

What is evil?

INTRODUCTION

Many films, plays and novels have been based around the concept of good and evil. Although evil is a commonly used word, this session asks students to think about what evil is, whether it exists and what its origins might be.

The concept of good is not a sole focus but students may wish to think about what good is to give further reflection on what evil is. It also focuses on the idea of evil being from a devil. The nature of this session may contain some disturbing themes such as people considered to be evil, the Devil and Exorcism. Therefore it is up to the session leader to judge whether this session is appropriate for their students.

ACTIVITY

In order to get students thinking in more depth give them each one of the following numbered statements. Ask them to play *Quiz Quiz Trade* [See, e.g., <https://www.theteachertoolkit.com/index.php/tool/quiz-quiz-trade>]. *Quiz Quiz Trade* involves each student discussing their statement with another member of the group. They have two minutes to discuss their statement before the session leader shouts change and they trade their statements and find another person to talk to. After students have done this pick on a number to get that student to feedback what they have discussed and thought about whilst playing the game.

- A creature called the devil causes evil in the world
- Evil does not exist it is an illusion
- As long as the human race exists, there will always be evil
- We have to have evil in the world to know what good is
- There is no God because there is a lot of suffering in the world
- Evil can be cured; there are ways of overcoming it
- God knows that there is evil but is not powerful enough to stop it
- People are born evil
- Every human being has the potential to do evil.

ACTIVITY

Using all of their thinking and discussion work so far, ask the students to try and come up with a definition of evil together, in groups or individually. Before they start they might want to think about what it means to be good.

Play the following clip below on what is evil to get students thinking about their definition. Ask students to feedback and justify their definitions.

What is evil clip: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qgd65WuxLKU

Explain to the students that philosophers mainly accept two types of evil: moral evil and natural evil.

Natural evil is suffering caused by events that have nothing to do with humans, and which are to do with the way the world is, e.g., natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions, floods or earthquakes. Moral (or human) evil is suffering caused by humans acting in a way that is considered morally wrong, e.g., bullying, murder, rape, theft or terrorism.

Ask students to respond to such questions as:

- *Do you think one of these types of evil is worse than another?*
- *Do you think there are any other types of evil?*

ACTIVITY

Explain to students what an exorcism is and other origins of evil. An exorcism is an expulsion or attempted expulsion of a supposed evil spirit from a person or place. People that believe in this may think that evil is a force that can take someone over. Some may say this force is a creature called the devil. Some people believe that you can be born evil, whereas others believe that you may become evil.

Play the following clip to students on a supposed exorcism performed by Pope Francis:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8B7JNxxw-5Q

Ask students the following questions:

- *Do you think this is an exorcism?*
- *Is evil a force?*
- *Does evil actually exist?*
- *Is it only human beings that can recognise evil?*

ACTIVITY

Explain to students that they are now going to consider whether there is an evil gene and whether it is ethically acceptable to test for this gene. The case-study of Adam Lanza will be used. The

Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting occurred on December 14, 2012, in Newtown, Connecticut when 20-year-old Adam Lanza shot 20 children and 6 adult staff members. Lanza shot himself after. Soon after this the University of Connecticut started to study Lanza's DNA to see whether there was anything different about this man's brain and whether evidence of an 'evil gene' could be found. Many people did not think this was ethically acceptable to do and many people believed that an evil gene is impossible because they disagree that evil actually exists or does not actually originate from the brain.

Ask students to create a courtroom scene with the following roles: judge, jury, prosecution and defence. Ask them to imagine that a group of people (prosecution) are taking a university (defence) to court because they want to stop the university's tests on a killer's genetic material. This group of people want the tests to stop, but the university authorities think it is vital research that could help our understanding of evil. Students should include in their arguments all of the discussion so far about what evil actually is and where it actually comes from.

CONCLUSION

After a concluding vote on the debate above, ask for students' reflections on the session and what they now think about good and evil.