

The Devil Made Me Do It: The Criminological Theories of Hannibal Lecter, Part Three

By

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The public demonstrates a seemingly insatiable appetite for crime, yet Dr. Hannibal Lecter eclipses all others in popularity. The character of Hannibal Lecter may be popular because he emerges from paradox, because he is criminal genius, or because he is a non-human monster (a vampire, a devil, or both). But two additional explanations exist. First, Lecter may be such a successful villain because he is a sympathetic victim – in fact his crimes may be nothing more than consequences of childhood trauma. Second, the public’s fascination with Hannibal Lecter may have less to do with Lecter’s origins than with the difficult questions about the fundamental nature of evil that the character forces readers to confront.

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INTRODUCTION

The public exhibits a seemingly insatiable appetite for true crime, and has exalted many serial killers into its pantheon of infamy (Oleson, 2003; Schmid, 2005), but one serial killer commands the popular imagination unlike any other: Dr. Hannibal “The Cannibal” Lecter. This fictional character, drawn from the profiles of real-life serial killers, has appeared in three novels (Harris, 1981, 1988, 1999) and four films (Demme, 1991; Mann, 1986; Ratner, 2002; Scott, 2001). Another novel and film in the franchise are in development (Random House, 2004; Internet Movie Data Base, 2006). Already, Thomas Harris’ Lecter novels have been published in more than 20 different languages and have sold tens of millions of copies (Random House, 2005; Sexton 2001a). The quartet of existing Lecter films has earned a score of awards, including a sweep of the major 1992 Oscars: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Adapted Screenplay (Harris & Dunkley, 2001). The American Film Institute has selected Hannibal as the greatest screen villain of all time (American Film Institute, 2005a), and has included his line, “A census taker once tried to test me. I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti” in its rankings of the 100 best film quotes of all time (American Film Institute, 2005b).

It may be asked, though, why Hannibal Lecter – a cannibalistic serial murderer – has been transformed into the kind of celebrity that at one time “was, arguably, the most publicized and recognizable personality (real or not) in America” (Skal, 1993, p. 383). It might fairly be asked why the public lauds such a villain.

There are a number of plausible explanations for Lecter’s uncanny popularity. It has previously been suggested that the character of Hannibal Lecter may fascinate the public because he is enigmatic, fitting several models of serial homicide, while defying others (Oleson, 2005). The allure of the character may also be linked to Hannibal Lecter’s status as a criminal genius.

Whether or not Lecter's immeasurably high IQ score can explain his crimes, his dizzying intellect may help to explain the public's fascination with the character. The allure of Hannibal Lecter may also be explained by the public's fascination with monster stories (Skal, 1993). There is substantial evidence in the Lecter novels to support the suggestion that Lecter is an actual non-human monster, either a vampire (Harris, 1999; Hawker, 2001; Picart & Greek, 2003; Sexton, 2001) or a devil (Dery, 1999; Harris, 1999; Johnson, 2001; Simpson, 2000; Suraiya, 1999; Whitty, 2002). Hannibal Lecter is, after all, a character with maroon eyes, six fingers on his left hand, superhuman strength, unnaturally sharp senses, and dominion over wild animals (Oleson, 2006).

Yet it may not be necessary to look to the realm of the undead or into the fires of hell to find an explanation for Lecter and his crimes. Indeed, there may be a much more parsimonious explanation available. The character of Hannibal Lecter may be little more than the product of an acute childhood trauma.

HANNIBAL LECTER: A SYMPATHETIC VICTIM

"To know all is to forgive all."

Madame de Stael (quoted in Crowther, 2001)

In *The Silence of the Lambs*, the character of Hannibal Lecter dismisses the possibility that his crimes can be explained, defiantly boasting, "Nothing happened to me ... I happened. You can't reduce me to a set of influences" (Harris, 1988, p. 20). Yet in spite of all Lecter's existential bravado, a passage in one of Harris' subsequent books suggests that something *did* happen to him, and he *can* be reduced to a set of influences. In *Hannibal* (Harris, 1999), Lecter falls asleep on an airplane. Dreaming, he recalls a terrible episode from World War II: his aristocrat parents were murdered by deserters from the wartime front. The children of the estate were locked in a barn, and when the famished deserters depleted their food supply, they came for the children. Like something derived from the story of Hansel and Gretel (Tatar, 2004), the deserters palpated Hannibal's thigh, arm, and chest, but instead selected his younger sister, Mischa. Young Lecter clung tightly to her, but the men slammed a barn door on him, cracking the bone in his upper arm. Young Hannibal released her and Mischa was led away, ostensibly "to play," but even from the barn, Lecter could still hear the sound of the axe. Later, he recognized her teeth in the reeking pit that his captives used as a toilet.

Several other commentators have located the etiology of Lecter's crimes in this traumatic event (Hannibal Lecter, 2005; Hannibal Library, 2005; Hawker, 2001). For example, Bruno (2005) has explored the link between the Mischa account and Hannibal's crimes, writing:

Mischa's horrible slaughter and consumption by the deserters formed the fantasy that shaped Hannibal Lecter, a revenge fantasy. In his dream, the deserters are crude and uncouth. They're not soldiers but deserters, cowards, ignoble by definition. They take over Lecter's parents' property and relegate the young residents to the barn. Their breath stinks. They butcher a deer as Neanderthals would. They screech like greedy vultures when they see the spilled blood seeping into the snow. When he grows up, Lecter targets

men he considered petty and uncouth. Raspail the inferior flutist, Krendler the vindictive bureaucrat, Pazzi the corrupt cop, the census taker, even Mason Verger the former libertine who managed by a miracle of medical science to survive Lecter's wrath — all of them are nothing more than stand-ins for the deserters who ate his sister.

While Bruno's explanation goes quite a long way in making Lecter's monstrous offenses understandable, even heroic, the death of Mischa does not explain all of Lecter's crimes. It does not, for example, explain his attack on FBI Agent Will Graham (Harris, 1981). Graham, after all, is no cretin. Lecter views him as a fellow professional. In fact, stating, "The reason you caught me is that we're just alike," Lecter suggests that he believes Graham is a kindred spirit (Harris, 1981, p. 62). Similarly, the avenging of Mischa's death cannot explain the murder of two police officers that were assigned to guard Lecter (Harris, 1988), or the disfiguring attack on a hospital nurse (Harris, 1981). Mischa's death does, however, make Lecter a far more sympathetic figure (Picart & Greek, 2003) and provide a facile explanation for Lecter's cannibalism — a paradoxical sort of cannibalism that violates the most primal of taboos while simultaneously showing off Lecter's status as a member of the haute monde (Oleson, 2005). Bruno (2005) continues:

Obviously he eats his victims because they ate Mischa. An eye for an eye. But why the gourmet preparation? Why serve their organs sautéed in butter and shallots? Why spend exorbitant amounts of money on vintage wines to go with these human entrees? Because Lecter knows he's better than the troglodytes who killed his sister. He has refinement and a noble lineage. He would never eat meat roasted on a stick. He does it the most sophisticated way possible. His meticulous preparation of human flesh is his way of throwing it in the faces of the deserters who gnawed on Mischa's bones.

This, however, is a disappointingly pedestrian explanation for the crimes of such a grand villain. Critic Roger Ebert has suggested that film characters are far more compelling when they retain an air of mystery than when they are explained away with shorthand Freud (Simpson, 2000). Perhaps author Thomas Harris found himself in the same position as English poet John Milton, who "wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell [...] because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (Blake, 1790/1975, p. xvii). Perhaps, having created a villain who was so skillfully drawn that he appeared heroic, Thomas Harris felt the need to invent some kind of exculpatory *deus ex machina* that would allow Hannibal Lecter to serve as his protagonist (in *Hannibal*) rather than as a compelling-but-wicked antagonist (in *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs*). Yet with the unveiling of the story of Mischa, the character of Lecter has lost a great deal of his mystique. Under this interpretation, Hannibal Lecter is no monster, no vampire, and no devil — instead, he is nothing more than a victim, a vigilante, a *Deathwish* Charles Bronson with a fondness for the *Oxford English Dictionary* and an appetite for forbidden food.

Any keen undergraduate with a copy of *Hannibal* and a basic psychology primer could explain away Lecter's crimes. The parallels between Mischa's death and Lecter's crimes are so obvious that it requires a willful kind of blindness not to arrive at the conclusions articulated by Bruno (2005). Thus, unless he is blinded by a profound state of denial, Dr. Hannibal Lecter, a world-class psychiatrist with an immeasurably high IQ score, should be well aware of the parallels between his sister's death and his own crimes. And if he is aware of the parallels, Lecter

was lying through his cannibalistic teeth when he gloated that he could not be reduced to a set of influences. According to the Mischa story, Lecter *is* a set of influences, and almost nothing else.

It is not only keen undergraduates who have attempted to explain the forces that make Lecter tick. Academics, too, have dissected the psyche of Hannibal Lecter, and located the origins of Lecter's crimes in the trauma of his childhood. Messent (2000), for example, claims that Lecter's crimes are a form of repetitive compulsion, stemming from the brutal murder of his sister. Gregory (2002) argues that Lecter suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, and notes that, analyzed from an object-relations perspective, Lecter is in a paranoid-schizoid position, relying heavily upon schizoid defenses. Through his relationship with Starling, however, he enters into the depressive position.

Reductive psychology appears to explain Dr. Lecter handily (Dery, 1999; Whitty, 2002). Lecter is not the irreducible riddle that he pretends to be. Rather, he is explainable, intelligible, and ultimately distillable to a set of obvious influences. His murders, his avenging cannibalism, his fascination with string theory (through which he hopes to reverse time and restore Mischa to the world), and even his relationship with Clarice Starling (whom he views as a re-emergence of Mischa) all stem from the same overwhelming need to undo his sister's death. Viewed through the lens of the Mischa story, Lecter is not a monstrous killer – he is a hero, using his prodigious intellect and superhuman talents to seek a single goal: the restoration of his murdered sister to the world.

But not everyone believes that Lecter should have been transformed from a monstrous villain into a hero. The actor Jodie Foster reportedly said that Harris “betrayed” the character of Starling by uniting her with Lecter in the final pages of *Hannibal* (Lamb's ‘in doubt’, 2000). It was, in her eyes, a disappointment.

But *Hannibal* (Harris, 1999) is not only disappointing in a literary sense; it is also deeply disappointing from a criminological point of view. It is disappointing because the Mischa story effectively moots an important criminological question.

If Lecter's cannibalistic murders are merely inverted reenactments of Mischa's murder, Lecter's behavior can be explained with elementary psychology. If Lecter's crimes are nothing more than the mathematical culmination of his traumatic childhood experiences, the books have little practical value to offer the social scientist. But if the character of Hannibal Lecter is correct when he states that “[w]e don't invent our natures ... [and that] they're issued to us along with our lungs and pancreas and everything else” (Harris, 1981, p. 241), another explanation must be sought to explain why a genius – a man of medicine, an urbane polymath – would deliberately choose to kill and consume another human being. It very well may be the case that Lecter's crimes are something more than clumsily-inverted reenactments, and more than the summation of his influences. But if there is more to Lecter's crimes than a repetition of childhood trauma, then criminologists must ask if another explanation exists, and must squarely face the question of whether moral evil can be a legitimate explanation for criminal behavior.

HANNIBAL LECTER: VICTIM OF EVIL FORCES

“The problem of evil is still with us ... except that of attributing evil to Satan, we look for the demonic figures in the world around us.”

Shirley Guthrie (quoted in Kloer, 2002)

It was suggested above that Hannibal Lecter may be a victim who, because of the traumatic events that haunt him, was destined by experience to become a cannibalistic serial killer. But perhaps it was not Lecter’s experiences that compelled him to kill, but a malignancy of his soul. Perhaps it was Lecter’s fundamental *nature* – not his nurture – that destined him to murder. The origins of Hannibal Lecter’s terrible crimes may be rooted not in the trauma of his childhood, but in something akin to metaphysical evil.

Is the character of Hannibal Lecter evil? Author Harris does not provide the reader with a clean and unambiguous answer in the text of the novels. Instead, he forces his readers to wrestle with moral descriptions that are difficult to navigate, for example describing Lecter as both “good and terrible” in *Hannibal* (Harris, 1999, p. 87). Worthy of particular note is an exchange in which Harris plays upon the irreconcilable tension between “scientific” and “theological” explanations for Lecter’s crimes. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Hannibal Lecter “waves away the idea of a psychological explanation, a cause, a motive” (Hawker, 2001) for his crimes, and dares the character of FBI Agent Clarice Starling to consider the possibility that he is metaphysically evil. He taunts, “You’ve given up good and evil for behaviorism, Officer Starling. You’ve got everybody in moral dignity pants – nothing is ever anybody’s fault. Look at me Officer Starling. Can you stand to say I’m evil? Am I evil?” (Harris, 1988, p. 20).

Agent Starling cannot bring herself to label Lecter as “evil” and instead suggests that he has been “destructive” (Harris, 1988, p. 20). While Starling’s inability to condemn Lecter as evil may merely have been good manners (i.e., not calling Lecter a name to his face), the inability to identify a cannibalistic serial killer as “evil” appears to be proof of Delbanco’s (1995) claim that Americans have lost their ability to recognize real evil, even when it stands directly before them. If serial murder and cannibalism are not evil, then what *is*?

The answer to Lecter’s seemingly simple question – “Am I evil?” – should be of great interest to criminologists. In all likelihood, the answer depends upon the working definition of “evil” that is employed. A number of approaches exist, since the concept of evil has been studied from many disciplinary perspectives over time (Hedgehog Review, 2000). For example, sociologists view evil – wholly or in part – as the result of social forces that shape and misshape individuals and institutions in society. Similarly, psychologists focus on the minds and the mental states of individuals who have committed evil deeds, while legal scholars equate evil with crime. Finally, theologians deal with evil as sin, and sometimes wrestle with the ultimate origins of evil.

Through a sociological lens, social institutions – not individuals – are responsible for “evil.” The Hedgehog Review (2000) suggests:

Sociologists are unlikely to use the word “evil” in their discussions of social life. But when they do, their focus is often on the social conditions that are conducive to widespread violence and crime. The health of society is at issue in these social problems. The onus for resisting evil is placed on transforming social institutions and conditions, such that the individuals and communities within them will be morally bound to each other in constructive ways. ... [S]ociological studies make a vital contribution to the study of a subject that has for so long been discussed in abstract terms with no empirical grounding, particularly since the evils that result from corrupt social structures have a much greater capacity for destruction than does a single individual.

Lecter’s crimes are merely the consequences of an industrialized European aristocracy that suffered the strains of class stratification, poverty, racism, and that eventually erupted in fascism and war. Like so many other people, Lecter was damaged and scarred by the events of World War II, and has not been able to find solace in the structures that society provides. Lecter’s murders are symptomatic of deeper social pathologies (the real evils).

Through a psychological lens, “evil” is a product of mental illness or personality disorders. Viewed from a psychological perspective, though, Lecter is an interesting anomaly. Although he commits acts typically characterized as evil, he is not mentally ill (Oleson, 2005). Although Lecter does not hesitate to torture and kill when he deems it to be appropriate, he does not satisfy the diagnostic criteria for either antisocial personality disorder or sadistic personality disorder. The Hedgehog Review (2000) notes that books on evil written from a psychological perspective tend to take particular forms: interviews with executors of evil, their victims, or those who have had experiences of evil; case studies from clinical practices; meditations on the motivations underlying evil actions; or discussions of how individuals conceive of evil. The strength of this approach is to demonstrate the complexities of evil, to show the reader how varied evil motivations can be, to indicate how destructive a single evil individual can be, and to illustrate how evil replicates itself in its victims. The limitations of the psychological approach, however, include glossing over the structural forces in society that shape moral development and ignoring the role of agency, rationalizing evil by reducing it to pathological biochemistry or a troubled childhood.

Through a legal lens, where evil and crime are synonymous, Lecter is “evil” because he is criminal. His actions – the *actus reus* of his crimes (homicide and cannibalism) – are condemned by society, but it is Lecter’s culpable mental state – his *mens rea* (“evil mind”) that truly designates him as evil. The killing of a human being under some circumstances (e.g., in wartime or during a lawful execution) is non-criminal, but the killing of another human being with malice aforethought is murder, and murder involving the kind of *mens rea* evident in Lecter’s deliberate crimes is first-degree murder – the most culpable (most evil) variety of murder. Because Lecter’s crimes involve the willful and intentional killing of others (and multiple others, at that), he exhibits the most serious kind of evil recognized by the law.

Through a theological lens, the concept of evil is related to sin. Instead of attributing evil to flawed biochemistry or the direct consequence of a troubled childhood, the theological approach to evil locates the source of evil within the agent (either in an evil human actor, or in a supernatural force that causes humans to act evilly).

Is evil a person, e.g., Satan, or a force at work in the world and in the wills of humans? Is evil the distortion of good or the lack of a measure of goodness? Is evil a radical choice or a banal thought-less-ness? Is God responsible for evil or are humans? How do humans conceive of evil and how does that relate to their understandings of human nature, the good, and God (Hedgehow Review, 2000)?

Two issues about theological evil merit separate consideration. First, the question of whether evil is a merely an absence or a lack of a quality (such as good), or whether it is an affirmative force. Second, the question of whether evil is a fixed and determined quality or whether it is a mutable quality that is neither linked to one's nature (genetics) nor to one's nurture (experiences). Each of these issues will be discussed in turn.

In one of the seminal works on evil, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt (1964) painted a disturbing portrait of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, suggesting that evil can emerge from a lack (bland and bureaucratic thoughtlessness) rather than from an affirmative choice. In Arendt's view, diabolical evil can stem from a lack of awareness, empathy, and knowledge. While it may be counterintuitive to think that evil originates from apathy and ignorance, it is also strangely comforting. Far more chilling is the notion that evil might come from *knowledge*, not ignorance, and that one can be "wise as well as malevolent" (Sexton, 2001).

Dery (1999) suggests that the character of Hannibal Lecter "refutes Hannah Arendt's declaration that evil, after Eichmann, is banal and bureaucratic, more a societal or an institutional cancer than a tumor on the soul" (p. 40). Dery argues that Lecter *is* that tumor. Greenberg (1992) similarly describes him as a "pure study in Coleridgean 'motiveless malignity' ... evil so deep and foul it needs no other cause but its own devilish sustenance to thrive upon" (p. 10). Like Milton's (1667/1981) character of Satan, Lecter is a great and terrible villain because he deliberately *chooses* to defy law and morality. His crimes are born of knowing choice, not ignorance.

The second issue is also perplexing. There are several ways that metaphysical evil could manifest. One way, described above, is for an individual (like Hannibal Lecter) to have an evil essence. Such a person, while not meeting the diagnostic criteria for antisocial personality disorder or clinical sadism, might be "born bad." While it might not be possible to see "evil" in this individual's genetic blueprint, the evil within him would be predictable and determinable. It might even be possible for scientists to measure or identify this kind of evil. More perplexing to criminologists is the possibility that evil is not an inherent quality, but one that depends upon forces that are both non-genetic and non-experiential (e.g., supernatural entities). Metaphysical evil of this kind would not be a fixed quality, but would be caused by unobservable and immeasurable forces.

Throughout the world, a number of serious offenders have insisted that evil forces are quite real, and are responsible for terrible crimes. Consider the following examples:

- An intoxicated police inspector in Hiroshima, Japan stole a bag containing 39,000 yen in cash from a bar. When his colleagues asked him if he knew anything about its disappearance,

the officer admitted to taking it, explaining his crime by saying that he had been possessed by an evil spirit (Topsy Cop, 2003).

- In Zimbabwe, a Chivhu policeman raped two of his teenaged daughters, impregnating one. When he was arrested, he claimed that evil spirits had compelled him to commit the crimes (Rapist Cop, 2002).
- In Uganda, a man arrested for attempted suicide claimed that evil spirits had placed the rope around his neck. He said that the spirits had already strangled two of his siblings in this manner (Man Attempts Suicide, 2001).
- A Somali man living in Ireland admitted to killing his son, but claimed that it was like he was in somebody else's body, and insisted that he was merely following the commands of evil spirits (Somalian Claims, 2003).
- In Kobe, Japan, a fifteen-year-old responsible for murdering two primary school students and assaulting three others wrote an essay in which he suggests that evil forces had caused the crimes. The boy wrote, "In any world the same thing repeats itself. What cannot be stopped, cannot be stopped and what cannot be killed, cannot be killed. Sometimes it can be living inside of oneself. It is an evil spirit.... [The evil spirit] controls me as if it were a skillful puppeteer" (Police Release Bizarre Essay, 1997).

While it may be tempting to discount these crimes as the products of schizophrenia or other forms of mental illness, claims of evil forces are not limited to those foreign jurisdictions where western psychiatry lacks a foothold. Even high-profile offenders who have been deemed sane by psychiatrists have suggested that evil forces may play a role in explaining "inexplicable" crime. Infamous cannibal killer Jeffrey Dahmer told police officers that evil forces may have led him to commit his crimes. Speaking with police officers, Dahmer mused:

I have to question whether or not there is an evil force in the world and whether or not I have been influenced by it.... Although I am not sure if there is a God, or if there is a devil, I know that of lately I've been doing a lot of thinking about both, and I have to wonder what has influenced me in my life" (Schwartz, 1992, pp. 200-201).

Beat poet William S. Burroughs claimed to have an answer to Dahmer's questions. In explaining how he had come to shoot his wife, Joan, in the head, Burroughs claimed that an evil force possessed him. He said:

Let's see, Joan was sitting in a chair, I was sitting in another chair across the room about six feet away, there was a table, there was a sofa. The gun was in the suitcase and I took it out, and it was loaded, and I was aiming it. I said to Joan, "I guess it's about time for our William Tell act." She took her highball glass and balanced it on top of her head. Why I did it, I don't know, *something took over* [italics added]. It was an utterly and completely insane thing to do.... I fired one shot, aiming at the glass (Morgan, 1988, p. 194).

The others in the room, Gene Allerton and Eddie Woods, corroborated Burroughs's account, noting that the gun fired low, hitting Joan in the side of the head, killing her instantly (Morgan, 1988, p. 195-196). But what prompted Burroughs to do the William Tell act in the first place? What prompted him to shoot? Morgan describes the evil force that Burroughs believed was responsible for Joan's death:

The inimical force that had caused him to kill Joan, Burroughs believed quite literally, was an evil spirit that had possessed him. This was a concept more medieval than modern, although whether the evil spirit is seen as coming from within or without, the result is the same. A divided personality with a capacity for wickedness can look for a psychological explanation, or can believe that he is possessed by malignant forces. Both explanations are metaphors for the nature of evil, which religion and the 'ologies' do not satisfactorily define (Morgan, 1988, p. 198).

Morgan makes an important point. Although it may appear unscientific to explain Burroughs' crime as being caused by an evil spirit, neither an evil spirit nor a pathological personality can be empirically measured. Both evil forces and psychopathologies are, at some level, equivalent metaphors. Although neither evil spirits nor personality disorders can be observed or measured directly, new research suggests that it may be possible to operationalize and measure evil.

THE SCIENCE OF EVIL: USING EVIL AS AN EXPLANATION FOR CRIME

"American sociology, after the 1920s, would reject the use of both journalistic and philosophical analyses of evil for a more thoroughly scientific methodology. However, the discipline then was left with great difficulties in discussing evil (now referred to as deviance) without transvaluing it as sickness or as a sign of social malaise or anomie, leaving treatises on the nature of evil to more ethnographically inspired writings such as criminal biographies, novels, plays, and ultimately screenplays."

Picart & Greek, 2003, p. 41 (citations omitted)

Of course, most criminologists do not explain crime in terms of evil. Typically, social scientists either ignore the concept of evil or reject it as a legitimate explanation for behavior (Greek, 1992; Hickey, 1991). Simon (2000, p. 24) explains, "Psychiatrists are medically trained and wedded to using the scientific method, so they avoid applying the term 'evil' to the aberrant or horrible acts that they are called upon to understand and explain." Similarly, Dorothy Lewis (a psychiatrist who has interviewed 21 serial killers) has bluntly dismissed evil as "not a scientific concept" (in Leiby, 2002). Some criminology textbooks even introduce the scientific discipline of criminology by contrasting it against an archaic, animistic worldview (i.e., the belief that spiritual forces such as "evil" were responsible for crime) (e.g., Schmalleger, 2002; Siegel, 2003).

Criminologists disagree about what causes crime. Introductory textbooks identify a number of competing theories, ranging from defective biology (Hooton, 1939; Lombroso, 1876) to social learning (Akers, 1998), from rational choice (Clarke & Cornish, 1985; Cornish & Clarke, 1986) to neuropsychological disorder (Raine, 1993; Volkow & Tancredi, 1987) to meta-

theories (Elliott, Ageton, & Canter, 1979; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). But almost all criminologists, as social scientists, agree on at least one fundamental axiom: crime is caused by knowable influences. The etiology of crime can be known. Criminologists, as scientists, believe that events are determined (Hergenbahn, 1997; Society of Natural Science, 2005), and that “for everything that ever happens there are conditions such that, given them, nothing else could happen” (Taylor, 1967, p. 359). Criminologists believe that crime does *not* simply occur – something causes it – and it is *not* caused by immeasurable-and-unobservable forces like “evil.”

Defying measurement, observation, and even definition, “evil” is an explanation of last resort. Because behavioral scientists, as “soft” scientists, often envy the positivism of “hard” sciences (such as physics and chemistry), they tend to emphasize quantitative methods that produce well-defined and mathematically formulable results (Mizrach, 2005). If it is true that behavioral scientists resort to invoking mental illness only when the offense is so egregious or bizarre that other criminological explanations do not suffice (Samuels, 1975), then ascribing the origins of criminal behavior to something as abstract and ephemeral as “evil” seems even more desperate. Accordingly, criminologists invoke explanations of “evil” only when describing atrocities that elude comprehension: genocide (Arendt, 1964; Staub, 1989), torture (Mohammed, Shaughnessy, Johnson, & Eisenman, 2002), or “motiveless” serial murder (Hickey, 1991; Levin & Fox, 1985) such as that committed by Hannibal Lecter.

Only a handful of social scientists have dared to argue that “evil” is a legitimate subject for scientific inquiry (Diamond, 2003; Goldberg, 1995; Shermer, 2004; Simon, 1996; Watson, 1995). Most of the research in this direction has generally applied evolutionary theory or made use of abstract psychological concepts. Attempts to link moral evil to concrete and objective measures are rare. Simon (2000, p. 24) has warned that “[e]vil is a thick rope of many complex, twisted, and intertwined strands” and that “[a]n effort to comprehensively define evil is an impossible task, a fool’s errand.” Psychiatrist Michael Welner (1998), however, has spearheaded an ambitious effort to create an operationalized and validated depravity scale. Welner has suggested that hitherto “[t]here have been flirtations with psychiatry’s ability to define evil, but that’s as far as it goes. There’s a sense of, ‘Can we approach this, because it’s so theological?’” (Perina, 2002, p. 16). Through his depravity scale research, Welner seeks to establish empirically-measurable societal standards of what makes a crime depraved (Welner, 2006). He notes:

Judges and juries both across the United States and in other countries who decide that a crime is “depraved,” “heinous,” or “horrible” can assign more severe sentences. Yet there is no standardized definition for such dramatic words that courts already use. And while we may all recognize that some crimes truly separate themselves from others, there is no standard, fair way to distinguish crimes that are the worst of the worst, or “evil” (Welner, 2006, n.p.).

To facilitate meaningful comparison of “evil” actions, Welner has developed a depravity standard instrument, an objective measure based on forensic evidence that distinguishes not *who* is depraved but rather, *what* aspects of a given crime are depraved and the degree of a specific crime’s depravity. The instrument is being normed through a three-stage process. In the first stage, now completed, professionals from legal and scientific backgrounds issued general

guidance. In the second stage, members of the general public are shaping the specific intents, actions, and attitudes that should be included as items of the depravity standard instrument. In the third stage, members of the general public are refining the relative weight of these items (Welner, 2006). If he is successful in developing an instrument to measure depravity, Welner will have made important progress in quantifying and categorizing evil. Although his efforts remain in their infancy, his research may serve as an important starting place in the study of “inexplicable” crime such as serial homicide. Heinous crimes such as those committed by Hannibal Lecter often defy explanation, but an empirical study of evil may eventually allow criminologists to understand the causes of serial murder.

CONCLUSION

“Is Lecter evil, a freakish monster with maroon eyes and a six-fingered hand, or an adult victim of abuse like Gumb and Dolarhyde? Lecter refuses to provide pat answers, unlike the FBI.”

Simpson, 2000, p. 94

Thomas Harris’s quintessential serial killer, Dr. Hannibal Lecter, has been depicted both in print (Harris, 1981, 1988, 1999) and on film (Demme, 1991; Mann, 1986; Ratner, 2002; Scott, 2001), and is a particularly worthwhile figure because he is derived from both real offenders and literary predecessors (Sexton, 2001). Not only is he a compelling paradox (Oleson, 2005), but the character invites us to think about the nature of human evil. Indeed, the public fascination with Hannibal Lecter may have less to do with his shadowy origins as either a vampire-devil (Oleson, 2006) or a victim of acute childhood trauma (Bruno, 2005) than with the challenging questions about heroism and evil that he forces people to confront.

Even within the literary universe of Thomas Harris’ Lecter novels, Lecter is a textbook case, studied by FBI agents at Quantico and by psychiatrists in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane (e.g., Harris, 1988, 1999). Why do Harris’ fictional FBI agents study this fictional serial killer? They do so because he – like his real-life antecedents Ted Bundy and Ed Kemper – is intelligent and insightful (Egger, 1998; Ressler & Shachtman, 1992). The agents study Lecter because, as a cannibal killer responsible for the ritualized murders of 21 people (Hannibal Lecter, 2005; Harris, 1999), *this* incredibly gifted serial killer can help them catch *other* elusive killers. The psychiatrists and the FBI agents in Harris’ novels study Lecter like a treasure map. They do not actually hope to cure him: they hope only to use him to capture other quarry. The approach reflects the attitudes of real-life FBI profilers. Heilbroner (1993, p. 147) quotes FBI agent Roy Hazelwood as saying:

We’re not interested in causes and we’re not interested in cures...We’re interested in identification, apprehension, incarceration and prosecution. I’m interested in what I can learn from them or from their wives or girlfriends that can help me more quickly identify them. Let somebody else figure out why.

Criminologists are those other somebodies. By asking *why* Hannibal Lecter commits his crimes, criminologists may be able to use the Lecter novels and movies as a catalyst for the study of the etiology of serial homicide. The character of Hannibal Lecter is, after all, based on real-life serial killers, and provides readers and viewers with an intimate (if hyperbolic) case study of

an organized serial killer. Characters drawn from novels can serve as valuable heuristic devices (Campbell, 1988), teaching us a great deal about the nature of crime and evil. Well-executed depictions of film villains also can teach us a great deal about these things:

Film provides an opportunity for dialogue; in that sense, it has always been an interactive medium. If David Lynch or Martin Scorsese displays the human face of evil in Frank or Max Cady, that is only half of the conversation. The other half is ours. It's our responsibility to mull over our feelings about these characters, understand them (or not) and, in the process, define our own moral boundaries (Hinson, 1993).

In addition to teaching viewers something about their own morality, the film character of Hannibal Lecter can teach social scientists a great deal about how serial killers are depicted in popular culture (Jenkins, 1994; Simpson, 2000). Dery (1999, p. 40) promises, "Hannibal Lecter ... offers a skeleton key for unlocking the true nature of our age of tabloid frenzies and talk-show pathologies, serial killers and the women who love them." In many ways, the character of Hannibal Lecter is like a Rorschach blot. The viewer who looks for a textbook organized serial killer in Lecter will find it in him (Oleson, 2005), but so shall the viewer who looks for a criminal genius (Oleson, 2005), a devil or a vampire (Oleson, 2006), or a heroic victim of childhood trauma. Hannibal Lecter dwells at the intersection of these contradictions, and is attractive because he is both man and monster, devil and avenging angel, villain and victim. The public's fascination with Hannibal Lecter says as much about the public as it does about Lecter. Ultimately, careful study of Hannibal Lecter might teach criminologists something more about the kind of a society that produces such killers and about the kind of society that remains obsessed by them (Oleson, 2005).

ENDNOTE

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