



Knowing Evil from Illness in Newtown and Everywhere

Courtesy of mass murderer Adam Lanza, Sandy Hook School in Newtown, Connecticut has been deprived of 26 members of its community, six adults and 20 children between the ages of five and 10.

Our hearts break — as they should. Unfortunately, to judge from the endless commentary on this matter, it would appear that our heads are just as fragmented.

The demand for better “mental health” treatment is a classic case in point. Yet this focus on mental health reflects, not just massive *intellectual* confusion, but equally massive *moral* confusion.

The ever perceptive writer Ilana Mercer was among the first to recognize this. Just hours after the Newtown shooting, legions of commentators — “self-serving tele-experts, twits of psychology and psychiatry,” as Mercer refers to them — stormed the airwaves to “diagnose” the shooter. But as Mercer was quick to note, the diagnosis of evildoers can only lead to the denial of evil itself.

“Adam Lanza,” she declared, is “evil, not ill.”

And she was right.

The language of “evil,” like that of “good,” is the language of *morality*. The language of “mental health” and “sickness,” on the other hand, is the idiom of science (whether pseudo-science or not is beside the point). Mental illness is as incompatible with moral judgment as is physical illness. Neither Asperger’s syndrome nor cancer has anything to say regarding the moral worth of Lanza’s character or actions.

Adam Lanza, the man who shot up a school, murdering 20 little boys and girls and six of the adults who tried to protect them, was evil, not ill.

The sick deserve our compassion. The wicked deserve our condemnation. Do you see the inconsistency between describing Lanza as both “ill” and “evil”? If it is some mental “illness” that *compelled* him to commit mass murder, then he no more warrants blame than he would if it was some physical illness like cancer that compelled him to vomit uncontrollably or suffer a dramatic weight loss.

The great conservative Edmund Burke had famously declared that the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. Yet good men cannot do a thing about evil unless they are able to recognize it for what it is — and what it is not. In fact, in the absence of this ability, men can’t hope to be good at all.





Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on December 18, 2012

So, point one: Unless we know this elementary difference between evil and illness, we will render ourselves incapable of making pronouncements concerning either.

This conflation of illness and evil gives rise to an even greater problem, however: Far more evil promises to be done in the name of “mental health treatment” than would ever be done in the name of justice.

C.S. Lewis was among those who took note of this nearly 60 years ago. Lewis wrote that when “the idea of mending tails off into that of healing or curing,” then the healers are likely to “act as cruelly and unjustly as the greatest tyrants.” Indeed, “in some respects,” they could “act even worse,” for “a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive” of all tyrannies. The therapists will “torment us without end” because they have “the approval of their own conscience.”

Lewis makes another crucial observation: The language of good and evil affirms the moral agency of men and women — even human monsters who would deliberately harm children. The language of mental illness, in contrast, deprives us of it.

“To be ‘cured’ against one’s will and cured of states which we may not regard as disease is to be put on a level with those who have not yet reached the age of reason or those who never will; to be classed with infants, imbeciles, and domestic animals.”

Yet when punishment, even capital punishment, is visited upon a person because he is believed to deserve it, the subject in question is “treated as a human person made in God’s image.”

Those of us who are resolved to combat evil must be just as resolved to differentiate it from illness.



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