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A Good Dalek: Morality In Doctor Who

Throughout the lengthy canon of human storytelling, mankind has invented countless monsters. Some are born from a simple fear of things we couldn’t explain, like strange fossils that people couldn’t identify or weather phenomena. Some are born out of a fear of death. Some come from a cultural anxiety based in xenophobic fear of a malevolent social other. Many are born from the fear of what lies inside humanity, what we are and what we can become. To some extent, all monsters are reflections of the humans who fear them. They are the things we fear to experience, the things we fear to understand and things we fear to be. For that reason, most stories about monsters center around the method by which people can kill these monsters. In doing so, those telling the story aim to allegorically kill that which the monster represents, banish the fear, and allow themselves to return comfortably to the present. However, sometimes people are willing to look in the dark mirror that monsters provide and ask themselves: What am I really afraid of? These stories examine what separates a good person from a monster. Is there some innate goodness that monsters are born without? Is it mere happenstance that keeps good people from becoming monstrous? Is there no difference at all? The acclaimed and long running sci-fi series *Doctor Who* proposes a different answer to this question when it explores the show’s most famous and terrifying villains, the Daleks. The Doctor’s endless struggle against the Daleks and their campaign against all other life pushes them to the limits of their morality and forces them to consider the doing the unthinkable time and time again. Occasionally they even force the Doctor to do monstrous things just to save the universe from safe from them. At their core, the Daleks remind the Doctor that kindness and morality are not innate qualities, but choices that must be made over and over to retain one’s humanity.

However, what makes a Dalek scary? Why does the Doctor hate them so much? It’s not just because the Daleks murder millions of people. Many of the Doctor’s foes have body counts that are beyond imagining. The Daleks have a uniquely terrifying brand of evil that sets them apart.

The terror of the Dalek’s has multiple levels. The first of which is in their very design. They are not humanoid in the slightest. They have no face, only a single cold blue eye stalk. There are no bared fangs or furious expression. This makes it nearly impossible to understand what a Dalek is thinking, no way to tell if it will kill you or not. This also makes the Dalek’s slaughter feel impersonal like the Dalek doesn’t even register their victims as people. Daleks do not have legs and instead hover just off the ground. Instead of running or marching towards you, Daleks simply advance towards you steadily. However, what truly sets the Dalek’s apart is the unique sound design that accompanies them and makes them so easily recognizable. The sound a Dalek makes while moving, the sound of its blaster, the music cues that play whenever the Daleks are revealed are all kept mostly consistent throughout the series. The Daleks voice is easy to pick up on. It is shrill, mechanical, and filled with synthetic rage. Daleks speak in very short sentences that lack contractions, turns of phrase or anything that is not directly related to they’re task. Simultaneously they speak in highly technical terms. Where a human enemy might say “I need you to find the Doctor”, a Dalek would yell “The Doctor must be located!”. Frequently Daleks will simply repeat a word or phrase twice with emphasis on the second (ex: “Explain! Explain!) when they demand something. And of course, nothing about the Daleks inspires more fear than their most iconic battle cry: “Exterminate! Exterminate!”. All of this comes together to create an effect of near instantaneous dread and hopeless terror whenever the Daleks are revealed to be present. This is best exemplified in the Daleks’ first appearance in the rebooted Doctor Who in “Dalek”. When the 9th Doctor encounters the broken Dalek, he is in complete darkness, all it takes is hearing the Dalek’s voice to send the Doctor screaming for the exit. Rarely, if ever, do we see the Doctor this terrified. Likewise, when the Daleks are revealed to be behind the moving of the Earth in “The Stolen Earth”, it immediately causes all the companions to despair. Jack kisses his friends on the head saying “There’s nothing I can do. We’re dead”. Sarah Jane Smith cries, hugging her son and lamenting how he’s too young to die. And in a way they’re right to be so afraid because nothing ever seems to be able to stop the Daleks from killing who they want to kill. For example, in “Dalek” Rose believes for a moment that she is safe when a Dalek appears to be unable to ascend stairs, only for the Dalek to start flying. Linda, in “The Parting of the Ways” thinks she’s safe behind sealed doors, only for a Dalek to shatter the window behind sending her out into space. Bullets don’t seem to even phase Daleks, most weapons can’t even touch them. The Daleks weapon only needs to hit someone once to instantly kill them. And somehow, the Dalek’s always survive. No matter how many times the Doctor destroys them they always return. The Daleks survived the being blown up by the Moment in the Time War, being turned to dust by Rose with all the power of the Time Vortex (The Parting of the Ways), being dragged into the void between worlds (“Doomsday”) and being destroyed by the Metacrisis Doctor. If even one Dalek escapes, they will regain their strength and attack again.

Most importantly, Daleks cannot ever be reasoned with. They cannot be bought. Appeals to morality don’t work on Daleks as they have no morals. They don’t fear death most of the time. Even deals with the Daleks inevitably end in betrayal and death as, Mr. Diagoras finds out in “Daleks In Manhattan” when his loyalty and service to the Daleks only earns him the right to be the first human to be forcibly converted into a human/dalek hybrid. The only thing a Dalek wants, they only thing a Dalek needs is to kill anything and everything that isn’t a Dalek. Nothing else will satisfy them. Their xenophobic quest for universal genocide, their obsession with remaining racially pure, and their ambition to make Daleks the supreme race and the only race in the universe, causes the Daleks to parallel real-world fascists like Hitler and his ilk. This only adds to their terror. In “Journey’s End” they even attempt to erase the whole of reality. Never once do they consider what they will do once they have actually achieved their goals, what will happen if they do become the only beings in existence. There is no way to convince a Dalek that achieving this goal is not good for the universe. Various Daleks have tried to change this paradigm and have failed every time. In “Evolution of the Daleks” Dalek Sek attempts to convince the Cult of Skarro that the Dalek’s quest for supremacy only ever resulted in their own destruction. For this, he is labeled as an abomination and is captured and eventually murdered. Any spark of change is seen by the Daleks as an abomination that must be purged.

It is a frequent occurrence that the Doctor will be confronted by the possibility of changing the Daleks for the better and they always have their hopes crushed. The 10th Doctor attempts to help Dalek Sek build a new race of human Daleks and find them a new world where they can develop into a new and better version of themselves. Then, the Dalek’s exterminate every one of the hybrids along with any chance for a rebirth of the Daleks. In “Into the Dalek”, the 12th Doctor attempts to redeem Rusty by sharing his vision of the universe with him, only to have the Dalek interpret it as a command to exterminate the other Daleks. In “The Witch’s Familiar” the Doctor begins to feel pity for a dying Davros who expresses regret over the way his and the Doctor’s fight has ruined them both, only for it to be revealed to be a trick by Davros so he could steal regeneration energy from the Doctor to revive himself and upgrade the Daleks. Time and time again, the Doctor is shown that the Daleks are utterly irredeemable beings. They will never change and are only capable of hate and murder. They are everything the Doctor has stood against for their entire life. If allowed to continue operating they will wipe out all life and possibly the universe with it. Fighting them would seem to be the most black and white course of action for a heroic person to do. So, what makes it complicated?

The rebooted *Doctor Who* changes the Doctor’s characterization in one fundamental way. The Doctor is now the last of the Timelords with the guilt of the genocide of their own people and the Daleks on their hands. The Doctor is no longer just a jolly hero with a flawless moral code, they are a war criminal. Even if it was with noble intentions to end the Time War, the Doctor now must live with the lives they took and the knowledge that he’s capable of killing again. Frequently, the Doctor, in a desperate attempt to achieve victory or enact vengeance towards a particularly hated enemy, will go over the edge and must be brought back into the light by their companions. One such instance is when they drown the Racnoss’s children in “The Runaway Bride”. When the Doctor wants to be, they are capable of ruthless efficiency and cruelty. In “The Family of Blood”, upon defeating the titular family, 10 punishes each one with a personal eternal torment that they can never escape and does so without a drop of anger on his face. Sometimes the Doctor’s dark side comes out, not in their attempts to kill their enemies, but also in their attempts to save people they care about. In the special “The Waters of Mars”, the 10th Doctor attempts to save Captain Adelaide Brook even though her death is a fixed point in time and doing so could jeopardize the future of the entire human race. He justifies this ludicrous breach of ethics by saying that being the last of the Timelords gives him the right to force time to be whatever he wants it to be. As heroic as the Doctor is most of the time, they are always close to losing themself.

And nowhere does this thin line become clearer than when they run into the Daleks. Rarely does the Doctor show as much visceral anger as when dealing with the Dalek’s. Usually, the Doctor tries to keep even their enemies alive. When the Master kills 1/10th of humanity in “The Last of the Timelords” using the TARDIS and the cannibalized corpses of billions of future humans, the Doctor still finds it in their heart to forgive him. In “The Doctor’s Daughter” when General Cobb shoots the 10th Doctor’s daughter right in front of him, they still don’t take revenge. However, when the Daleks capture Rose in “The Parting of the Ways” the 9th Doctor makes it clear that the first thing that he will do after saving Rose and the rest of humanity is “…wipe every last stinking Dalek out of the sky”. Even when the Doctor does kill monsters, rarely do they ever do it with such mad fury as with the Daleks. In “Victory of the Daleks”, the 11th Doctor furiously beats a Dalek over the head with a wrench and screams at it to get it to reveal its violent nature. He is so bent on ensuring that the Daleks can never return that he almost lets several English soldiers sacrifice themselves. The Doctor, who is always so cool-headed and high-minded can’t help but be filled with single minded hate when confronted with the Daleks. It was the Dalek’s who pushed them to do the unthinkable to their own people. In their mind, the Daleks are the reason why they continue to suffer. As 10 says in “Daleks in Manhattan”, “They survived. They always survive, while I lose everything”. Sometimes this hate makes the Daleks experience real fear for the first time. It’s the reason the Doctor is called “The Oncoming Storm”. However, sometimes their reaction is not hatred, but something far worse: admiration.

The first time we the Daleks draw parallels between the Doctor and themselves is in “Dalek”. After learning about the fates of the Daleks and Timelords by the Doctor’s hand, the broken Dalek tells the Doctor that they are the same. The 9th Doctor starts to deny it, but he can’t. Instead, he doubles down and tortures the Dalek. It is later in the episode when the Doctor commands the Dalek to take its own life that the Dalek remarks “You would make a good Dalek.” The Time War has changed him, he has spent too long having to make terrible choices and do terrible things just to survive and protect the people he cares about. The old Doctor could have easily rebuked this Dalek’s comment. He could point to his motives, his actions, his principles. But now, he has known hate, true hate, the hate that only comes out of seeing people slaughtered by the thousands and being unable to stop it. Now, he has taken lives on a scale that most soldiers couldn’t even imagine. He has been in the position to make choices that could affect the fates of whole planets. He thinks differently now. Things that were never on the table are now options that can be considered. For example, the Doctor makes a point to never carry a gun. One of the defining features of their brand of heroism is that they save the universe carrying, not a weapon, but a screwdriver. They solve their problems with their mind by finding clever ways to reverse the damage of villains or trick them into foiling their own schemes. Failing that their prevailing strategy is to simply tell their companions to run away. However, to stop the Dalek from escaping, the 9th Doctor brandishes an enormous alien rifle and threatens the to shoot the Dalek. In his mind, whatever it takes to end the Daleks forever, to finally put an end to this cycle of death and hatred, is justified. He only stops when Rose asks him “What about you, Doctor? What the hell are you changing into?”

The comparisons between the Doctor and the Dalek’s continue throughout the series. A major subplot in the finale of Season 4 is a prophecy made by the insane Dalek Caan who saw into time and predicted that, at the moment of truth, the Doctors true self will be revealed. That moment comes when Martha threatens to use the Osterhagen Key to destroy the Earth in order to prevent Davros from detonating the Reality Bomb which would erase all of Reality at the same time as Jack Harkness threatens to use the Warp Star to destroy the Crucible. This time not only has the Doctor become a killer, but his followers, the people who are usually the ones to talk him down from the edge have now put destroying the world on the table. Davros calls him out on this, saying that just like he created the Daleks, the Doctor turns ordinary people into soldiers, soldiers who will happily kill and die for him. The Dalek Parliament in “Asylum of the Daleks” reveals that the Daleks have a concept of beauty centered around hatred that prevents them from disposing of the insane Daleks in the Asylum. The head Dalek suggests that perhaps that concept of beauty is why they have never been able to kill the Doctor. In “Into the Dalek” the 12th Doctor shrinks down travels inside the body of Rusty, a Dalek who appears to have developed a conscience. He bitterly sets out to prove that the Dalek can’t have changed. When he changes his mind, the thing that eventually dooms his hopes of redeeming Rusty is that when Rusty looks into the Doctors mind all he sees is a pure and violent hatred of the Daleks. Rusty says that by Dalek standards, he is failure, but the Doctor is a prodigy. For the Doctor, having their worst enemies, the most senselessly cruel and violent beings in the universe praise them is a horrifying and stark reminder of how fragile their own morality is. “The Witch’s Familiar” presents the Doctor with complicated Dilemma, if presented with Davros as a child, would he be willing to let him die, thus preventing the Daleks from ever being created in the first place. It’s such a seemingly simple choice. As innocent as the child may look, he will one day grow to be one of the worst people ever to live and his creations will be responsible for the deaths of uncountable multitudes. Davros’s children will help make the Doctor the last of his kind and burden him with a guilt that he will carry for the rest of his lives. Surely sacrificing one child would be worth saving all those lives. However, as the Doctor has had to realize over and over again, you can’t use the ends to justify the means. Good intentions can never make a wrong act right. In the end, the Doctor almost always backs off and makes the right choice even if it’s hard.

No matter how often the Daleks and other enemies like the Master try to prove that the Doctor is no different from them, they always do the right thing in the end. How do they do this? Is it because the Doctor is a fundamentally good person that might be tempted occasionally, but can never be truly evil? No. There are two things that are key in helping the Doctor keep himself on the straight and narrow.

The first is that the same things that make the Doctor so vulnerable to hate and violence are also what make them capable of such compassion. The Doctor has lost everything, their own people, their friends, their home. They bear the weight of unimaginable guilt, the deaths of billions and for that reason they dedicate all their energy to making sure that no one else ever has to experience what they have experienced. As 12 explains in “The Zygon Inversion”

“I fought in a bigger war than you will ever know. I did worse things than you could ever imagine. And when I close my eyes, I hear more screams than anyone could ever be able to count! And do you know what you do with all that pain? Shall I tell you where you put it? You hold it tight till it burns your hand, and you say this. No one else will ever have to live like this. No one else will have to feel this pain. Not on my watch!”

The Doctor shows compassion, even to those who don’t deserve it. They refuse to let their hate consume them. Frequently, instead of simply punishing their enemies, they will reach out to them and try to get them to see reason. The Doctor knows the position they are in; they know how the guilt of doing horrible things can ruin a person because it has ruined them. This compassion can even extend to the Daleks. When the 10th Doctor confronts Dalek Caan at the end of “Evolution of the Daleks” he still tries to get the Dalek to see reason, because, as much as he hates the Daleks, he cannot stand to be responsible for another genocide. It is for that same reason that he banishes the Meta-Crisis Doctor to the parallel world in “Journey’s End” for eradicating the Daleks. It is because the Doctor realizes how fragile goodness is that they go out of their way to show compassion to everyone.

The second and most important source of moral strength for the Doctor are their friends, their companions and the ordinary people who are there to call the Doctor out and insist that they do the right thing. In “A Town Called Mercy”, the 11th Doctor leaves Jex to the mercy of the Gunslinger by holding him at gunpoint. As Amy tells the Doctor that he can’t do this, she remarks that moments like this are the result of him traveling alone for too long. And she’s right. We see this clearly demonstrated in two versions of the same scene displayed in “the Runaway Bride” and “Turn Left”. In the original scene, the 10th Doctor drowns the Racnoss’s children to save the Earth. He does so until Donna tells him to stop which pulls him out of his funk and makes him realize that he was going too far. “Turn Left” visits an alternate reality where the Doctor and Donna never met. In this timeline the Doctor never stops his attack on the Racnoss, and it ends up costing him his life. It was the Doctor being alone that lead to his hubristic spiral in “The Waters of Mars”. If Adelaide Brook didn’t stand her ground and take her own life, the Doctor’s attempts to make time bend to his whim would succeed and he could’ve caused irreparable damage. That same hubris is the cause of most of the Doctor’s bad decisions. They have a messiah complex that makes them believe that, not only must they be able to save everyone and fix every problem, but that they’re the only one who can. The Doctor needs ordinary human beings by their side. When the Doctor gets to absorbed by the big picture, they help bring them back down to earth and remind them of what’s truly important. In “The Day of the Doctor”, several versions of the Doctor are in the position of having to help their past-self end the Time-War and repeat their worst crime. It is Clara who forces the Doctors to remember the reason why they called themselves the Doctor to begin with. As 12 informs Missy in “Death In Heaven” when she tries to force him to conquer the world with an army of Cybermen:

“I am not a good man, and I'm not a bad man. I am not a hero and I'm definitely not a president and no I'm not an officer. You know what I am? I am an idiot, with a box and a screwdriver, just passing through, helping out, learning. I don't need an army, I never have, because I've got them, always them, because love is not an emotion, love is a promise."

It is difficult, nearly impossible, for a single person to remain morally pure when they are responsible for the safety of entire worlds. The Doctor realizes that sharing the burden with the people they love is essential to making sure that they keep trying to save everyone and do the right thing, even when it doesn’t work out.

As much as *Doctor Who* at its core is an idealistic show that centers on fundamentally good and heroic people, it does not pretend that kindness and morality are easy qualities to attain. Doing the right thing means doubting yourself at every turn. It means feeling the guilt of knowing that you won’t be able to save everyone every time. It means having to make hard choices and sacrifices. Being kind is a strenuous endeavor that the Doctor must keep working at every day. And they do. That is what makes them a hero and what separates them from the Daleks. They make the choice every day to try to do what’s right. Sometimes they fail, but they always try again. Every time they come face to face with the Daleks, the Doctor is forced to remember how important making that choice is and the consequences of not making it. That is a far more attainable ideal of goodness for a hero than the ideals of perfection espoused by other stories of heroes fighting monsters. No one is born good, but everyone can become good, if only they are willing to try.