

*The Anatomy of Evil*, by Michael H. Stone. Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 2009, 430 pp., \$26.98

This is an unusually important book that should be read by all psychiatrists and psychotherapists. That having been said, a word about its distinguished author is in order. Michael H. Stone is perhaps best described as a phenomenon. Dapper in dress, elegant of manner, he lectures throughout the world, usually in the language of whatever country he happens to be in. Stone achieved a well-deserved international reputation following the publication of his monographs on the borderline syndromes, and on a follow up of patients hospitalized at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. The only other psychoanalyst/psychiatrist who rivals Stone in productivity and quality is Otto Kernberg, who wrote the afterword to *The Anatomy of Evil*.

Stone is to be congratulated for his straightforward use of the term "evil" in the book title. Modern psychodynamic psychiatry is awash in optimism that at times borders on sentimentality. Stone's vivid portrayals of the people in this book remind us that the human psyche is not in fact endlessly plastic. No degree of attunement or relationality, or positive patient/therapist fit or empathy could ever correct the psychic and moral defects among most individuals he discusses. Their anger/hostility/violence is not a defense against anxiety but rather an expression of their primary "nature." As a group they are more depraved than anyone that this reviewer has met in the world of fiction. Most have been more vicious than Goneril, Regan, Edmund, Richard the III, and Hannibal Lecter of best seller and film fame. These are not people that most psychotherapists ever meet, unless they happen to be murdered by one of them. As Stone astutely observes, their deeds are considered "evil" by the general public and Stone's title validates the moral framework used by most people in their daily lives.

Following his earlier contributions, Stone became interested in forensic psychiatry, and particularly violent criminality. The database for this volume came from two sources: published biographies, and interviews of criminals (mostly jailed murderers).

Although influenced by Freud, Stone's scientific perspective is basically Darwinian. His world view owes much to Dante, and each chapter begins with a quotation from the *Inferno*. He notes ruefully however that even Dante, who brought to life the most egregiously immoral people he could imagine, never portrayed acts that were as horrible as those actually carried out by the criminals discussed in this book.

Other scholars have discussed violent criminality, however, and it is important to comment on the particular contributions that elevate Stone's book to a level that is unique. Like Dante and Darwin, Stone found himself creating categories for people and heinous acts, and constructed a 22-point "gradations of evil" scale. These are meant to apply to people during peacetime. Thoughtful commentators, from Herodotus and Thucydides on have observed that during times of war many people who would ordinarily not commit savagely antisocial acts do so for one reason or another. These people tend to conform to the social contract when they return to civilian life, however.

Stone's scale has two anchoring points: justifiable homicide on the one hand and psychopathic torture murder on the other. The book is organized around the attributes of those who fall into different categories on the scale. Its major headings include the following: Impulsive Murder in Persons Without Psychopathic Features, Persons With a Few or No Psychopathic Traits, Murder of a More Severe Kind—Psychopathic Features Marked, Spree or Multiple Murders—Psychopathy is Apparent, Serial Killers, Torturers, Sadists.

One of the book's strengths is that Stone explicitly discusses the limitations of modern psychodynamic psychiatry. For example, although most of the people he portrays were subject to abuse and neglect during childhood, some of the worst offenders apparently came from relatively normal families. Of the violent offenders who did experience childhood neglect/abuse, some had psychologically normal siblings who had been subject to the same stress. There are childhood prodromata for adult violence including firesetting and animal torture for example, but it is usually not possible to predict in advance who will and who will not become a danger to society. Another strength is Stone's clear grasp of neuroscience and the way in which he explains its clinical relevance.

This book was written by a master clinician, and a theoretician who stands in the company of the best that modern psychiatry has to offer. We have yet another volume published by Michael Stone that is destined to be a classic.

This review is written, however, with a warning. *The Anatomy of Evil* should not be read before bedtime, or if one is alone in a creaky house. The very first quotation from Dante's *Inferno* might be kept in mind as well: "Give up all hope; ye who enter."

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