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Book Review of Bloom's 'Lucifer Principle'


by J.M.G. van der Dennen

"An act of astonishing intellectual courage" (Leon Uris); "A powerful thinking tool, complex, ambitious, and bold" (Allen Johnson); etc.

The book *The Lucifer Principle* has, according to the blurbs on its wrapper, already received so many kudos and laudations from all kinds of celebrities, that one must feel pretty stupid not to detect its merits immediately.

Yes, admittedly, it is well-written, though its popular tone soon reaches high levels of irritation. Yes, the written portraits, curricula vitae and vignettes of a number of illustrative historical individuals (e.g., Oliver Cromwell, Khomeini) are well researched and documented.

What, then, is the matter with this book? I think it is because the book is basically and fundamentally wrong, not because - as one might expect the criticism from a sociobiologist to be - Bloom defends group selection, but because it is based on false premises, and that the cheap and sensationalist slogans like 'innate evil' are misleading and/or plainly false.

It is fundamentally fallacious to project into (or attribute to) Nature the notions of good or evil, and subsequently derive Human Nastiness from Evil Nature. Nature is quite amoral (not to be confused with immoral), it is beyond good or evil. The systematic use of the moral/ethical/legal category 'murder' to refer to animal killings (whether intraspecific agonistic behavior or interspecific predatory behavior - it does not make much difference to Bloom) is intentionally misleading. A lioness is not 'murdering' her prey, and even an infanticidal male lion cannot be said to be 'murdering' the cub. 'Murder' presupposes ethical knowledge and reasoning, (self)consciousness and intentionality, and 'malice aforethought', i.e., premeditation.

Genocide, genocidal warfare, massacres, cruelty and sadism are, with the (possible) exception of the eusocial hymenoptera, virtually absent in the animal world, and for sound evolutionary reasons: high, prohibitive costs (in terms of time and energy, high probability of receiving wounds, lacerations and even death, 'agonistic neglect', etc.) and relatively low profits. There are not many mammals that commit massacres, and we do not habitually find sadomasochistic rabbits, malicious cows, or serial-killer-bulls.

Ritualized interindividual agonistic behavior in animals does indeed exist and has been the subject of numerous game-theoretical analyses since Maynard Smith and Parker, because the group-selectionist explanation of this phenomenon (puzzling ever since Darwin) by Lorenz and the Lorenzian school of ethologists, and Wynne Edwards, namely that inhibitions on killing each other had evolved because that is beneficial for the (perpetuation of) the group or the species ('Greater Goodism'), was rejected as too facile and inadequate.

Chimps and gorillas (and, of course, humans) make war, Bloom asserts, but he does not seem to wonder why warmaking is confined to these few species, and why it is so conspicuously
absent in the many thousands of other (especially mammalian) species, even though, predominantly sublethal, intergroup agonistic behavior has been documented for a number of social carnivores and primates (in which it is, by the way, the females of the species who do the threatening and the vociferations). The resemblance of chimpanzee ‘warfare' to raids in human preindustrial societies should be explained, not treated as extra evidence of natural and human depravity.

Bloom blames a lot of human ‘evil' on our hypersociality (the Superorganism as he calls it), yet nowhere in the book does he attempt to explain why humans have become hypersocial (only humans?, and if so, why that?).

Given that war, genocide, cruelty and sadism are typically human accomplishments, is it not more ‘logical' to associate these specific forms of violence, not with the animal, but with the specific human brain, i.e., the neocortical acquisitions superimposed on the reptilian brain and limbic system?

The testosterone surge and the vigorous burst of energy accompanying success ("Testosterone makes winners restless, confident, and aggressive... biology gives the lucky souls who've landed on an upward track a burst of manic zeal" (page 260-61) is quite credible for (male) individuals, but for entire nations or empires is seems rather absurd. Who has to experience the surge? All the males?; the leaders?; the military?; a majority of the population? And for how long, over what period? Testosterone surges do last for a couple of hours, but certainly not for years.

Non-ideologically motivated serial killers are (still) virtually confined to the USA. Why? Homicidal-suicidal human bombs are virtually confined to Muslim fundamentalist groups. Why?

And so on, and so forth. It is, all in all, a facile attempt to locate Evil in Nature and to derive human evil from natural evil.

Apparently, there is a market in the U.S.A., as well as in Europe, for a kind of morally-masochistic literature that purports to show or 'explain' HOW EVIL WE ARE. People of all persuasions revel in these allegations and intimations, and they relish the thought of incorporating a Beast Within (The hype of "Look How Bad We Are"...). Bloom just caters to that market. The book has very little to do with science. It is a curious heap of truisms and nonsense.

What is the Lucifer Principle?

Lucifer, the magnificent, but fallen, angel incorporates the idea of evil in mainstream Christian cosmology. "Marcion the heretic said God was responsible for evil. Mainstream Christians absolved the Almighty of responsibility by blaming all that's wrong on the Prince of Darkness and on man. But, in a strange way, Marcion understood the situation better than the more conventional followers of the church, for Lucifer is merely one of the faces of a larger force. Evil is a by-product, a component, of creation. In a world evolving into ever higher forms, hatred, violence, aggression, and war are a part of the evolutionary plan" (p. 2). The last couple of sentences reveal all that is wrong with this book: the projection of evil in Nature, even though Nature is absolutely amoral; the fallacious idea that evolution has an upward
direction; and that the more destructive propensities of organisms are part of that masterplan resulting in Ultimate Good.

How does Bloom explain the Lucifer Principle and the Forces of History (what propels the cultural tides of human beings)? He presents five ‘simple concepts' that may help explain these human currents, and which together are the foundation underlying the Lucifer Principle:

"Concept number one: the principle of self-organizing systems replicators bits of structure that function as mini-factories, assembling raw materials, then churning out intricate products. These natural assembly units (genes are one example) crank out their goods so cheaply that the end results are appallingly expendable. Among those expendable products are you and me.

Concept number two: the superorganism. We are not the rugged individuals we would like to be. We are, instead, disposable parts of a being much larger than ourselves.

Concept numner three: the meme, a self-replicating cluster of ideas. Thanks to a handful biological tricks, these visions become the glue that holds together civilizations, giving each culture its distinctive shape, making some intolerant of dissent and others open to diversity. They are the tools with which we unlock the forces of nature. Our visions bestow the dream of peace, but they also turn us into killers.

Concept number four: the neural net. The group mind whose eccentric mode of operation manipulates our emotions and turns us into components of a massive learning machine.

Concept number five: the pecking order. The naturalist who discovered this dominance hierarchy in a Norwegian farmyard called it the key to despotism. Pecking orders exist among men, monkeys, wasps, and even nations. They help explain why the danger of barbarians is real and why the assumptions of our foreign policies are often wrong.

Five simple ideas. Yet the insights they yield are amazingly rich. They reveal why doctors are not always so powerful as they seem, but why we are compelled to believe in them nonetheless. They explain how Hinduism, the religion of ultimate peace, grew from the greed of a tribe of bloodthirsty killers and why nature disposes of men far more casually than women. They shed light on America's decline, and the dangers that lie ahead of us.

Above all, they illuminate a mystery that has eternally eluded man: the root of the evil that haunts our lives. For within these five small ideas we will pursue, there lurks a force that rules us" (p. 10-11).

(Note that the Principle of Greed, the Territorial Imperative, the Killer Ape Phantamagoria, the Born to Kill Whispering Within, the Innate Belligerence, and the Beast Within might do the same job: give a quasi-explanation).

The book ends, as every book of this kind ends, after more or less graphically painting gloomy pictures of human savagery through the ages, with the following cliché and anti-climax:

"Superorganisms, ideas, and the pecking order the triad of human evil are not recent inventions 'programmed' into us by Western society, consumerism, capitalism, television
violence, blood-and-guts films, or rock and roll. They are built into our physiology. They have been with us since the dawn of the human race.

But there is hope that we may someday free ourselves of savagery”.

Here is an anthology of other slogans, unwarranted generalizations, and assorted sound bytes:

"Nature does not abhor evil; she embraces it" (p. 2);
"man's inborn evil" (p. 3);
"Nature's amusements are cruel" (p. 25).
"Women encourage killers. They do it by falling in love with warriors and heroes. Men know it and respond with enthusiasm" (p. 33).
"Humans are built to eat meat" (p.157) (With our conspicuous molars?);
"There are no righteous societies; there are simply different degrees of depravity" (p. 236).
"our biological curse, our animal brain's addiction to violence" (p. 318);
"Nor can human beings as a species stop their inexorable itch for war" (p. 319); (Then, why bother?)

A number of (falsified) myths:

**Homo sapiens** tribes rampaging the unfortunate Neanderthals (p. 43);

The most potent impulse in the makeup of every micro- and macrobeast is the drive for personal survival (p. 47);

The myth of male expendability (p. 147);

Societies that hug their kids are relatively peaceful (p. 239). Yet, Yanomamö, Jivaro, Cayapo, and many other highly warlike Amazonian and New Guinean tribes' fathers are very affectionate with their children.

The myth of the correlation between cotton prices and lynchings (p. 288) (refuted long ago simply by using the correct coefficient);

It is straining all credulity to hear Bloom's explanation of the Sun Dance and other self-mutilations of the Plain Indians: "For the individual, self-mutilation was not a great way to ensure survival, but it was an effective way to raise the overall health of the group" (by eliminating those who did not survive the infections). If this is what group-selection arguments boil down to, we are back to the crude functionalism of the sixties.

The crucial question, at least for me personally, is: does this book contribute anything to my understanding of war, genocide, ethnocide, and other gross human rights violations, or, on a smaller scale, to criminal and pathological violence; or, on still smaller scale, domestic violence (wife battering, child abuse, etc.)? Not surprisingly, the answer is ‘no'; "man's inborn evil", like their counterparts "instinctive aggression", and "man's ineradicable warlike urges", found in other fashionable publications (especially in the Netherlands), do not only explain anything, they do not even denote anything. After reading Bloom's book I cannot say, in all honesty, that I now better understand the forces of human history, human nature, human nastiness, human cruelty, or anything else the book touches upon.
Other recent books pretending to offer a novel interpretation of human evolution and history (e.g., Dudley, Maryanski & Turner), or to explain why (some) individuals may (sometimes) be violent (e.g., Bailey, Moir & Jessel), are much less pretentious than Bloom, but also showing much more (scientific) integrity and honesty.

Finally, the famous Arnhem Zoo does not lie in Belgium (p. 67), not even in Holland (p. 291), but in the Netherlands.

**Postscript**

It took me some time to realize what exactly was wrong with Bloom's *Lucifer Principle*; I only had a vague suspicion. It was after reading Baumeister's (1997) excellent book (much less pretentious but infinitely more 'honest' than Bloom's work besides being based on sound theoretical fundamentals and empirical research) on the subject of *Evil: inside human violence and cruelty*. I found out that it is the stereotype of evil, the 'myth of pure evil' as Baumeister calls it, that Bloom had been presenting all along (mistaking the grotesque gargoyle for the real thing):

Popular images of evil feature wicked, malicious, sadistic perpetrators inflicting senseless harm on innocent, well-meaning victims. The myth defines the way people think of evil which is in some crucial aspects quite different from the real, actual causes of violence and oppression.

First, evil involves the intentional infliction of harm on people. Second, and of crucial importance, evil is driven primarily by the wish to inflict harm merely for the pleasure of doing so. By and large, evil is not understood as something that *reluctantly* uses violence as a means to an end. Rather, the harm inflicted by evil forces is *gratuitous*. Evil is sadistic: Evil people enjoy the suffering they cause, and they inflict harm to get this enjoyment.

Third, the victim is innocent and good.

Fourth, evil is the other, the enemy, the outsider, the out-group. The conflict of good versus evil is often superimposed on the conflict of *us* against *them*.

Fifth, evil has been that way since time immemorial.

Sixth, evil represents the antithesis of order, peace and stability. Seventh, evil characters are often marked by egotism. They do not lack for self-esteem.

Last, evil figures have difficulty maintaining control over their feelings, especially rage and anger. This characteristic is not as well established as some of the others, and there may be many exceptions. Indeed, some depictions of evil characterize it as coldly calculating, driven by an implacable hostility toward the good and normal, as opposed to being out of control. Still, there is some tendency to depict evil as given to impulse and wild actions, and indeed this wildness is sometimes seen as the vulnerable spot or fatal flaw that allows good to triumph (Baumeister, 1997).

Those readers who are really interested in these, rather unpleasant, aspects of human behavior, I sincerely recommend Baumeister's work.

**Literature**


