly never pursues evil, would that mean that no man can ever be evil? If no man pursues evil, does that mean that all the wrongdoers and lawbreakers of the world wholeheartedly believed that they were in the right, and that they were doing the right thing?

To argue that no man pursues evil voluntarily would also be to argue that no evil exists when you look at the actions of humanity. If no man pursues evil, why does he kill? Steal? Rob? Rape? Why does he discriminate against fellow humans who have the same views and values as himself?

The debate about good and evil is a debate that has been going on for as long as humanity's recorded history, and it might stay a debate until our species die out. Saying that no man voluntarily pursues evil would make one think that everyone believes what they do is the correct thing, or that they have no choice if they do believe that their actions are evil. If this is the case, what would make us have different views on what is evil? Is it our upbringing and environment that makes us believe that our actions are the correct actions, or is it perhaps our genetics that skew our view of good and evil? Sometimes it is one of them, and sometimes it is both. An unhealthy environment in childhood can bring one up to believe that their evil actions are good actions, while an unhealthy, unstable deposit of hormones and neurological pathways can make them either unaware that their actions are evil, or incapable to care about it.

If we are to discuss why people commit evil actions, then we might have to discuss what an evil action is. The definition of evil, if no man is evil, would be impossible to place. Is killing someone evil if the killer believes he is doing the right thing? Humanity's views on evil have changed so much throughout history, and even today different cultures believe different actions and beliefs are evil. The Pro-Life protesters in America believe getting an abortion is evil, while the Pro-Choice protesters believe that taking away a woman's right to choose is evil. Who is in the right? Is anyone in the right?

This might be where society and civilization come into the picture. Because so many people have different views on what evil is, society has organized itself in a way that allows the majority to decide what is evil, at least in democratic societies. We have developed laws to prohibit people from doing evil, and to have guidelines for how to react when an evil deed is done. If somebody does kill, they will be persecuted and tried before a judge, told that what they did is evil, and they will have to atone for it. In countries like Norway, they atone by jailtime and fines, while in other countries they might even face torture or death.

As for my viewpoint on the matter, I must admit that I partially agree with the citation from Socrates. I believe that meanwhile evil is not part of human nature, we can still pursue evil actions while knowing they are evil. If it is voluntary can be discussed as we today are aware of mental and developmental issues that might cause one to do evil deeds. If somebody does something evil while in psychosis from a mental disorder, is that truly voluntary, or is it their brains working against themselves and their humanity? If someone has a hormonal regulation problem and cannot control their moods the same way most do, are their actions done in fits of rage truly voluntary? I do not believe it is something us as a species will ever be able to agree on, and maybe that in itself is evil. After all, if no man voluntarily pursues evil, and evil is relative, how do we know that we are not just all evil?