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## From Whence Evil? Shakespeare as Political Psychologist

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**Abstract.** This paper identifies a passage from Shakespeare's Hamlet that is germane to the question of the source of political evil.

Political behavior involves negotiating the life route of infinite need and finite resources. That is, people rarely seem to be fully satisfied in all spheres of life, and part of this less than full satisfaction stems from the unavailability of sufficient resources for satisfaction: physically, mentally, and spiritually. To maximize one's political power is to best manage (often but not always to minimize) the disparity between the ideal and the real--between what one has and what one wishes to have, between what one is and what one wishes to be.

Some of the political behaviors engaged in by people to maximize political power are at times termed evil--not merely the absence or dearth of good, but also beyond appropriate boundaries. Some of these behaviors often include genocide, assassination, so-called crimes against humanity, blackmail, bribery, and lying. In the 20th century, as with any century, some of these behaviors may occur frequently enough to be within appropriate boundaries. But the question still remains--from whence evil?

A passage from Shakespeare's Hamlet (Act I, Scene IV, ll. 13-37) provides three main hypotheses for the political psychologist. Hypothesis #1. Some people are born with a characteristic for evil. They have not caused the characteristic but are repositories for it. As Hamlet states, "oft it chanceth in particular men\That for some vicious mole of nature in them,\as in their birth, wherein they are not guilty\ (Since nature cannot choose his origin)" (ll. 23-26). Hypothesis #2. Some people are susceptible to moods that--at least temporarily--contaminate, overrule, or override cognition, e.g., judgment, reason, rationality, logic, information processing. As Hamlet states, "By their o'ergrowth of some complexion,\Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason" (ll. 27-28). Hypothesis #3. Some people commit evil while under the influence of some external agent--e.g., a charismatic leader, alcohol, drugs, some external situation with significant "stimulus pull"--or internal one--e.g., a state of consciousness arrived at through meditation. As Hamlet states, "Or by some habit, that too much o'erleavens\the form of plausible manners" (ll. 30-31).

In an era of globalization with significant trends towards military operations other than war--e.g., humanitarian and peacekeeping missions--and towards paying at least lip service to human rights, Shakespeare's sources of evil may be used to generate a list of specific and likely source examples from which human rights violating might spring. The examples and means to prevent their occurrence or minimize their effects could form the basis of human rights training for deployed military personnel.

Many political psychologists would venture that most if not all people have the potential in at least some situations to engage in awe-inspiring good or evil. However, one of many problems with evil--besides its primary and direct consequences-- is its penchant for blotting out the good: the good's potential and that which already has been done. As Hamlet also states, "The dram of evil\Doth all the noble substance often dout\To his own scandal" (ll. 35-37).

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Be it the potential conflict between Denmark and Norway or between uncle and stepson/nephew in Hamlet or the moment-by-moment conflict in our modern world, from whence evil remains a question whose answer may be from whence good can appear. (See Alford, C. F. (1997.) The political psychology of evil. *Political Psychology*, 18, 1-17; Manninen, V. (1996.) The supremacy of evil: The ultimate masculine fear in the light of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. *Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, 19, 73-96; Shakespeare, W. *The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet*. H. Jenkins (Ed.). NY: Routledge. (Original work published c. 1600.) (Keywords: Evil, Good, Lying, Moral.)