

Is there evil?

These days it is fashionable to dismiss the idea of good and evil. If there is good and evil, then not everything is relative. If there is good and evil, then our lives can and should be judged. If there is good and evil, then other bigger questions arise, such as purpose and meaning. Life is easier if good and evil do not exist.

And yet, political action in our democratic republic ultimately is predicated on some sense of good and evil. Is it evil to abuse an animal? If there is no evil, what is the problem with doing so? Is it evil to rape someone? If there is no evil, what is the problem with doing so? Do we hypocritically appeal to a moral sense of good and evil, while selectively arguing they do not exist?

The literary giant Alexander Solzhenitsyn, once a soldier of the Soviet Union in World War II and then a political prisoner of the very government for which he fought, found himself wrestling with the good and evil of the world as well as in him. His written reflections in the second volume of *The Gulag Archipelago* beautifully cut to the core of the matter:

“Looking back, I saw that for my whole conscious life I had not understood either myself or my strivings. What had seemed for so long to be beneficial now turned out in actuality to be fatal, and I had been striving to go in the opposite direction to that which was truly necessary to me. But just as the waves of the sea knock the inexperienced swimmer off his feet and keep tossing him back onto the shore, so also was I painfully tossed back on dry land by the blows of misfortune. And it was only because of this that I was able to travel the path which I had always really wanted to travel.

It was granted me to carry away from my prison years on my

bent back, which nearly broke beneath its load, this essential experience: *how* a human being becomes evil and *how* good. In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer, and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart – and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... an unrooted small corner of evil.

Since then I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world: They struggle with the *evil inside a human being* (inside every human being). It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.

And since that time I have come to understand the falsehood of all the revolutions in history: They destroy only *those carriers* of evil contemporary with them (and also fail, out of haste, to discriminate the carriers of good as well). And they then take to themselves as their heritage the actual evil itself, magnified still more.

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When people express vexation, in my presence, over the West's tendency to crumble, its political shortsightedness, its divisiveness, its confusion – I

recall too: 'Were we, before passing through the Archipelago, more steadfast? Firmer in our thoughts?'

And that is why I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: '*Bless you, prison!*'

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(And from beyond the grave come replies: It is very well for you to say that – when you came out of it alive!)”
([The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956](#), Vol. 2, 615-617)

(Image Credit: *Daily Mail*)