On Monday morning, the Washington Post carried a pair of headlining articles. One focused on the mass murder in Aurora last week, the other on a pickup truck crash in Texas. In the first, 12 people were killed and more than 50 wounded, while in the second 14 people were killed and 9 injured.

The first event quickly became a national tragedy; the second did not. The first event generated daily headline stories; the second fell off the main news before the end of the day. The first gained a presidential visit; the second did not.

The first event, the mass murder, was quickly declared to be “evil.” The second, the wreck of the pickup truck, was just an accident, even though more people were killed.

The loss of life and the number of people injured in both of these events were large in scope as well as both tragic and horrifying in their human consequences. But we see one as evil and not the other. Why is that? What is our intuitive definition of evil that motivates us to classify these events in this way?

President Obama twice called the mass murder evil. During his Saturday press conference he said, “Such evil is senseless -- beyond reason.” By his Sunday speech in Aurora, he took the deed’s evil character for granted, referring to the killer as “the perpetrator of this evil act.” Similarly, most news articles and commentaries have assumed that this was an evil deed. There has been no questioning or debate on that point.

So what makes mass murder evil and mass death not? It is clearly not the body count.

Perhaps in part evil comes from premeditation. The killer planned to murder and injure a large number of people. He bought thousands of rounds of ammunition. He purchased an assault rifle and other guns to deliver them to his victims. He protected himself to make it difficult for others to interfere with his murderous actions.

Perhaps our sense of evil comes from its random character. The predator did not care who died as long as someone did. He did not target particular individuals who he thought had wronged him, nor did he target groups of people based on age, racial, religious or other prejudice or hatred. He just wanted to shoot human beings, preferably a lot of them.

The killer must have had a motive, but our sense that his actions were evil does not require us to know it or to take it into account. While we want to know why he did the deed in a (vain?) hope that the information will help us make sense of the horrific event, we do not need that information to determine its evil character.

President Obama made an observation on Saturday that may suggest an answer. He said, “What matters in the end ... [is] how we choose to treat one another, and love one another. It's what we do on a daily basis to give our lives meaning and to give our lives purpose.” While few of us treat everyone as kindly as we should, most of us recognize that our kindness and politeness to others usually comes back to us. We participate in this social agreement.

So if life’s meaning comes from the way we treat and love others, then a person who purposely kills randomly is decidedly evil. Such a person intends to act to harm people not because they have harmed him, but because they are human. He derives meaning by violating the social compact of kindness that most of us recognize. His murderous actions are not about revenge (rightly or wrongly) against an individual who harmed him, but against humanity as a whole, whether children, adults or old people.

In this instance, then, evil is defined as the intentional, premeditated repudiation of the way we understand our ties to other people. However individualistic we are, we sense that this constitutes an attack on the fabric of our society. It is humanity and human society that is somehow seen as the most appropriate target of violence and murder. The people killed in the truck accident tragically lost their lives, but their death was caused by an accident of a moment rather than premeditated evil.