

In our Time Programme 45
Man's inhumanity to man

Melvyn Bragg : Hello, for inhumanity there's never been a century like it. 58 million people died in the slaughter of two world wars. Stalinist Russia killed 20 million of its own people. It's estimated that Mao killed about 40 million in China, the Nazi's killed 6 million Jews, 2 million were killed in Vietnam, 3 million in Korea and 1994 in Rwanda, 1 million ordinary people were suddenly turned on and killed by their neighbours, and all the while in this bloody century the private and individual murder of one human being by another has risen inexorably. What are the conditions that allow man to be inhuman to man on such a scale, and can a scientific study of the mind ever uncover the roots of inhumanity or evil?

I'm joined by Jonathan Glover, a philosopher and Director of the Centre of Medical Law and Ethics at King's College, London. His new book "Humanity:A Moral History of the 20th Century" has prompted this discussion, and Dr Gwen Adshead who's main job is as a consultant psychiatrist at Broadmoor special hospital, and she's written several books on ethics.

Jonathan Glover, people were very optimistic about humanity at the start of this century, what was the basis for their optimism?

Jonathan Glover : Well, I think the -in Europe at least - there had been a hundred or so years of largely unbroken peace, since the Napoleonic wars. People believed that human beings were progressing, were making moral progress. People believed there was a moral law that said we all knew how we should behave, and it was thought that barbarism was a thing of the past, we were gradually growing out of.

Melvyn Bragg : Do you think those conditions, now appear - before we get into the 20th century - do you think those conditions now appear almost freakish?

Jonathan Glover : Yes, I think they do. I think that it isn't true that the 20th century is unique in barbarism. Barbarism has disfigured all of human history, with a few isolated calm bits.

Melvyn Bragg : We do seem to have stepped up the pace though.

Jonathan Glover : Well that, quite a lot, is technology I believe. A few people can decide something which results in vast numbers of people being killed, often far away.

Melvyn Bragg : But can we just come back to the beginning of the century, to set the scene, first of all? Was it the sort of , the rule, imperial rule of the British and the navy ruling the waves, the American consti..... America being allowed to develop peacefully in all sorts of ways, and so on? Were there any key factors in that hundred years which have sort ofgave people a feeling at the end of the 19th, early 20th centuries? You said that "barbarism had been confined to the museum" and so on.

Jonathan Glover : Well, I think it was really just that the settlement at the end of the Napoleonic wars had lasted really pretty well. I mean there had been the Franco-Prussian war, and there was a lot of bloodshed in colonial conquests and colonial wars, but I think it was that the political settlement had lasted, and then there are reasons why it started to disintegrate at the beginning of the 20th century.

Melvyn Bragg : Now it's difficult to distinguish, although you say that all centuries have known their barbarism, including the 19th century although not much in Europe, and I agree with that, but by any body count factor, and it's not just technology, I think we can dispute that, the 20th century has been particularly barbarous, it's difficult to know where to start from. We look at Stalin and Mao and Rwanda and so on, but the holocaust, I'll come to Gwen in one moment, but one of the things that people are still puzzling about is the holocaust involved so many, in heavy quotes, "ordinary people" unquote, on the German side, who then committed what we can still scarcely speak of as atrocities. Now can we..... how did they overcome what could have been called their restraints to do that?

Jonathan Glover : Well, I think there are a number of different ways. One was that there was a system of belief , which said that Jews were to blame for the defeat in the first world war. Hitler and his followers tended to believe in the stab in the back theory, and particularly that the Jews had done this stab in the back. Secondly was very powerful propaganda, which dehumanised the Jews, so that it was easy.....there were films showing Jews looking

particularly horrible, intercut with shots of rushing hordes of rats, for instance. So there was a build up of dehumanisation and hatred. There was also the segregation of the Jews. They were firstly removed and then killed later. Then there was the trampling on their dignity. One of the great protective barriers, is respect for people's dignity, and the humiliation that was imposed upon the Jews, I mean when the Nazis took over Vienna, the Jews being forced to scrub the streets with tooth brushes amid jeering SS men. These humiliations removed the barrier of respect for people's dignity. Then again there was the fragmentation of responsibility. Every person thought that they were only a cog in a machine. This person is only arranging the train time table. This person is only arresting them, and taking them somewhere else where they're going to go. This person is only supplying some gas for a camp, and so on.

Melvyn Bragg : So are these.....? Was this accretion.....? Can I come back to that in a second? But Gwen Adshead, do you find any response in what Jonathan Glover has said in the individual patients you deal with in Broadmoor? Do you find any connection there between what we're talking about as a mass event and what we're talking about with you is individual people who have committed wicked and evil acts?

Gwen Adshead : Very much so. I think that....I suppose the best analogy I can draw is something between, I suppose the....a melody played on an individual instrument and taken up and elaborated by an orchestra. That sort of distinction between the individual and the sort of larger group, because I think that, one of the.....many of the themes that you've just outlined, about a sort of gradual process of dehumanisation, a sort of whittling away, gradual humiliations are things that I certainly see, not only, sometimes in the histories of the people that I work with who have committed acts of literally sometimes, unspeakable violence, but also, in terms of, sometimes what they've actually done. I think one of the things..... what I'm struck by when I'm working with individuals is all the devices that they use to try and make it all right for them, to have done what they have done. Because most people....all the people that I am working with are struggling to live in a way, with what they've done, and that's true as much in prisons. I used to be a visiting psychiatrist in prisons, and I think it's just as true for ordinary prisons as well as a special hospital, and what I'm always struck by is the individual trying to **make sense** of what he's done, and what I hear in their stories, and what they often when they are arrested on remand, is a hist.....is often a quite recognisable script, rather like what you've been saying Jonathan, about "I only did this.....the victim was really much more blameworthy than it appears". It's all...it's all like a small scale version of what you've been describing.

Melvyn Bragg : So you think the individual can be translated in to the mass without something else happening?That's one of the things that fascinates me. Is mass behaviour..... a different..... do different rules, different qualities apply when we're talking about mass behaviour?

Gwen Adshead : It..it...I agree with you, I think it is the most interesting thing, really is about some.. something...what happens between the gap between the individual and the group. I mean I'm a group therapist by training, so I'm particularly interested in how groups work together and I run groups in the hospital where I work and I think what's interesting is to look at sort of what are the dynamics that happen between a group of individuals , when you get them together as a group, and there's been quite a lot written actually about what happens to people when you put them in a large group, and I think there's a question in my mind about whether there's something about very large groups, very large communities that can actually link, that actually respond to this question of conformity that you raise in your book for example, the Milgram experiments and so forth about how people who can respond with conformity , only obeying orders, and "it's not really my responsibility". I wonder if there is something about individuals joining groups that does seem to...you can lose your responsibility in a larger group.

Melvyn Bragg : Jonathan, what do you see as the connection between research in the individuals, and does that give you enough.....doe that, is that a good source of information for talking about what's happened to masses of people, involved in this century?

Jonathan Glover : I think it's a good source, but a partial source. I think in order to understand the Nazis , it is actually illuminating to look at the sort of upbringing that the leading Nazis, the people who ran the camps had. They were given horrendously authoritarian, disciplinarian type upbringings. The exact opposite of the sort of upbringing, that the people who bravely rescued Jews in Poland, for instance, characteristically had, where they were encouraged to have a morality based on sympathy and reasoning and discussion, rather than obedience and conformity. But the individual psychopathology can't, I think be the whole story. Because, as you said it's a matter of often ordinary people, who haven't had any special horrible upbringing, who, one way or another, participate in

terrible atrocities.

I think one of the things that normally restrains people, I mean it's not by any means the only thing, but normally restrains people in everyday life from committing atrocity, is simply group pressure, and some societies the group pressure works the other way. In some societies, the pressure is against you. You're stigmatised if you help a Jew, or in the Chinese cultural revolution, you help a reactionary, you're stigmatised. So that sort of pressure makes people conform.

Melvyn Bragg : The....you....er, I enjoyed the book very much indeed, and you refer to Aristotle at one stage, he said "virtues cultivated by the practice of virtuous acts", and the opposite is true, vice can be cultivated, if that's the word, strengthened, encouraged, by the practice of wicked acts, I presume?

Jonathan Glover : Yes. I think there's a lot to Aristotle's remark. I think that very often people start to behave in a way they do because they're conforming, because they're under social pressures, and then they rationalise it and it becomes a habit which they justify.

Gwen Adshead : I mean the acquisition of vir.....the acquisition of virtue and pro-social behaviours is a developmental task, I think that children do engage in, and you can see...you can see the tension between virtuous and vicious behaviour in very young children. Really from very early ages, early as 18 months, and there's some very nice research that shows how children acquire more virtuous behaviour and indeed about ones who acquire more anti-social behaviour and demonstrate that, and I think...but I think.....

Melvyn Bragg : But how they've acquired it is by nurture, it's by teaching and example?

Gwen Adshead : It'sit's...it's main.....it seems to be mainly by nurture that there's.....there doesn't seem to be really any convincing evidence for either anti-social behaviour or indeed for virtue, and I think..... but I think by far the most important impact is something about environment. But I think the other...I mean the relevant point here I suppose is that development doesn't stop in childhood. People continue to develop throughout adulthood and I think that this may help us to understand how it is that a community, a political community could get itself..could lose its moral identity perhaps in the way that happened in Nazi Germany, and I think if you....I mean I think Victor Klemperer's diaries, the second volume which has just been published, they're a fascinating account of what it was to be a Jew in Dresden, and to.....and the gradual, as you say the gradual accretion , the gradual diminution of identity there.

Melvyn Bragg : Can I turn from , as it were, the holocaust to a Russian example. Again taking something from your book, Jonathan, which is full of..... which is full of marvellous things from yourself, and from other people. There's this quotation from Solzhenitsyn, where he's talking about the....a question which again seems to me to be sensible..... central and rather (indistinct) that anybody could do these things, that we're all capable of doing these things. Solzhenitsyn seems to reinforce that, he says, "if only.....if only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, if only it were necessary to separate them from the rest of us, but the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. It is, after all, only because of the way things worked out that they were the executioners and we weren't", directly contradicted by another quote from you from Primo Levi , which says, "to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease". Now I'm on Levi's side there. I think that everybody's capable of all sorts of evil, is....I don't think it's accurate, it's some kind of cop out, what do you think?

Jonathan Glover : Well, I am roughly on the same side as you, but I think it's a bit more complicated. As Primo Levi says, it's...does no service to truth to pretend that everybody is the same. There are real differences between those who were Nazis and those who were their victims, and as he says it does no service to truth just to blur the distinction. But all the same, I think that it's in part a matter of the good fortune or bad fortune of the kind of upbringing you've had when young for instance, and other factors, that makes the difference. The kind of person you are makes a difference to whether you participate in atrocities or not.

Melvyn Bragg : But lot's of people have..... sorry....

Jonathan Glover : But the kind of person you are is, in turn, partly the product of factors outside your own control.

Melvyn Bragg : But lot's of people can have authoritarian upbringings. I mean many people in this country, Britain, had very stern upbringings when they were children, very stern indeed, before the first world war and between the wars, from ones own family, you know how people were very strictly monitored at home and in school, yet they didn't go out and start sort of behaving in an evil way?

Jonathan Glover : I'm not saying thatthat's just one causal factor, there are all sorts of causal factors. I'm less confident than Gwen is that there is no genetic component, for instance. I think that if one looks at say the difference between levels of violence in men and women, one wonders a bit whether there isn't an innate component.

Melvyn Bragg : But I think it's something you have to.....I'm glad we're talking about this, because it really gets on my nerves when people say, you know, the English, the British could have been just as fascistic as the Germans in the 30s and 40s, all the evidence is against that, in any sensible, reasonable, relative sense, and yet it goes on. It's a kind of.....seems to me to be...more than a canard, it seems to me just to be mistaking the way people behave. If that were true then you Gwen would find that we were all capable of being the psychopaths you deal with at Broadmoor.

Gwen Adshead : Well, it is...it is a complex area, and to sort of collapse into a sort of simple cause and effect statements I think is too....in a way to be responded to the anxiety that these type of questions raise, because I think that there's a distinction between saying that everybody has the capacity to get into evil states of mind, it's quite different from saying that everybody has the capacity to *act* evilly, and it's quite another to say that that would necessarily happen, and I think it's quite important to distinguish those, I mean, for example you just take the example of early childhood experience, you're absolutely right, that it's quite clear that only a proportion of people who are, for example, exposed to repetitive fear and humiliation as children go on to become perpetrators of violence in adulthood.

However it is equally true to say that nearly all the individual perpetrators of severe violence that we see in the hospital, and indeed in prisons too, nearly all of them *have* been exposed to extremes of fear and violence in childhood. So that the equation...it's not a two way equation.

So I think.....I think what that tells us is that the developmental capacity to do these things is complicated and it's affected not only by childhood experience, not only by genes and what you just said about gender Jonathan is wildly provocative, and perhaps we can come back to it, but I think that....I think that we can't underestimate the question about political identity and whether the British could have been as fascistic, I mean if we had had a government like Hitler's? If we'd had.....

Melvyn Bragg : But we didn't.

Gwen Adshead : We didn't, but that's the point isn't it, you know?

Melvyn Bragg : I mean all Europe was going fascist, and we got one, Mosely and he was booted off the field.

Gwen Adshead : Absolutely, so I think that, if we had, perhaps, somehow, got to that collective state of mind....

Melvyn Bragg : I mean I mean there was nastiness around, there was anti-semitism, but that's different from what was going on in Germany and Austria and Spain and all over the place.

Gwen Adshead : Absolutely, but I think also to be politically fascist of course, is not the same as.....I don't think should be equivalent with the idea of being evil, I mean this is not the same thing. There's something about a political identity which is not quite the same I think as a moral identity, and the one thing...the other thing I would say is that even if you thought there was an intertwining of experience in terms of victims and perpetrators, even if there's some...I mean Primo Levi does talk about this, both the oppressors and victims need refuge and protection, but the point is that that they both have...they have a moral valence, that's quite different, and what we decide about them morally seems to me to be quite different.

Melvyn Bragg : Jonathan?

Jonathan Glover : I want to say two things. One is that we had a different history leading up to the 30s. We hadn't had the humiliation of defeat in the first world war, and the economic collapse to the degree that Germany did, so it's a bit hard to tell how we would have behaved if we'd had that history. But the other thing is that culture makes a difference. If one looks at the different occupied countries under the Nazis, one finds that the response to Nazism was very different. So it isn't just a matter of individual upbringing. Culture makes a huge difference. Jonathan Steinberg has a wonderful study of the difference between Italians and Germans who both were officially on the same side, both officially committed to the sending off the Jews, and the wonderful way in which the Italians all the way down to the most humble soldier, had a history and tradition of resisting and refusing, so when the Nazis came to demand that the Italians rounded up the Jews, they were given the run about in all sorts of ways. They were told the orders hadn't come through yet, so the Nazis went up to the higher people and they said "We can't understand how the orders haven't got through". In all sorts of ways, different cultures lead people to behave in different ways, and that's a very important factor.

Melvyn Bragg : Yes it is. They still managed to get rid of quite a few Jews from Italy though, didn't they?

Jonathan Glover : They did, but not nearly to the same extent that happened in Germany or in Poland.

Melvyn Bragg : Or in Hungary, yeah. You talk...if the servants of evil regimes become embroiled in activities little by little, what of its leaders? How are they able to get away with it, and to impose their will Jonathan? I mean we talking about will, it brings us to Nietzsche quite soon, and Hitler did take from Nietzsche said he's revealed something of the "primal being" in me Nietzsche said, err..... Hitler said of Nietzsche, but how do leaders figure in this equation?

Jonathan Glover : Well, leaders sometimes are, as I think Hitler was, virtually psychopathic. I mean Hitler seems to me a person with absolutely no moral restraints, and, I mean all his preoccupation with morality was all about "cleansing" Germany from prostitutes and so on, as well as cleansing people from what he thought was racial impurity. Sometimes there are psychopaths who happen to get power in times of great crisis. Sometimes they're cold fanatical ideologists, as Stalin was. Stalin I think wasn't, as it were, emotionally a psychopath, but was simply a person who, in a weird way, really believed in a system of belief which said that killing vast numbers of people was somehow the path to a better society.

Melvyn Bragg : Mmmm, you say.....you've said, Gwen that "we are born inhuman", that and we have morality instilled in us through some empathy with our parents and so on.

Gwen Adshead : Well, I'm not...yes..... I'm not sure I would necessarily claim that people are born inhuman. I think that.....

Melvyn Bragg : I think that....nevermind...I thought I was quoting you, but let's take the point.

Gwen Adshead : I think there's something perhaps about acquiring the capacity to be human that I do think it does happen as a developmental task and continues through life, and I don't think it's simply a features, as I say, of childhood, it continues to happen through life, and I think that what you've been describing, in relation to Hitler and Stalin, who of course have had, sort of, many psychological autopsies done on them, and...you know....and I think there is a very real question about whether it makes sense to look at those men in terms of their individual psychopathology, because I don't..... because they were historical creations, they were men in their time and their place and they had political power and I think that's important.

Melvyn Bragg : But from what you were saying...from your studies, what you've observed, do you think that the idea, goes back to the idea of original sin and before, that virtue has to be instilled, is very important, and if it isn't then in the gap.....

Gwen Adshead : Mmmm, yes.

Melvyn Bragg : ..that would be filled up by wickedness?

Gwen Adshead : I think...I think....I think that virtue and certainly a moral identity does have to be acquired,

and that the capacity to be human is an acquired capacity. I think it maybe that the capacity is innate in everyone, but for it to flourish, to use an Aristotelian term, and for it to be fully developed is a developmental task that takes a whole lifetime, and some people never achieve it, and some never achieve it and some people only achieve it partially, some...and very few people, I think, never achieve it at all, but those people I think are very rare, and we don't see them all that often. The people that I work with more are usually people who have lost their capacity, their capacity for interpersonal relation, to be human has been diminished or whittled away, just like Hitler and Stalin.

Melvyn Bragg : The.... there are some people Jonathan Glover who think that the Godlessness of the 20th century, the comparative Godlessness has been huge a contributing factor to the barbarism, what's your view of that?

Jonathan Glover : I think the evidence goes both ways. I mean first it should be said that of course belief in God can lead to fanaticism, intolerance, cruelty, crusades and so on, and I speak here as an atheist, with some feeling! But on the other hand, I'm also aware that many of the people who behaved most bravely and courageously, did so on the grounds of principled religious commitment, and a non-religious believer, I see one of the central human tasks is to be...to create a way of being moral that doesn't require appeal to religious authority.

Melvyn Bragg : When I said at the start of the programme, I just recited a few statistics about the millions and millions that have been killed in this century, you ...your repost was, "well there's been barbarism in every century", with which I agreed, and that the increase in numbers is largely to do with technology, so do you actually think that human nature has not become more unleashed this century, that there's a steady pulse of wickedness which goes in a more or less regular rate throughout the centuries and what's happened now is it's just hit the fan because of the atom bombs and capacities for getting people to concentration camps and that sort of.....?

Well if we fluctuate over time, I think people have always had both the capacity for great evil and the capacity for great moral heroism and goodness. What I do think is that technology provides circumstances in which it's far easier for large numbers of people to do really terrible things, because the effects of what they do are at a distance and invisible.

Gwen Adshead : I think communication has something to the other changes there've been this century, is something to do with communication. The fact that you can spread your message about the evilness of your victim, you spread that message very easily, it can be transported, and I think that's one thing, and I wonder whether there's also been a sort of engagement with images of violence this century, that there perhaps wasn't in previous centuries. That it's possible, particularly through television and the cinema to see depictions of violence and have an image....we're presented with an image of violence in a very rigid way, rather like the way that you describe in your book Jonathan, where you describe a very...a rigid polarised...the victor....the aggressor, violent, triumphant person and the victim...the victims who just disappear.

Melvyn Bragg : I mean, curiously enough one of the most vivid examples of inexplicable violence recently in Rwanda was more than encouraged by the radio.

Gwen Adshead : Absolutely.

Jonathan Glover : Though I want to say that in one way the media of mass communications do provide us with some hope, because there's also the sense that for the very first time in history really, there's a sense of a kind of world public opinion which is starting to find atrocities intolerable, so that when atrocities happen in Kosovo or in East Timor, there's a widespread sense that something has to be done. Now what is done is not always effective, and sometimes arguably misguided and at considerable cost, but I think we're seeing the beginnings of a shared human consciousness that we are aware that all this is going on all over the world now, soon as it happens, and as a result there is some hope that we might start to shape institutions that would curb and control it.

Gwen Adshead : You see, I think it's interesting that you say that, because I think you're right, because I think that Shelley talked about, just as you do actually, Shelley talked about the imagination being an instrument for moral...for moral...for good, and I wonder whether..... and I can think of a man that I worked with in a hospital who's used his imagination both for good and for terrible evil. He has used his creativity both to be a beautiful artist and create beautiful things, but also to be an appalling sadist, and I wonder whether that, what we have to struggle with, perhaps in the next century is something about how we use our imagination, and the images that we fill our

imagination with, how we use our imagination profoundly affects I think, how we act.

Jonathan Glover : Shelley said that "The poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" and I was surprised after I'd finished my book, to find how much more often I'd quoted poets than philosophers.

Gwen Adshead : Absolutely.

Melvyn Bragg : Can we come back to - in talking of quotations - to a quotation I used when trailing this programme, from Nietzsche, over a hundred years ago, where he said , "there can be no doubt that morality will eventually perish, which is the great spectacle in a hundred acts reserved for the next two centuries in Europe". He does seem to have been on the right track, if you just look at the evidence, Jonathan.

Jonathan Glover : Well, he thought that the death of God which he believed in, and he believed that God had died, there wasn't a credible belief any more. He thought that would mean the collapse of the Judeo-Christian morality , and he thought that would be both terrifying and wonderful . My belief is that we ought to try and keep certain key aspects of Judeo-Christian morality about loving our neighbour, about caring for other people, instead of the sort of ruthless struggle that Nietzsche believed in, we ought to develop that kind of morality in way that doesn't depend upon a religious authority which many of us now can't accept.

Melvyn Bragg : Do you see....going....do you see any evidence that we can do that? That we're in control enough to do that? That people will be responsive to that being encouraged in them?

Gwen Adshead : Oh yes, yes I do, no I do , because coming back to this question about innateness and about being..how...born inhuman or human, I think that what we do know is that we do have an innate drive to relate to each other. We actually...there is an innate drive I think to make relationships as people. We're not born to be alone, and in that...

Melvyn Bragg : Those relationships can be war can't they?

Gwen Adshead : They can..... I think that the challenge then is what we make of those relationships and how we treat others, particularly the vulnerable.

Melvyn Bragg : Finally, just quickly, do you...in your researches have you found anybody who you would call, completely evil?

Gwen Adshead : Have I? I would...maybe states of mind, brief states of mind of complete evil, yeah I think I would say that.

Melvyn Bragg : Well, we'll have to leave it there. We were talking around the book "Humanity: A Moral History of the 20th Century" by Jonathan Glover, with Jonathan and Gwen Adshead, and be back, thank you very much, thanks for listening, over ran, blast! (laughs)