Demons and thought fallacies

Thoughts and feelings can end up in locked patterns and habits. The reason for this is that thoughts run along the neurons which are made in the brain. They take the path of least resistance, preferring to follow the brain's highways. In doing so, they make the roads they travel wider. They are self-reinforcing by nature. The illustrator of this

> I define demons as thought patterns or habits which lead to behavior that does not benefit you, or to negative emotions. A demon is a rotten reality filter.

book, who is also a friend of mine, refers to this as a bicycle track. Imagine a cyclist who is biking in a circle over and over again. In time, a deep track is created which the bicycle will follow. The longer the time, the harder it is to steer in another direction.

Some of these patterns are beneficial, such as when we brush our teeth before going to bed. Other patterns and habits can be extremely disadvantageous. It does not harm anybody if you prefer to eat breakfast before you shower (or vice versa). Yet the thought patterns of depressed people directly or indirectly lead to

depression, sadness and a poor ability to function in society. I refer to these thoughts and behavior patterns as demons.

Demons can manifest themselves in several ways, both conscious and subconscious, such as when you get an urge to revel in unhealthy food when you get upset, or when you believe that nobody could love you because you have been rejected by somebody of the opposite sex. Other demons function as a voice of inner criticism inside the mind.[i]

Note that this is a metaphor. I am not writing about demons such as those found in films like *The Exorcist.* I am referring to parts of *your own psyche* which do not benefit you, not a creature which comes from the outside and takes control. You can see these demons as the small red devils in cartoons, which sit on the shoulder and whisper bad advice. I am not referring to biblical demons, but to purely psychological ones.

This is a relatively complex concept, which is best explained through examples. The following is an everyday example, followed by a more serious situation.

One day you are called in by your boss for a meeting. The boss is satisfied

and commends you for the work you have done recently. By and large, he has only positive things to say. Nevertheless, at the end of the conversation he mentions one area that requires improvement. He thinks that you could be better at giving constructive feedback to your colleagues, as you can be a little negative in the department meetings.

You leave the meeting with a bad feeling. You do not consider for a second all of the commendations you have just received, but think only of the last comment; that you are negative with your colleagues. *There goes that promotion,* you think. *The boss sees me as a negative element at the office.* The rest of the day you are in a bad mood, and you are miserable when you get home from work. You end up in a fight with your spouse, and you snap at your children because they have not done their homework.

This is an example of a relatively mild demon: focusing on the negative in a situation and ignoring the positive. Now for the other example:

Imagine that you are on your way to a party where there are many people

you do not know. You enter the party venue and immediately get a bad feeling. You feel that people are looking at you with skepticism, or almost hostility. You sense a lump in your stomach, a well-known fear which increases with every passing minute. The fear gives way to panic and you look frantically around for somebody you know, yet no one can be found. They probably have not yet arrived.

Now, luckily you spot an old acquaintance, Robert. You go over to him. He is standing in a circle of people you have never seen before, and they look at you with irritation as you interrupt their conversation. Robert greets you, but is clearly irritated also. This is the last straw, so you excuse yourself and quickly leave the apartment and the party.

On the way home you flay yourself for having ruined yet another party, for again having failed to deal with a social event. You are totally incapable, you say to yourself, you should simply go and hang yourself. You are worthless! You go home and lie down in bed, taking with you a deep depression which remains throughout the long, dark night.

The above example is written from the 'protagonist's' perspective. Yet had Robert

been asked about the incident the following day, he would have said he was glad to see the protagonist, and that it was unfortunate that he had left so soon. Robert was not irritated in the slightest; he was simply in the middle of a story when the protagonist showed up. In the protagonist's perspective, this was interpreted as irritation and rejection.

I believe that this is a relatively typical example of how social anxiety and depression can occur. The above example shows how demons can change everything you experience, color everything in dark hues and transform all things positive to negative. It also shows how dangerous demons can be, how they can utterly destroy lives. A lot of people go through such experiences many times each and every day.

Demons are found in the subconscious and are formed in the aftermath of one or more past experiences. They can, for example, come from an assault or other traumatic childhood experience. Some demons originally begin as beneficial thought patterns which later spin out of control. A good example of this is worries. If you never worry, the chances of being injured in an accident increase. In this way, worries are good. But if you spend several hours every day worrying about everything that can theoretically occur (and which almost never occurs),

these worries have become a demon. It was made to help, to support or to defend you, but then it became twisted and mutated over time – and suddenly it was no longer a helper, but a torturer.

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Another way of seeing this phenomenon is to view it as a "machine in the brain". We all have 'machines' in the brain, which produce different things. For example, we have a calculating machine, which produces more or less accurate answers to mathematical problems. We have communication machines which produce more or less effective communication in verbal or written form. Clearly this is also a metaphor – there are no gears in the brain, but there are specialized neural pathways which have particular purposes, which remember things, control the body, reason and so on.

In the depressed, however, one may find machines which are effective producers of things like sadness, despair, bitterness, jealousy and low self-image. These machines function perfectly in principle – they can produce enormous amounts of the products they are configured to produce. The problem is that the

products are wrong. But we can reconfigure the machine so that it produces another product. Or we can turn it off.

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We can defeat demons and become stronger and wiser in the process. The first thing you must do is to be aware of the demons – get to know them. Afterwards you must accept their existence in order to create a strategy to defeat them. In the end a plan is implemented, resulting in a situation where the demon no longer holds the same degree of power, or where it is gone forever. This provides a feeling of mastery, which in turn gives courage and energy to push on with the work.

Mastery, willpower and self-confidence are central concepts when hunting demons. This process will certainly include some defeats and disappointments along the way. You do not win every battle you engage in. To build a better version of yourself is a little like playing *Snakes and Ladders:* you fall down a level or two every so often, but also find ladders which provide a substantial jump upward.

Perseverance and decisiveness will be important personality traits in this process. Do not lose heart if these are currently not your strongest traits, because this book includes techniques to strengthen them. The trick is to build up self-confidence and willpower slowly but surely through the mastery of those challenges you currently have the ability in which to succeed. It is a little like high-diving – a novice does not begin on the highest diving board. In the same way, try to not take on too much in the beginning, but instead start slowly and equip yourself with time and patience. A good strategy is to endeavor to win many small victories over time, while not allowing the small defeats to knock you out of the battle. If you have a head full of demons, you probably have had them for some time. You will manage holding out for a few years, as long as you know that you are moving in the right direction.

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If you visit a professional therapist, it is quite unlikely that they will use the term *demon,* even if they understand what the patient is talking about. Cognitive psychologists will rather speak of flawed ways of thinking, which I refer to as

thought fallacies. I see thought fallacies as that which the demon is built of.

The reason I insist on using the word *demon* is that in many cases the phenomenon can have an enormous impact on one's life. This is not simply a little annoying tendency to have negative thoughts, but instead refers to inner problems which can completely paralyze and destroy a life.

In the 60s and 70s the American psychologists Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis developed what we today know as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). The core of CBT is to understand how you think, and how you can change this way of thinking over time so that you get to experience an improved quality of life. One searches specifically for disadvantageous thought patterns, which can be called thought fallacies. There are many good books on CBT, and I especially recommend *Change Your Thinking with CBT* by Sarah Edelman. It is full of examples of different thought fallacies, making it easier to understand which thought fallacies you have. Here is an overview of the most important types:

Generalizing

We generalize all the time. In many cases this is fine. Saying that 'all cats are sweet' is quite harmless, even if this is obviously not always the case. But

thoughts like 'I never succeed at anything' or 'everyone I know is an idiot' represent damaging generalizations.

"Should-ing"

In my world the word *should* is one with little usefulness. It is a judging word which says that there is something you should have done but did not, or vice versa. It is a word which inevitably carries with it a bad conscience. *I should exercise, I should eat less candy, I should visit my mother more often.* In this book you will not find the word *should* often. It is fine being aware of what actions are appropriate, but constantly going around with a bad conscience is of little use. "Should-ing" is fortunately relatively easy to eliminate. Simply exchange the word *should* with *can* in all situations. *Can* is a word which opens up possibilities and holds no form of judgment, such as that found in *should.*

Over-dramatizing

It is normal for people to over-dramatize the negative things they experience such as receiving a parking ticket. It is irritating to get parking tickets, and sometimes

people do not have the money to pay the fine, but they do not represent the end of the world. Over-dramatizing is what you do when you take a negative incident and inflate its significance.

Polarizing

The world is not divided into black and white; rather, different phenomena and events occur along a gray scale. Just the same, many of us insist on sorting things into just two categories, that is to say polarizing, for example, by dividing people into either *good* or *bad* categories. This is a gross oversimplification. All attributes are distributed along scales – it is not as though a person is either funny or completely devoid of humor. Nor is someone either completely evil or totally good.

Personalizing

This thought error refers to taking responsibility for something that occurs, even though it is not your responsibility. Personalizing is not recognizing the wise words of Reinhold Niebuhr at the beginning of this book (read them again). There

are many things that happen, both good and bad, which are completely or partially out of our control. Life can get quite heavy if you go around taking responsibility for everything that happens. One example of this thought fallacy is when a friend is in a bad mood, and you believe that it is your fault. We cannot take responsibility for others' feelings.

Blaming

Blaming is the opposite of personalizing. This is what we do when we blame external forces or people for something, when we hold partial responsibility for that which has happened. The truth usually lies somewhere in between these two extremes. Always blaming others makes you blind to the fact that the real problem sometimes lies with you. An example is a worker who arrives late every day at the office, and then blames the boss when they get fired for it. Another is when a partner leaves due to the other's infidelity, and the unfaithful partner insists that it was the other which drove them to it.

Mind reading

We often go around believing that such-and-such a person thinks such-and-such about us, and more often than not it is something negative. *She doesn't like me,* one can think. We often make such conclusions based on misinterpretations of expressions or body language. Maybe the person in this example had a bad day the last time they met, and for this reason was not especially friendly. To conclude that *she does not like me* because of this is mind reading, and it is a useless way of thinking.

Filtering

People with depression have a tendency to latch on to the negative in a situation. They filter information, straining out the positive and ending up with a soup of negativity – like a teenager with nearly straight A's on his report card getting hung up on the one C, or the hostess who believes the whole dinner is ruined because she burned the cake. Unfortunately, they will then make the situation much worse by throwing over-dramatizing into the mix. Not only was the dinner ruined, but her husband will hate her for it and leave her.

Put aside the book for a moment, and think about some incidents you have experienced lately. Can you recognize some thought fallacies you have made? If the answer is yes, jot them down in a notebook or journal. To eliminate the thought fallacies you make, you must first know what they are.

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[i] Here people can be very different. Many do not have voices in their head at all. Others have inner dialogues which are manifested as voices in their head. Some have critical voices, which I describe as demons in the cases where they work against you. These voices often sound like one's own voice. On the other hand there are people who hear voices from external people (sometimes even from famous figures like Jesus or the devil) in their head - in other words, voices that are not their own. They will often be diagnosed with schizophrenia.