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Multimodal Repurposing Assignment - **Good or Inherently Evil?**

Rania: I would be lying if I stated that I am the first person to pose the question, are humans born good or evil? The question has been raised since the 15th century, with people like philosopher John Locke arguing that people are born a tabula rasa or clean slate. While I do agree with this, there are so many examples of bad children that do have an individual questioning this.

In this first episode of “Good or Inherently Evil?” I kick off my podcast with an interview conducted with a family friend of mine. In order to preserve her anonymity, we will be calling her “Jane.” Jane’s oldest son, who is now almost 6 years old, began acting different once his younger sister was born. What was initially thought to be jealousy, might actually be something else.

Rania: Jane began by recounting that her son was normal for the first four years of his life. Both she and her husband doted on him, and he was the most adorable little child. When his sister was born at the age of four, however, everyone started to notice slight changes in him.

Jane: He became slightly more hostile. In the beginning, he just wouldn’t want to interact with his sister. When we brought him into the hospital room after my delivery, he got upset and refused to kiss her or even come close to her. My husband and I, along with the people in my family, laughed this off thinking that this would be very short-lived.

Rania: Jane soon realizes that she was wrong and her son's behavior was not short-lived after all.

Jane: One of the most terrifying moments for me as a mother was when he threw his sister at me. We live in a one bed-room apartment in Flatbush, Brooklyn, and since the apartment is so small, our kitchen and living room are connected. I left both my children in the living room to watch TV as I washed the dishes. Before I finish my chore, I hear my newborn start to cry a little. I thought to myself, "I'll wash these last dishes quickly and go to her."

Jane: My son didn't give me the chance to do this. Before I could go over to both my children, I heard him come up behind me and tell me, "Tell her to shut up." Glancing over my shoulder, my heart drops completely because I see him carrying his sister like a rag doll and then he kind of thrusts her in my direction for me to hold.

Rania: Did you think he would hurt her?

Jane: I'm not really sure what I was thinking. It took me a while to process what had happened. For months, my husband and I just brushed off his actions and said that it was jealousy, but then his aggressiveness began to worry me.

Rania: As Jane's children grew older, her son's behavior simply worsened. The slight escalation became worrying and there were points where she seemed scared of her own child.

Jane: There was another instance where he pushed his sister off her scooter at the park. I know that doesn't seem like anything, but it was the way in which he did it. He pushed her off aggressively and then took the scooter and rode away from her. She ended up busting her lip, but it's almost like he didn't care. Even when my husband yelled at him and gave him a time-out, nothing seemed to make a difference. He sat in the time-out corner so relaxed.

Jane: Another concerning moment was when he threatened a family friend who we left to babysit. He told her that “he had weapons and knives to kill her with.” Once she told me this, I couldn’t help but feel slightly off. I don’t know what made me do this, but I checked our kitchen drawer and found a couple of knives missing.

Rania: Where did you find them?

Jane: I found them in our room underneath his bed. This was kind of a turning point for me because I felt like I wasn’t raising a regular human being. I don’t know -- I felt like my child was possessed or something. Despite yelling and questioning him, he didn’t say a word. He just sat expressionless as my husband and I tried to reprimand him for what he was doing.

Rania: While it may seem like Jane is raising a demonic child, I think now is a good time to consider that her son might actually have antisocial behavioral disorders, conduct and oppositional defiant disorder in particular. Let’s revisit the symptoms of both.

Rania: Conduct Disorder or CD is characterized by aggressive behavior, cruelty to both humans and animals, destructive and deceitful, and difficulty following rules and respecting others. Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is similar in that it presents itself as anger, irritability, and active defiance.

Rania: From the symptoms alone, it is clear that Jane’s son exhibits many of these behaviors -- his anger and violence towards his sister, his violent threats towards his babysitter and even his callous unemotional behavior towards his family in general. While yes, it is easy to simply write off his behavior to him being an evil child, it seems to me that this child has onset symptoms of these behavioral disorders. Even though some children and adolescents are genetically

predisposed to certain antisocial disorders, it is important to keep in mind that the collectiveness of some risk factors can aggravate the presence of such disorders.

Rania: What can you tell me about the environment that your family lives in?

Jane: As in home environment or as in surrounding geographical environment?

Rania: Both.

Jane: Well, I think we do have a good home environment. Like I said before, we doted on our son a lot before his sister was born especially since he was our only child. We live in a small basement apartment in Flatbush, Brooklyn. I don't think we live in a bad area, but other people might disagree. What I can tell you in terms of stats and demographic is that there is a minority populated area, with big African Americans and Latino communities. The schools in our area and zip code, however, do not perform at grade level, which I don't think is necessarily the fault of the school and faculty. Schools try their best to work with the funds and resources that are allocated to them, which is not much.

Rania: Two etiological factors that can aggravate antisocial behavior are environment and human interactions, specifically parental interactions. The plasticity theory states that individuals with risk alleles are easily influenced by their environment, whether it is for better or for worse. Someone, especially a child or adolescent, with genetic risk for violence will be more likely to engage in antisocial behavior when placed in a bad environment (Barnes et al). Direct contact with violence, whether it is crime or maybe even aggressive behavior from other students in the classroom, could trigger such behavior in the child as well. Considering the neighborhood that Jane and her family live in, this is a possible risk factor for her son. Harsh parenting is also

something that could be aggravating his behaviors. Although both Jane and her husband love their son, there is no denying that their behavior towards him has changed since his outbursts and aggressive tendencies. The manner in which the two reprimand this child, i.e. yelling, can be a further cause of aggravation in the child. A study has shown that parents who are harsh in their approach with their children can cause the underdevelopment of the amygdala, the part of the brain that is responsible for emotion. The amygdala is sensitive to stress, and stress from cold parental responses will lead it to not maturing fully. This leads to antisocial behaviors because the youth will not respond to fear (Gardener et al). In the case of Jane's son, we see that the possible harshness in their responses to his behavior could further be exasperating his callousness. It seems that he is already not responding to punishment and fear, seeing as time-outs do not faze him in the slightest.

Rania: I know some people might be hearing this and thinking, who cares? I, for one, think that it's important to learn and consider things like this. Some people might not be aware that such disorders exist and can affect children in the way that they do. In recognizing this and acknowledging this as a possibility, there might still be hope for the child. Jane's son might seem bad, but consider that for the first four years of his life he was fine. He was a good child. I'm going to end off with reiterating John Locke's theory of tabula rasa. We are all born as clean moral slates. Some of us might just be predisposed to things that others aren't. On that note, thank you for listening in on the first episode of "Good or Inherently Evil?" Until next time.