

In our Time Programme 25  
*Good and Evil*

**Melvyn Bragg** : Hello, the nature of good and evil is a subject which has continued to tease and trouble the greatest minds in the 20th century, whether in medicine, philosophy, politics or the arts. In a century that has seen one of the greatest atrocities known to mankind, the Holocaust, and with continual wars in the former Yugoslavia, the question as to what is good and evil is as resonant as ever.

Is good and evil in our genes as medicine is currently seeking or are they a product of society ? Where does responsibility for good and evil lie? And is a belief in God essential to any argument about good and evil? Joining me is Lazek Kolokovsky, born in Poland he was a prominent Marxist there, in the 50s, and was exiled in the 60s. Since then he's lectured widely at Yale, the University of Chicago and Oxford University, where he's professor of philosophy. He's the author of over 30 books including "Main Currents and Marxism". In his latest book, "Freedom, Fame, Lying and Betrayal:Essays in Everyday Life", he wrote in one essay, "If God is dead nothing remains, but an indifferent void which engulfs and annihilates us".

I'm also joined by Galen Strawson, one of the new generation of philosophers, and of this country's rising stars in the field. A committed atheist who marries Darwin with his philosophy, he's a fellow and tutor in philosophy at Jesus College, Oxford and the author of books on Freewill, Causation and the philosophy of mind. He's currently working on a book on the self.

Professor Kolokovsky, is good and evil best understood in terms of religion?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Best in the sense that within a religious intellectual mental framework, we know what we can rely upon. We get some irrefutable, so to say, rules. It doesn't mean, however, that people who do not believe in God or have no religious convictions, are unable to use these concepts good and evil, or that there is something wrong with them, if they use them, no.

**Melvyn Bragg** : But do you think yourself that the ideas of good and evil are dependent on the idea of there being a God?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Logically, not necessarily, because as I've said, there's no imperative need to think of God when we say something is good or evil. It's possible that we have a direct intuition of good and evil, and this intuition can be there without God, even so, religious people would say, that this intuition itself results from God having once implanted in us a kind of natural law. Like with other truths, we might believe in some axioms of mathematics without thinking of God, even though, possibly it was God who made us think this way.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Galen Strawson what do you think of this idea which has been put forwards by others that good and evil can not only be *best* understood, but can *only* be understood in terms of religion?

**Galen Strawson** : Well, there's a sense in which I agree. When Lazek says that evil can be identified only through the sacred, I agree in as far as I think it's a supernatural notion, but then I don't really believe in evil.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : You don't believe in evil?

**Galen Strawson** : No, I think it may just be the word that rings wrongly to me, and I think people can be stupid and selfish and pig-headed and thoughtless, weak, insane, and they can do terrible and appalling things, but the notion of evil seems almost to dignify all these rather unattractive things. But perhaps that's just my response to the word "evil".

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Do you perhaps identify evil with the evil one? With Satan?

**Galen Strawson** : I believe in good and bad. Yes, I think if the devil came along, he'd say to us "Hah, you know you human you think you can be evil?", forget it, you don't know the first thing about evil.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Well as you know in the Lord's Prayer, there is this this expression (foreign phrase spoken) "Deliver us from evil".....

**Melvyn Bragg** : "Deliver us from evil", yes

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : ....in the authorised version, but in the New English Bible, there is "from the evil one", that is to say from the devil.....

**Galen Strawson** : Oh is there? Right.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : As it was usually read in antiquity, because it was a grammatical accident that (foreign phrase spoken) could be from (foreign phrase spoken) personal or (foreign phrase spoken) abstract even. Therefore there's a confusion.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Do you think there's such a thing as evil?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Very much so.

**Melvyn Bragg** : So how would you convince Galen Strawson of this?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : I cannot convince him if he refuses to believe, I have no arguments. If he says well people might be cruel of course, there's a lot of cruelty, things people do to each other, so he obviously accepts that, that's purely empirical. But he has something against calling it evil, perhaps because it is too much associated with the idea of a personal devil.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Let me just go to something else, you, in this book, talk about Hitler and Mother Theresa, and you say they are both equally deserving of human dignity, and you obviously are putting forward someone thought to be very good, and someone thought in your words to be very evil. Now can you tell us why you have chosen that example, and why you want to tell us that they're equally deserving of human dignity?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Precisely because they are two extremes. It was in an essay on "equality". I said that it is a traditional, well a tradition in our time, is accepted today, since the French Revolution that all people are equal, and what does it mean? Not that they are identical or that they are equally endowed with all sorts of abilities or not, they differ. Everybody knows that people differ from each other in many ways, some deny that. So in what sense may we say that all human beings are equal, only in the sense that they are endowed with dignity, and dignity is something that is very difficult to define.

It is easy to say when it is violated, but what it is in itself is rather difficult, nevertheless it is good enough to argue that slavery is a bad thing, if we do not believe that there is such a thing as human dignity, we might say well slavery and freedom are acceptable or not according to our whims.

That's the difference between the American mind and the German mind. American mind says there's a consensus about the evil or slavery and we don't need more, but the German mind doesn't want to be satisfied with this simple explanation, the German mind says "no, we want to know whether slavery in itself is evil" because otherwise we must say, "well now there's a consensus about slavery being evil, but not a long time ago, slavery was considered normal, and therefore it was actually good, in any conceivable sense.

But people who fought against slavery, they fought on moral grounds precisely because they believed it is evil *in itself*, apart from a consensus.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Galen what's your view?

**Galen Strawson** : And you think that too?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Yes, yes I do.

**Galen Strawson** : I think I understood Lazek's argument. He took Mother Theresa and Hitler because they were opposites and the argument goes, they are equal as human beings because they are equal in human dignity, I think you said that the foundation of their dignity was their ability to choose between good and bad, or good and evil as you'd say, and that it was that, that you identified as being that which made them worthy of respect. So there's a kind

of chain, that our dignity is founded in our ability to choose between good and evil.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Yes.

**Galen Strawson** : I've got a problem with the word "dignity", just as I have a problem with the word "evil", because to me it seems to connect to the idea of pomposity, and I think it's an inadequate word, but I think again this is just semantic. I actually have the trouble.....the word "respect" is better, but the word...it's been trashed that word, you know, now it just means...it's on the street, and it's become a kind of monkey morality word, you know.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Respect is not the same....

**Galen Strawson** : It's been ruined.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : ....respect is our attitude to ourselves, people, various things.

**Galen Strawson** : I know, it has a high attractive philosophical use which connects with Kantian "Achtung" which is sometimes translated as reverence, but the word "respect" now is just a kind of threat or .....

**Melvyn Bragg** : So how would you follow through your response to Lazek's argument then?

**Galen Strawson** : Well, people often talk about there being something sacred or immeasurably valuable about the human individual, and actually I find this hard to understand, because I certainly don't think there's anything sacred or immeasurably valuable about myself. I'm certainly unique, but it seems that my..... but then so is an....seagull, actually. But actually, when I think about other people, I find...then it does seem to have force on me, but it doesn't seem to have force on me when I consider myself, and I wonder whether that's true of each of us, that we don't....the ideas of the sacredness of human life, we may be more inclined to apply them to others than to ourselves.

**Melvyn Bragg** : How does Darwin help to explain, as it were, Mother Theresa and Hitler?

**Galen Strawson** : Oh, by giving a general explanation of the kinds of psychological traits that are good for survival and that's the first fact, the second fact is that they come in various mixes. There's lot's of studies in game theory which shows that if you've got a society of rather good cooperative people, then there'll always be a place for someone who cheats and lies to survive just as well and have just as many children. **You can actually work out the percentage** of the honest people and the dishonest people, as soon as you've worked out what the payoff values are. So Darwin's theory can give an account of all human characteristics that we know, and then general principles of combination...

**Melvyn Bragg** : How would you explain therefore someone's....the altruism...let's just accept this for the moment, the goodness of Mother Theresa?

**Galen Strawson** : Oh, well that is seen to be a problem for the theory of evolution because it's all about how nature is red in tooth and claw, and how there's a struggle for survival, and the phrase "The Selfish Gene" has become very popular and well known, and the first thought is that **if Darwin is right**, then we all ought to be selfish, out for ourselves all the time, but there is an explanation of how more attractive human characteristics come to be, things like loyalty, friendship, trustfulness, and on the other side trustworthiness, which is simply that very often, the best thing for you to do, if you want to do well in life, and survive and reproduce is to cooperate with someone else. So you need to be an attractive proposition for other human beings to cooperate with.

The first reply to that is "well maybe the thing to do is to cooperate when you can benefit and then to cheat as soon as the other person stands to benefit". But the trouble with that is that then the other people will get rather good at detecting cheats, so you'll have to get better at deceiving them, and the argument goes, that in the end, the best way to deceive others efficiently is to deceive yourself. but what *that* means is that you actually become nice! You become naturally trustworthy, you have impulses of loyalty and then you do well in forming cooperative bonds with others, so I think you can see how good human characteristics evolved. Ultimately the explanation is in terms of then doing better and then surviving well. But it doesn't follow from that, that these characteristics aren't real, that they aren't exactly what they seem, we really do have feelings of loyalty, friendship, trust, affection, sympathy. It's just that they can be explained, in terms of Darwin's theory.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Lazek what's your response to that?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Well Nietzsche precisely took the opposite view on the basis of Darwin's theory.

**Galen Strawson** : I think that was almost Nietzsche's biggest mistake. He didn't think through Darwin properly, but....

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : That's possible, but to him it is natural that big fish swallows small fish. So it is natural for the Third Reich to exterminate smaller nations that might be harmful to them. The idea that ultimately it pays to be truthful and loyal to other people, of course.....

**Galen Strawson** : It's a deep idea.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : ...of course, well, Kantian, you remember Kant's essay on lying? He says if people lie whenever it suits them, the behaviour will turn against themselves, because nobody would believe anybody, and the liar would defeat his own purpose, not true, because I can say "No I want all people to be always trustful and loyal except for me". I will lie whenever it suits me.

**Galen Strawson** : Exactly.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : But I want other people positively to say always the truth, there's nothing illogical in that.

It is only my survival device, and indeed some people who are not religious at all argue that religions are a ("good inversion" -indistinct) of evolution, which is again doubtful, for two reasons.

**Galen Strawson** : Social evolution.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : For two reasons. First, how can you argue that it is good for survival of mankind or society to believe, like Jesus, that no Earthly goods have any value whatsoever, that one should only wait for the apocalypse, and don't care about our food, or dwelling or whatever. Or like a Buddhist, greatest religion of the (indistinct), universal religion, to believe like Buddhists that **life cannot be but misery**, and you should only wish to escape from it as soon as possible. So it's difficult to imagine how those great religions can be good for the survival of mankind. That's one reason.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Can Galen Strawson take that up first?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Yes, yes.

**Galen Strawson** : Well I think the trouble with that argument is that it's too direct, it suggests that you can get an explanation of the existence of religion straight from Darwin's theory of evolution, but actually it has to go through an intermediate stage which is human psychology. Darwin's theory of evolution gives rise to human psychology, and that gives rise to all sorts of quite surprising and possibly very unexpected effects that can no longer be explained straightforwardly or immediately, in terms of survival value of the individual.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : In other words that evolution is fallible.

**Galen Strawson** : If you think of it as a kind of machine for designing super efficient survival machines, yes totally fallible.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Yes, yes.

**Galen Strawson** : Because it gives rise to things like affection.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : So what went wrong with evolution?

**Galen Strawson** : Nothing went wrong with it, **nothing can go wrong with it!** It just does what it does, it's selects out the people who just happen to have the characteristics.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : The other reason is that if people who are not religious take this view that religion is very good after all for social reasons.....

**Galen Strawson** : Right.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : ...then they essentially think in the same terms as 17th century libertines....

**Galen Strawson** : Right.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Enlightened Atheism for the elite, but religious superstition for the masses.

**Galen Strawson** : Yes. Actually there are all sorts of other explanations....

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : That's a little bit dangerous....

**Galen Strawson** : No I don't.....

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : ....view in our time.

**Galen Strawson** : Well, quite, but that actually gives you another possible evolutionary explanation. You can say someone designed the Christian religion....the ideal of self denial for reasons of power, somebody wanted to be in power, and to repress everybody else by making them believe in renouncing worldly goods, that's a Nietzschean....

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : You repeat of course Nietzsche.

**Galen Strawson** : Yes.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Nietzsche's doctrine.

**Galen Strawson** : That's right.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Extremely unlikely, extremely unlikely.

**Galen Strawson** : Yes, it is, but once it got going, it did in fact get exploited in that way. People used it as an instrument of control and repression, sometimes.

**Melvyn Bragg** : You've written a lot about Marxism Lazek, how far was Marxism an attempt to secularise notions of good and evil in your view?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : There is no such concept as good and evil in Marxism. Marx never uses such a concept, neither does he the concept of justice for that matter. Marx is not about justice, it's about alleged historical loss, which leads us towards well, what would be ultimate salvation even, so he doesn't use this concept, but he's ambiguous about it. On the one hand he believes in the loss of history, on the other hand he believes that, for some strange reason, this loss of history leads us towards ultimate liberation, whatever it might mean. So there is a hidden moral agenda in his writings. He really believed that once we made everything state property, then it would be ultimate hilarity in the world! (Galen sniggers)

**Galen Strawson** : So is it a fundamentally utilitarian outlook?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : No I don't think....

**Galen Strawson** : Is he interested in maximising human well-being?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : He doesn't use such a concept ....

**Galen Strawson** : No.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : ...of....that all value judgements are based on the idea of maximising general happiness . For instance.....

**Galen Strawson** : Well not maximising...

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : I eat a good...I go into a restaurant and eat a good dinner, I made a morally glorious act, because I increased the general happiness of mankind!

**Galen Strawson** : Right (sniggers). The goal is human well-being presumably...

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Human liberation.

**Galen Strawson** : ...what else are we doing it, what else....?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Human liberation.

**Galen Strawson** : Oh liberation.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Whatever it.....

**Galen Strawson** : But that's meant to be in .....

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : In fact individual beings, real human beings will coincide with the **idea** of humanity.

**Galen Strawson** : So you're absolving him from the charge that he rejected morality? You're saying he has a hidden moral agenda? What about his....?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Hidden , hidden.

**Galen Strawson** : Yeah, what about his seeming hatred of the words "justice" and "rights"?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Precisely because he pretended to be a scientist.....

**Galen Strawson** : Right.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : ....again bogus of course. He was a wise, very highly educated, very learned man, no doubt about that, and very interesting, nevertheless his own predictions proved to be false one after another.....

**Galen Strawson** : Right. Right.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : ....and his idea of liberation, we know how it ended, and it was not just a mistake. No, in the 19th century a number of people predicted that Socialism based on Marxist principles, will be horrible despotism. (Lists names of predictors)

**Galen Strawson** : It was a mistake about human nature .

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Mmmm?

**Galen Strawson** : It was a mistake.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Yes.

**Galen Strawson** : It was a mistake about human nature.

**Melvyn Bragg** : How would you say that Marx was mistaken about human nature, Galen?

**Galen Strawson** : Well I suppose you're ....Lazek's maybe thinking top down , that it would become.... there would be despotism from above. I was just thinking about.....there's a fact I think about the productivity of the Soviet Union, that 3% of the total land value or was it even less, produced 33% of all the vegetables, because that 3% was privately owned. It was a little section of the (indistinct) or whatever it's called, that was allowed to remain in private ownership, so that sort of simple point about how people work for themselves!

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : But it was Marx and not Stalin who said that the entire idea of communism can be summed up in one single phrase "abolition of private property"....

**Galen Strawson** : Yes, that was the mistake about human nature.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : ...if so then the Stalinist system was Socialist in the sense of Marx. there was nothing wrong with it because private property has been really abolished and .....well...we know what happened.

**Galen Strawson** : Yeah I mean, I think he was a good and interesting man in many respects, but he wasn't entirely consistent. There's a place in the Communist manifesto which he wrote with Engles, where he says, I've got it here, that, "the free development of each one is the condition for the free development of all", and that seems to suggest that there's an asymmetry, that **people need independence and some kind of rights, in order for the community to develop**. He might have said "the free development of all is the condition for the free development of each", but he didn't , they said it the other way around.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : On the contrary, he believed that human rights is a concept designed to defend the bourgeois society.

**Galen Strawson** : Right.

**Melvyn Bragg** : I'd like to read another quotation from your book "Modernity on Endless Trial" you write "There is no such thing as absolute good in politics, and there is nothing we can do about it. This in turn may lead us to suspect there is no such thing as absolute evil in politics, that however is more doubtful", why do you want to make that distinction?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : In some political phenomena, we are tempted at least, to speak about the "absolute evil", whereas absolute good certainly doesn't exist, because in politics we have to make choices none of which is free from bad results .

**Melvyn Bragg** : Can you give us some examples of this?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Well I think that something that we can observe every day is the budget that has (laughs) is obviously bound to have some results which are not pleasant to many people. We are always in the world of finite amount of goods. The distribution is never absolutely just, if we know at all what justice might mean. People have chosen to bomb Yugoslavia, why didn't they bomb Sierra Leone which is much worse than Yugoslavia. Much much worse, so what's wrong with it?

Something is wrong. Well obviously, why didn't they bomb Russia because of the war in Chechnya, they didn't and of course we know why, but the point is that such matters invoke moral reasons, it's always doubtful because of the characteristic of moral reasons is that they have to outside the ("utilitarian" -indistinct) considerations.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Galen?

**Galen Strawson** : Yeah I think it's not hard to make the case that there's no such thing as absolute good in politics, but I just wondered what you actually had in mind when you said that maybe there was such a thing as absolute evil

in politics? I mean there are obvious cases.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Well absolutely evil systems.

**Galen Strawson** : Right, presumably you had in mind the Third Reich?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Well we have so many examples.....

**Galen Strawson** : Right.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : .....of murderous or genocidal regimes there's no need to dwell on it.

**Melvyn Bragg** : I'd like to come back to these ideas about good. Galen when you were writing about the late Iris Murdoch, you said "Iris Murdoch made claims that almost suggested that", quote, "good is as real as rock", when she said that "good represents the reality of which God is the dream".

Could you develop that?

**Galen Strawson** : I mean I think it distracts attention from the thought of good to tangle it up with vaguely personified figures like God, and I think she herself says in that same book, "God does not and cannot exist, there is no responsive super thou", as she puts it. Of course I can see what's attractive about religion, by the way I don't think I'm a committed atheist full stop. I'm a committed atheist with respect to the Christian religion, but I'm only an agnostic, with respect to the idea that there might be some very large mental presence in the universe, or that that the universe might indeed *be* such a presence.

So it's really the way it gets tangled up with these sorts of personifications and with **dogma**, that I find, makes it worse than a dream, makes it a melodrama, and actually a rather appalling one. Especially when it involves notions of Heaven and Hell and so on.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Do you think that it is an appalling dream, as Galen said?

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : No, appalling, no not at all.

**Galen Strawson** : All I had in mind there was Heaven and Hell and the story of eternal damnation and that's appalling.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Eternal damnation has become more and more doubtful in Christianity recently. I know that there are some expression in the New Testament which seem to confirm it yes. Every body knows that, nevertheless, some scholars argue that if you look closer you'll see that some nuance in the Greek texts are lost in the Latin translations, and there are people that argue that there is no eternal damnation. Catholic Theologians, there are such people, and mind you the church has never said of anybody that it has been damned. It said on thousands, people were saved of course, all the saints, but never of anybody that has been damned, not even Judas.....

**Galen Strawson** : Interesting.

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : ...and while it is true that originally the theory that hell will be destroyed and the devil will be restored to glory, was condemned by the church.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Can I finish with Galen Strawson's notion about God which is opposed to yours. It's in the Columbia Dictionary of Quotations from your review of the Darwin biography Galen.

**Galen Strawson** : Errm I think what I said there was it's....I suggested that it's an insult to God to believe in God. Because on the one hand it's to suppose that He has perpetrated acts of incalculable cruelty, on the other hand it's to suppose that He's given us an instrument, which is our mind, which must lead us if we think hard, to conclude that He didn't exist. So my suspicion is that, the people he really loves best now in the 20th century are probably the atheists and the agnostics, because they're the only ones who have ever really taken him seriously!!



**Melvyn Bragg** : I'm going to stop there. Thank you very much....

**Lazek Kolokovsky** : Thank you.

**Melvyn Bragg** : ...Galen Strawson. Thank you Lazek Kolokovsky and thank you very much for listening.

**Galen Strawson** : The trouble is I have the religious temperament but I don't have the belief! (laughs)