

Making Sense of Good and Evil

Wednesday, May 2, 2007

This spring I'm teaching a course titled "Confronting Evil." The course is for students over age 55; it's part of the Montana Osher Life Long Learning Institute, administered by The University of Montana's Office of Continuing Education. This is a rewarding course to teach, as the students bring much wisdom and experience to class discussions.

The week of the Virginia Tech tragedy we read a selection from Fyodor Dostoevsky's classic novel, *Crime and Punishment* – a dark tale about a university student who rejects belief in good and evil and demonstrates his convictions by committing murder. One student in the class remarked that it was a "heck of a week to read that story." I agreed.

Nonetheless, it's noteworthy in reading the speeches, editorials and blogs on the tragedy in Virginia, how frequently people frame it terms of good and evil. This reinforced the importance of our class's reflections on influential writings about this topic. Of course, there are many competing interpretations of the significance of good and evil, and with all these conflicting opinions, how are we to make sense of these important concepts? In these brief comments, I will talk about our class's discussion on one account that I find helpful: Dostoevsky's.

The Russian novelist is notable for his explorations into good and evil. Perhaps the depth of his insights has a lot to do with his experiences. At 26, he was sentenced to death by the Czar. While on the firing line, he was given a reprieve and sent to Siberia for four years. During his middle years he became addicted to gambling, which led to self-loathing and financial hardship. But in the latter part of his life he experienced the goods of a secure family life, the joy of children and great literary success.

Despite the complexity of his novels (particularly all those confusing Russian names) Dostoevsky's ideas on good and evil are simple. They center on the golden rule, the command to love your neighbor as yourself. He's not unique in this, as most ethical systems, both secular and religious, seem to affirm this basic moral insight. In one of Dostoevsky's stories the main character concludes: "The chief thing is to love others like yourself, that's the chief thing... It's an old truth which has been told and retold a billion times – but it has not formed our lives." However, another character asserts that he "could never understand how one can love one's neighbors. It's just one's neighbors, to my mind, that one can't love, though one might love people at a distance."

It's not impossible to love one's neighbor, but it can be a challenge. In fact, the golden rule might be better named the golden challenge. We have no direct access to what other people are thinking or feeling. In my course I speculated that it might be possible for a person to live with another for 20 years, without bridging that gap and really knowing the other person. One of the students volunteered, a comment that seemed to come from years of personal experience, that it's possible for a person to do that for 40 years. The philosopher Josiah Royce called the way we bridge that gap "the moral insight." The moral insight is the realization that the human life in oneself is the same as in others – that pain is pain and joy is joy, in all of us. This insight comes and goes; as Royce notes, "Moments of insight, with their accompanying resolutions; long stretches of delusion and selfishness: That is our life." I think these comments on the moral insight help explain Dostoevsky's accounts of good and evil.

On the one hand, his characters commit evils when they lose connection with others and become obsessively, inwardly focused. These characters turn inward when they become jealous, or suffer an offense or insult of which they can't let go. Then, they dwell on this to the point that all they know are their own thoughts, and their neighbors become unreal. When this happens, they become cold and indifferent to others, and are capable of cruelty and evil.

On the other hand, his characters realize goodness through the moral insight – by empathy. Yet, as a student in the class pointed out, goodness needs more than empathy; that the moral insight and the golden rule are built upon our ability for compassion. Another student pointed out that compassion means the ability to identify with others' suffering *and* the desire to do something about it. When people experience compassion, they are capable of kindness and goodness.

The event at Virginia Tech raises many questions about good and evil, and perhaps the Russian novelist does offer some insight. For him, the source of moral goodness is our capacity for compassion, while the source of moral evil is the absence of compassion – the inability to share in our neighbor's suffering, and joy.