

Viruses and the Evil Urge

By David Kraemer

Recently I received an urgent e-mail message from a friend, informing me, with profound apologies, that she had unknowingly sent me a computer virus with an earlier e-mail. She proceeded to provide directions for eliminating the virus, telling me how to find the virus, with its characteristic icons, and how to delete it—not just once (sending it to the recycle bin), but twice (thus eliminating all possibility of re-awakening it). Having been the near victim of earlier virus scams and hoaxes, I called her by phone and asked her how she knew these files were actually viruses. She told me that she had gotten the same message from another friend, and she was just passing along the information to people on her address list. So I logged onto the Norton Anti-Virus Web site, and soon discovered that this “virus” warning was, in fact, a hoax, one that had people deleting important parts of a resident program. At the same time, I was provided with a means to check for another “virus” (the KlezH worm), so I downloaded the necessary programs and proceeded, for the next hour and a half, to take the necessary steps to discover, in the end, that my computer was clean. No harm done. Much time wasted. I then went to walk the dog.

As I was out walking, much frustrated and disgusted at the time I had just wasted, I realized that the “viruses” I had been searching out were not viruses at all! They were the intentional, malicious creations of mean-spirited people who apparently thought it would be “fun” to mess up my computer—and the computers of many others. What was particularly galling to me was that these malicious programs offered their creators no gain. They were not stealing something from me (aside from my time and sanity, which they could not possess), nor were they gaining access to information that might benefit them. On the contrary, the only consequence of their designs was to create havoc for others, and this, it seems, gives them pleasure. From this I have learned something important about “human nature” and its consequences for human societies.

In the ‘80s and ‘90s, I was as quick as the next guy to dismiss the notion of a “human nature.” It was all socially constructed, I would say—though this was an academic orthodoxy concerning which I always had my doubts. But my reflection on the computer virus-plague leads me to conclude that, in one crucial respect, at least, there *is* a human nature. Simply put, it is in the nature of humans—not all humans, but always some humans—to do bad, to do evil, to do harm, to plague others. This is a human quality that has long been recognized, and the explanation for which has long been mythologized. The Jewish tradition calls it “*yetzer hara*,” not, as it is frequently mistranslated, “the evil inclination,” but, more correctly, “the urge to do

evil.” And this is an urge to do evil *for its own sake*, not because the perpetrator will benefit but because, kind of like Everest, the opportunity is there. And since the opportunity will always exist, there will always be the virus programmer. We will always be in the position of having to protect ourselves against ourselves.

The fact that there will always be some humans who are pursuers of evil means that the sorts of suspicion and distrust provoked by their presence in our midst will always be a part of our social existence. Who are you? What do you want with me? What do you want *from* me? These are the sorts of questions we shall never be free to neglect – not in the face-to-face world nor in the cyber-world of e-mail, and virtual identities. Or if we do neglect these questions, we will live with the consequences. Sure, if we build good defenses we will be able to relax for a short while. But the malicious programmer will surely find a way to subvert them. As quick and efficient as the virus update programs might be, they can only, at best, react to the last virus even as someone somewhere is busy working to invent yet another more virulent bug.

Does the language I just used sound like the frequent observations and cautions regarding our collective security following 9/11? Sure it does. And, to me, the fact that we can use similar language concerning our programming enemy (call him a cyber-terrorist) and our al Qaeda enemy demands a sober recognition. As I have already suggested, the programming enemy is an outgrowth of who we, collectively, are. Some humans are mostly evil and all humans are partly evil. This is the troubling reality of the human animal, and it is inescapable. But if the cyber-terrorist is of and like “us,” and if, as the language we have used suggests, the cyber-terrorist is like the al Qaeda terrorist, then “we” are like “them.” The “they” who conspire against us and seek our harm—in part motivated by religious and socio-political factors, but in part merely moved by their inclination to do evil—are an extreme form of who we all are or might be. Perhaps, if we remember this, we will better understand “them” and find a way across the chasm that separates us and exposes us to such danger.