The Universal Challenge of Combating Evil

A review of

Overcoming Evil: Genocide, Violent Conflict, and Terrorism
by Ervin Staub

Reviewed by
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In his 2007 review of Philip Zimbardo’s The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil, Ervin Staub (2007, para. 1) describes Zimbardo’s work as a “highly personal book.” The same can be said of Staub’s new book, Overcoming Evil: Genocide, Violent Conflict, and Terrorism. Staub is professor of psychology emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and founder of its Psychology of Peace and Violence program. Overcoming Evil represents the culmination of his life’s scholarly and applied work on the roots of collective violence and strategies for its prevention.

Staub was born in Hungary and as a young child lived through Nazism and communism. He escaped to Austria when he was 18 years old and made his way to the United States, where he eventually completed a PhD at Stanford University. Both his research and applied work has focused on the psychology of good and evil. His best-known
previous works include the two-volume *Positive Social Behavior and Morality* (1978) and *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (1992). Through these works Staub established his position as a scholar–practitioner who thinks and writes broadly about issues that are important for humankind.

In this new work, Staub writes in the first person, and his style is engaging and clear. In a country such as France, where “intellectual” books have a relatively very large audience and the names of “star” intellectuals are as well known as those of rock stars, Staub’s new book will likely be widely read and discussed. Unfortunately, in the North American and United Kingdom contexts, public discourse has been affected by the “Rupert Murdoch effect,” so that even “serious” media outlets have been “dumbed down.” The impact on public discourse and education more broadly has been detrimental, which means that few serious books achieve wide circulation and influence.

Staub has certainly written for a wide audience, drawing examples from his own experiences in Rwanda, Congo, and Israel/Palestine, as well as offering examples in contemporary terrorism, Dutch Muslim minority relations, and the Holocaust. An expansive book with practical conclusions, *Overcoming Evil* makes a significant contribution to the corpus of psychology literature that highlights the powerful role of situations, rather than dispositions or personality, in creating “evil.” This work is suitable for both university students and lay readers.

Staub’s core question is how to make violence less likely, particularly violence committed by groups. In developing his formula for violence prevention, Staub gives central place to the behavior of bystanders. Bystanders may be government leaders, members of the media, or ordinary individuals, as well as groups, organizations, and nations.

The defining component for Staub is that bystanders have opportunities and responsibilities to respond to, and prevent, violence. Active responsiveness in his conception is not limited to intervention when acts of violence are witnessed but extends to the conditions that make violence more likely. For example, “Western countries must stop supporting nations with repressive governments,” he argues, as such regimes tend to increase the likelihood of mass violence (p. 505).

Staub advocates a foreign policy approach of engaging repressive government regimes, aiming to change their policies, rather than pushing for “regime change.” Other conditions for violence include competition for scarce resources as well as rapid social, economic, and political change. In response, he advocates creating high-level offices in foreign ministries with the responsibility of initiating preventive action, collaborating with civil society institutions, and mobilizing nations and individuals. He also applies psychological theory to the effective design of educational programs, including efforts to promote pluralism, democratization, active bystandership, and nonpunitive child rearing that allows children a voice. These highly practical proposals are of great value and should receive attention from policy makers.
Overcoming Evil is a text grounded in social psychology literature, not in personality research or the study of violent individuals. In this respect, Staub is working in the tradition of a long line of distinguished social psychologists, including Muzafer Sherif, Stanley Milgram, and Philip Zimbardo, who give priority to situational rather than personality characteristics.

While acknowledging the value of considering individual motivations and dispositions, Staub focuses his discussion on contextual and social factors such as group identity and norms that predispose individuals and groups to normalize or justify violent action. These factors include excessive obedience to authority as well as cultural narratives, ideologies, and institutions that dehumanize other groups. What is required, says Staub, is caring for others outside of “us,” actively resisting the normalization of destructive actions, and creating constructive ideologies that humanize others and create just institutions. He also considers the powerful role of healing from past victimization, during which addressing past injustices can break cycles of trauma passed down from generation to generation.

From the perspective of those outside psychology, it could be argued that this is not a book about evil and that the title is somewhat misleading. Staub cites literature to help explain why groups engage in violence, but he does not engage any literature about evil in theology, philosophy, or anthropology, for example. His moral claim—one he has made for decades—is that “evil is the action, not the person or the group,” even if “individuals and groups change as a result of their actions” (p. 33).

In contrast, he defines goodness as “actions that bring substantial benefit to individuals or to whole groups of people” (p. 35). These he describes not as the result of divine grace or free will, but rather as “the outcome of ordinary human psychological and social processes, part of everyone’s potential, such as valuing human life, the capacity for empathy and feeling of responsibility for others’ welfare” (p. 35). Moreover, he argues, goodness creates a multiplied effect: “By experiencing goodness, people become more able to live goodness in their later lives” (p. 494).

However, in this book Staub is primarily interested in the prevention of violence, particularly mass violence, rather than in a systematic understanding of evil or goodness in a moral or philosophical sense. The question of evil is traditionally broader than the study of terrorism, war between nations, or acts of physical and emotional violence. In Staub’s defense, it could be argued that he is concerned with only a narrow psychological examination of evil.

Among the strengths of Staub’s text is his effective integration of theory with practical steps, including concrete examples of active bystandership. Staub’s approach is consistent with Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit’s statement to the effect that the more we sweat in peace, the less we bleed in war. Active engagement, he says, requires sustained education and engagement, including engagement with indigenous cultures and religions.

In practice, this claim carries rather complex implications. For example, religious engagement remains a controversial component of U.S. foreign policy. Whereas religion was
once considered a “private” matter by Western policy makers, events such as the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the attacks of September 11th, 2001, led to renewed attention to the role of religious engagement in violence prevention and conflict resolution (Fisher et al., 2000).

President Obama’s historic speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009, promised to engage Muslim communities, but what this religious engagement looks like in practice remains controversial. So, too, are goals of “developing pluralism” and “democratization,” which are understood differently in different regions of the world. In Afghanistan, for instance, democratization is associated with a broad set of liberal Western values, including freedoms of religion and public expression, rather than representative government alone (Larson, 2009). Overall, Staub includes few examples from contemporary international war zones of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq.

Perhaps the most important contribution of Overcoming Evil is its illustration of the social mind as both instrumental in violence and a tool for its prevention. Staub’s analysis is multifaceted and presents a picture of human mass violence as influenced by interacting psychological, cultural, political, and historical factors.

Prevention, Staub persuasively explains, requires addressing material, structural, and psychological insecurities, including needs around identity, belonging, and difficult life conditions. The role of collective identity insecurities has been highlighted by recent trends, particularly international radicalization and terrorism. The first sentence of the UNESCO constitution states that because wars originate in the “minds of men,” the defenses of peace must also originate there. Staub’s book argues that violence prevention is broader than the study of the mind but may not be possible without it.

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**References**


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