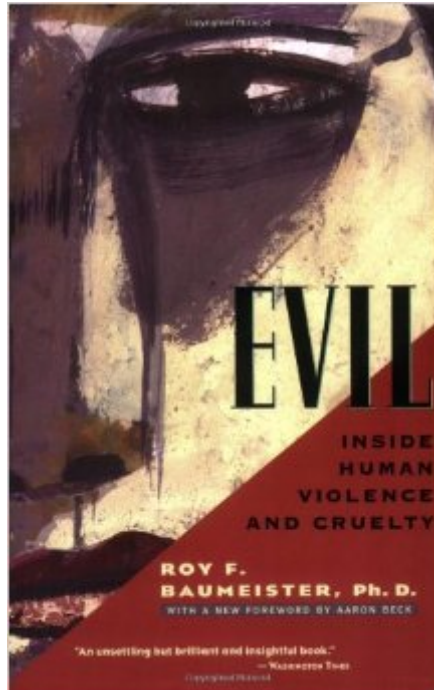


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# Evil: Inside Human Violence And Cruelty



## Synopsis

Why is there evil, and what can scientific research tell us about the origins and persistence of evil behavior? Considering evil from the unusual perspective of the perpetrator, Baumeister asks, How do ordinary people find themselves beating their wives? Murdering rival gang members? Torturing political prisoners? Betraying their colleagues to the secret police? Why do cycles of revenge so often escalate? Baumeister casts new light on these issues as he examines the gap between the victim's viewpoint and that of the perpetrator, and also the roots of evil behavior, from egotism and revenge to idealism and sadism. A fascinating study of one of humankind's oldest problems, *Evil* has profound implications for the way we conduct our lives and govern our society.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is the book for anyone who has ever been the victim of a crime and wishes to understand how or why it happened, or whose profession requires frequent contact with perpetrators of evil and who needs to understand the thinking process of such people. I have read several other books on the subject, mostly approaching it from the perspectives of literature, religion or mythology, but these works tend to provide unsatisfying answers to the basic questions of what inspires evil and what causes it to spread. Dr. Baumeister's work answers both of these questions convincingly, along with many others, such as why evil people almost never consider themselves to be evil; why there is not more evil in the world, considering how often evil goes unpunished; why revenge is usually disproportionate to the initial offense and why it settles nothing and often inspires further and greater

evil; why drugs and alcohol so often accompany evil and whether they are actually a cause of evil; whether low self-esteem or high self-esteem is more conducive to evil, and the role which self-esteem, and challenges to self-esteem, play in the initiation of evil; and how the perpetrators of evil manage to live with themselves. This is not only the best book I have ever read on the subject; it is the only one I have read which approaches the problem from the standpoint of empirical research rather than mere ideology. It is also extremely well written, accessible to the general reader and generously illustrated with examples from history and current events.

Important topic, promising approach, but the insights offered are too few and too shallow. I bought this book partly on the strength of its readers' reviews here on , but found myself disappointed. The book's subtitle, "inside human violence and cruelty," promises much, but the author, I feel, has not really delivered. A social psychologist, Baumeister avoids a philosophical and theological discussion of evil in favor of a psychological one, based on facts gleaned from history and experiment. This approach is attractive and promising, but somehow, in almost 400 long pages, not much seems to come of it. Too often I felt that the insights offered by Baumeister were mere banalities, such as that evil acts are experienced more strongly by victims than by their perpetrators--a point Baumeister repeats many, many times. The author uses this observation to conclude that "evil is in the eye of the beholder"--and even launches the book with a clever anecdote about an event in which two people see each other as evildoers, despite no intentional act of harm being committed. But this is surely a special case, and not comparable to the operation of a system of death-camps, or hacking apart defenseless people huddling for safety in a church. Baumeister takes pains (repeatedly) to stress that he wants to see evil acts through the perpetrators' eyes, and not prejudge events from the perspective of victims, but the result is an uneasy or indecisive tone that wavers between a normal-sounding condemnation of evil and a moral relativism that really believes that evil is merely in the eye of the beholder--that is, there's no such thing as evil, as long as you're the one perpetrating it. Baumeister finds four basic psychological causes of evil: greed/lust/ambition, or evil as a means to an end; revenge for insulted egotism; ideological evil; and actual sadism--deriving pleasure from harming others. The author discusses each of these at length, but does not come up with many conclusions. He observes that crime, for the most part, does not pay as well as even the lowest-level jobs, and that people who commit crimes generally have a poor idea of the long-term consequences of their actions. This, to me, is another banal point, not an insight that requires much discussion. Baumeister makes much of his conclusion that standard psychology is wrong when it attributes violent, bullying behavior to low self-esteem; he feels that the facts show that bullies and

violent people in fact have high self-esteem, in the sense of high or even inflated regard for themselves. As an example, he points out that convicted, incarcerated rapists often think of themselves as "superachievers." Technically this might be called high self-esteem, but I would call it delusional, and I think there is a difference. Maybe I'm alone here, but I think of high self-esteem as being realistic and adaptive, not the fragile egotism of the narcissist. Baumeister spends much time trying to disprove the "low self-esteem" model of violent behavior, but I was never persuaded. My overall impression is that there is length here, but not depth. I did not feel I got "inside" human violence and cruelty. Having read only the first chapter or so of James Waller's "Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing", I already feel that I am getting a much deeper and also more sympathetic view of how and why evil is committed, from a social-psychological perspective.

In the course of reviewing over 20 books on the topic of human violence and mass murder, I found this to be far and away the best. Some obviously have problems with the author's attempts to understand and not just demonize killers. I can think of no other way of getting into the heads of those who commit violence in the name of a state, an ideology, an ethnic group, a religion or indeed any other belief system. Confronting the "banality of evil" is indeed an unpleasant exercise, but necessary if we are ever to achieve a deeper understanding of our greatest failing as a species. To summarize, this work is probably the best research-based study of the psychology of human mass violence currently on the market.

I have taught a course on violence and culture for a few years, and the last few times I have taught it, I have included this book as a required reading. It is smart, organized, and engaging. Students really enjoy it for its analytical clarity and its rich descriptions. It is an important read for anyone interested in the human roots of violence. As he points out, the "myth of pure evil" asserts that "evil" is a force or entity apart from us, rather than behavior that we engage in. WE are always good and innocent, but THEY are always evil and solely responsible for the bad in our life. That is just silly. Baumeister's analyses of the group effect, the root causes of violence (we should stop using the term "evil" altogether, since one person's evil is another person's noble truth), the escalating factors, and more are valuable to anyone who is seriously interested in why we normal regular humans perform violence sometimes and even feel good about it...or feel nothing at all. I integrated insights from this book, as well as many other sources, including Zimbardo's work, Kreisberg's work, and many cross-cultural studies into my own recent book, "Violence and Culture" (Wadsworth

2005). If we want to do anything about violence, we must understand it realistically, not just attribute it to some irrational, foreign, and sadistic force or being that could never just be us. As Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments illustrated, it could be and has been us.

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