**Good and Evil: Reshaping our Moral Universe**

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| By [Paul Davies](http://www.metanexus.net/magazine/tabid/68/tabid/72/Default.aspx?aid=53) |

General Augusto Pinochet is now back in his native Chile amid a welter of recriminations. He stands accused of the kidnap, torture and murder of thousands of his fellow citizens. On the grisly Richter scale of genocidal horror, the world has seen far worse than Pinochet - Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot killed millions. The recent slaughter in Rwanda and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans are timely reminders that deliberate, systematic human savagery is never far beneath the surface veneer of civilization.

The conduct of the men involved in brutal campaigns of terror and extermination is so extreme it can only be described as evil. Which raises the question of how these predilections became part of human nature. Why do people have a capacity to inflict such misery on others?

The problem of evil has baffled theologians and philosophers for centuries. If there is an omnipotent God who is supremely good, why does he not intervene to prevent gross wrongdoing? One traditional answer was to portray the universe as a battleground between opposing forces of good and evil, with humans caught in the crossfire. Another was to argue that evil is the price paid for human free will, which is on balance a greater good. Today, however, more scientific explanations are demanded.

 From the scientific viewpoint, human wrongdoing isn't hard to understand, at least at first sight. We are, after all, the products of Darwinian evolution, with its central mechanism of natural selection. Each of us carries the winning genes that have got what it takes to survive. Because genes help build our minds as well as our bodies, the way we behave is influenced in large part by the DNA we have inherited from our successful ancestors. Oxford zoologist Richard Dawkins coined the term "the selfish gene" to make the point that we dance to the tune of the genes that are good survivors, even if that means we may sometimes act ruthlessly to ensure they reach the next generation. If rape, murder and theft prove good reproductive strategies (which they often do), it is no surprise to a Darwinist that people resort to these acts given an opportunity. Of course, Dawkins is quick to point out that he is using a metaphor: genes themselves aren't selfish or evil entities. Nature is merely indifferent to our plight. "Genes don't care about suffering, because they don't care about anything," is how he eloquently puts it.