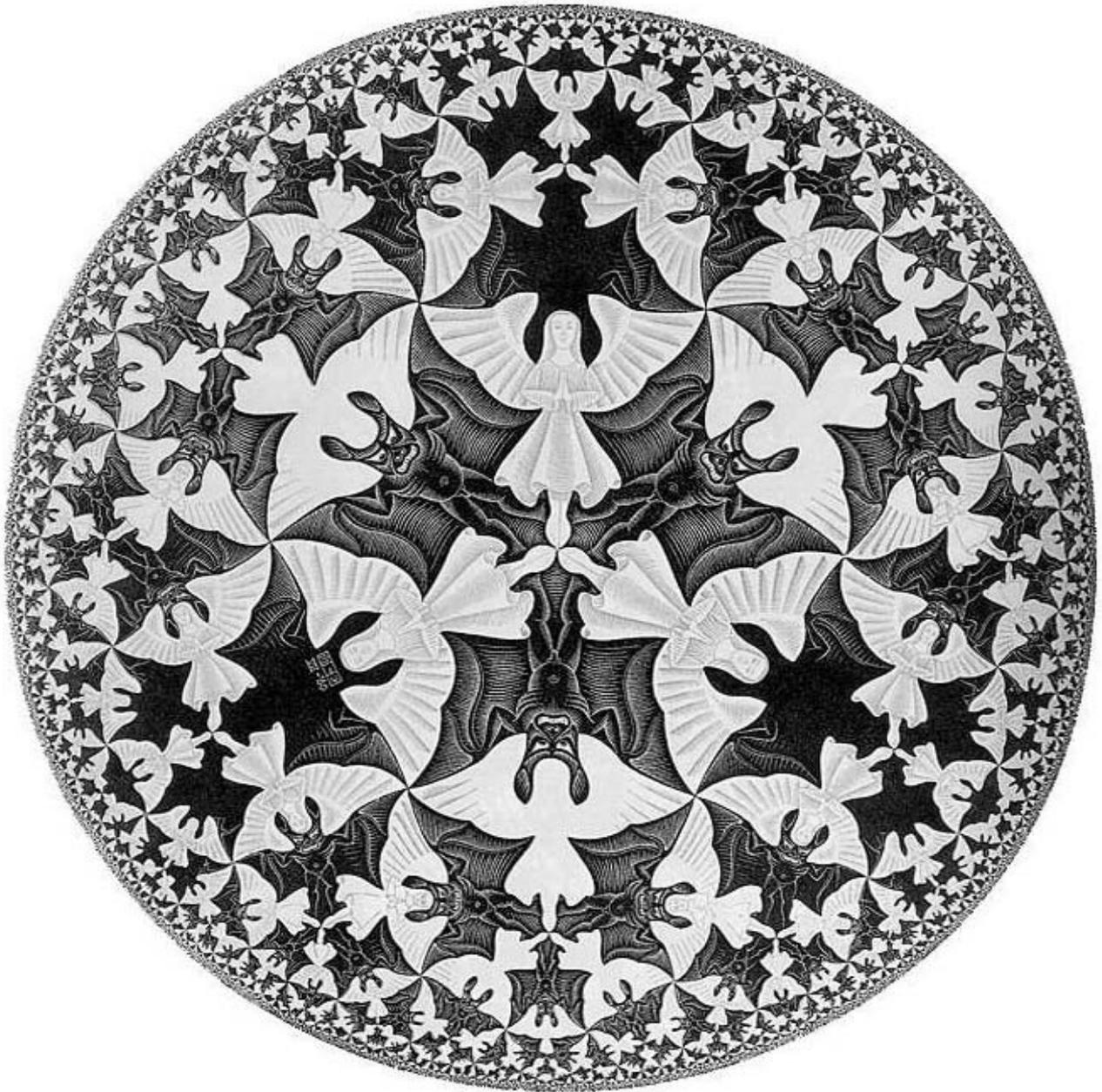


The Line Between Good and Evil



An essay by Anna Rømcke Høiseth

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What Causes People to Commit Evil Deeds?

- a study in humans' moral, psyche and social self -

Introduction

Evil comes in many shapes and forms. Whether it is dictators responsible for horrible genocides, prison guards in Abu Ghraib, or two young, English boys brutally murdering the two-year-old, James Bulger. When exposed to such evil, we are shocked and sickened, but perhaps most of all, fascinated. How is it possible for people to go through with these atrocities? We might then distance ourselves from the evildoers, and claim that we could never act in such a way. Is it only the sociopaths and the «bad apples» that commit evil deeds? Are they only the exceptions, and not the majority? Or is everyone capable of carrying out evil deeds?

In this essay, I will explore the nature of evil, and the psychology of the human mind. I will attempt to give an answer as to what makes us evil. Are we born with it, or do we become evil? In other words, are we essentially evil, or situationally evil? I will focus on the evildoers, not the bystanders, because I am interested in the active form, not the passive form. Furthermore, I will not turn to religion for the ultimate explanation of evil. The image of evil as an outer force occupying humans is of no interest in a scientific essay. However, I will mention religion's part in evildoings, because of its ideological power.

First, I will try to define evil, as best as I can, and then work from the basis of my definition. Then I shall look at the extreme cases of individual evil, such as sociopaths, serial killers

and so on. Afterwards, I will move on to collective evil, particularly focusing on the Stanford prison experiment, the Milgram experiment and the events that took place in Abu Ghraib. In addition to that, I will look at the Rwandan genocide. Throughout this essay, I will constantly return to my problem question, and the problematics of essential and situational evil - Is it the person or the situation who is to blame?

Definitions of Evil

Evil is an abstract word, and is therefore not easily defined. Nevertheless, I will do my best to try to find a useful definition. Here I am interested in the adjective, not the noun: to be evil, not an evil. The obvious thing to say about evil is that it is the opposite of good. However, this definition is too imprecise to be of much use. "The Free Dictionary" proposes; that which is "morally bad or wrong; wicked".¹ Hence something that is immoral, but also wicked. Wicked is defined as "evil by nature" or "malicious".² "The WordNet Search" at Princeton University's web pages has a similar definition: "morally objectionable behaviour" and "morally bad or wrong".³ Clearly, if something is evil it opposes morality. But whose morality? This is where the problem lies. Is a person evil if he or she acts according to his or hers morality? "Wikipedia" offers the explanation that something is evil if it violates "the most basic moral or ethical standards prescribed by a society, philosophy, or religion".⁴ Further, it says that since different societies have different morals, evil is not a fixed thing. So, if this definition has some validity, it is the society's morality, and not the individual's, that determines if something is evil.

However, both "The Free Dictionary" and "The WordNet Search's" definitions have a second significant part. The focus lies on the consequences of an action, not the intention. The Free Dictionary's second definition of evil is that which is "causing ruin, injury, or pain; harmful". Furthermore, the WordNet Search's is "that which causes harm or destruction or misfortune". Both focus on the consequences of an action. If it causes injury, pain or harm, it is considered evil. However, this definition is not functional on its own. In the event of an accident, for example a car crash, where an innocent person is killed, would that signify that the driver is evil? Even if the driver had no intention of killing, and could not have done anything differently.? No, it would be rather peculiar to call the driver evil, or even that the

1 Author unknown, «Evil» (The Free Dictionary, 2009) - <http://www.tfd.com/evil>

2 Author unknown, «Wicked» (The Free Dictionary, 2009) - <http://www.tfd.com/wicked>

3 Author unknown (WordNet Search – 3.0) - <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=evil>

4 Author unknown, «Evil» (Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 2011) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evil>

act was evil. But the second definition is not useless. On the contrary, it is rather important. I would argue that some acts are evil, because they cause such pain and horror, even if the perpetrator think he or she is acting morally correct. For example the persecution of Jews and the Inquisition.

There is no one definition of evil, it is a broad term. In Lars Fr. H. Svendsen's book, *Ondskapens filosofi* [The Philosophy of Evil], the author argues that trying to find one definition of evil is not fruitful, because it limits our understanding of the phenomena evil.⁵ He continues by proposing four different kinds of evil; the demonic, the instrumental, the idealistic and the ignorant form of evil. The demonic evil is the form of evil one thinks of first: It is evil for evil's sake. However, this evil is nowhere to be found in reality, only in fiction. Svendsen clarifies this in close detail in his book, and finds that there is always other motives that causes the perpetrator to act. Therefore, when I mention it, it is only to emphasize his point; that it is only an idea, and does not exist in reality. The second form of evil, the instrumental one, is where evil is used as a mean to reach a goal. "The end justifies the mean", is another way of describing it. This second form of evil is closely linked to the third kind of evil. This is the idealistic form, which is evil committed in the belief that it is good. Clear examples of the idealistic form of evil can be terrorism and persecutions. Furthermore, religion is noteworthy in this context, as was shown on 9/11. There are innumerable crimes committed in the name of God, such as sacrificing human life to appease gods. Other examples are the Inquisition, witch hunts and persecutions of religious minorities. Evil in the name of religion can be good examples of both instrumental and ideological evil. Firstly, it is instrumental because they are committed for a higher purpose, which is pleasing God or acting according to his wishes. Secondly, it is a good example of ideological evil, because they act in the belief that they are removing evil from the world, or adding goodness. The last category is the ignorant form of evil; the evil committed because the perpetrator either does not reflect on the consequences of his or hers actions, or fails to realise the consequences. Many cases(tilfeller?) can fall under more than one of the four categories, because there are often intricate reasons to why people act as they do. However, Svendsen's four definitions of evil is the best background available, as far as I can tell. It opens for further discussion on which acts are evil, by looking at the perpetrators, and their motives. Moreover, it will systemize my search for reasons why people commit evil deeds.

⁵ Svendsen, Lars Fr. H., *Ondskapens filosofi* (Universitetsforlaget, 2001)

Individual Evil

People Are Essentially Good or Evil

The conception that some people are good and some are evil is widespread. This idea of evil has been so throughout human history, and will continue to be so in years to come. This statement has been, and is still being used as an explanation for terrible atrocities. When we fail to explain why people commit evil deeds; when we fail to understand them, we resort to saying that the perpetrator simply is “evil”. The discussion often ends there, because if that is the reason, there is nothing more to discuss. I would argue the opposite. When I first mentioned individual evil, I mentioned serial killers and sociopaths. Let us now explore these two categories further. Are serial killers and sociopaths examples of pure evil, or is this just a misconception?

First, I will examine serial killers. A serial killer is a person who kills at least three people over a minimum period of 30 days.⁶ Serial killers must not be confused with mass murderers, who murder four people, or more, at the same time.⁷ In the article “The Serial Killer”, written by FBI special agent Robert K. Ressler, he lists up fourteen common traits of serial killers.⁸ Over 90 per cent of serial killers are males, who hate their parents, come from unstable families, have an IQ above average and do poorly in school. They are commonly abused in their childhood, and often abandoned by their father at a young age. They also have high rates of suicide attempts. They show sadistic features early on, and are often involved in tormenting of small creatures, usually animals. Many also show interest in voyeurism, fetishism and sado-masochistic pornography. But, most importantly, they show features of anti-social behaviour, and psychopathic disorders. Many serial killers come from families with criminal, psychiatric and alcoholic history.

Sociopaths have what is called antisocial personality disorder, and are also referred to as psychopaths. Some of the symptoms are lack of remorse or shame, egocentricity, incapacity to love, and unresponsiveness in interpersonal relationships.⁹ In short, they

6 Author unknown, «Serial Killer» (Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 2011) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serial_killer

7 Payne-James JJ, Byard RW, Corey TS, Henderson C, *Encyclopedia of Forensic and Legal Medicine*, Vol. 3, Pp. 216-223. (Elsevier Academic Press, 2005)

8 Ressler, Robert K., «The Serial Killer» (Internal Association of Forensic Science) - <http://www.drphil.com/articles/article/188>

9 Hare, Robert D – *Without Conscience: The Disturbing of the Psychopaths among Us* (Guilford Press,

have difficulties adhering to social norms, and finding their place in society. Furthermore, one of the most important characteristics is lack of empathy. This explains much of their harmful actions towards fellow human beings.

Many serial killers might be sociopaths, or at least share many important characteristics. They are anti-social creatures, although they often have a winning personality. Because they lack empathy, one of the most significant qualities for social creatures, they do not fit in in society. Furthermore, a common trait serial killers and sociopaths share is that of understanding social norms, but deliberately choosing not to follow them.¹⁰ They feel that the society's general morality does not apply to them, and instead they often form their own set of rules.¹¹ So, do these people commit evil deeds because they are essentially evil?

To answer this question I must return to the different definitions of evil. First of all, their intention is to harm others, and often to promote themselves. Second of all, their actions inflict harm on others. So in that respect they can be defined as evil. But, an important aspect here is that they have a disorder. Here nature and nurture enter the picture. They are likely to have a disposition for developing into anti-social creatures, but their childhood is decisive in whether they develop it or not. One common trait of serial killers is the fact that they have been abused during childhood. Another trait is that they often come from families with a psychotic history. A study from the University of Virginia concluded that bad behaviour amongst children, such as bullying and shop-lifting, were more often a result of genes than parents arguing.¹² Although nurture is very important, nature is as well. This study, as many other studies, show that children have different dispositions because of their genes. So, you could say that some people are more likely to commit evil deeds because of their genes. This is very different from saying that they are born evil. But their acts are evil because they contradict with the norms of the society, their intention is to harm others, and they inflict pain on others. However, after looking at what has shaped these kinds of perpetrators, it seems wrong to call them flat out evil.

1999)

10 Cleckley, Hervey M., *The Mask of Sanity: An Attempt to Clarify Some Issues About the So Called Psychopathic Personality* (Emily S. Cleckley, 1988)

11 Montaldo, Charles, «Characteristics of Psychopathic Personality» (2011)<http://crime.about.com/od/serial/a/psychopaths.htm>

12 Author unknown, «Parents' Genes, Not Parents' Arguing, May Cause Children's Conduct Problems» (UvaToday, 2011) -<http://www.virginia.edu/uvatoday/newsRelease.php?id=1447>

So, if I turn to Svendsen's four definitions of evil, I might be able to make more sense of it. It is not the demonic form, because they do it not because they wish to do evil just for the sake of doing evil. Their motives range from hedonistic, lust and thrill-seeking, to the idea that they are on a mission on behalf of God or the devil. Next on, there is the instrumental form of evil. I would argue that it is not this form either, because the goal is achieved through the mean. In other words, the goal and the mean is the same thing. For example, sadistic treatment of the victims to achieve feeling of power or sexual gratification, has no higher goal. When the perpetrator commits the act, he or she will at the same time reach his or hers goal. On the other hand, some murders committed by serial killers might fall in under the third category: the ideological form of evil. Herbert Mullin, for example, believed that the American casualties in the Vietnam War prevented California from experiencing an earthquake. When the deaths decreased he started to kill people so that an earthquake wouldn't take place.¹³ That could be a case of ideological evil, but it would also be fall in under in the category of ignorant evil. This last form is the most important in this context. Ignorant evil is when the perpetrator does not reflect on the consequences, or fails to understand them. Since anti-social humans do not feel empathy for others, they cannot fully understand the consequences either. Our morality depends on our empathy, as Jeffrey Kluger put it in his article for Time Magazine: "The deepest foundation on which morality is built is the phenomenon of empathy, the understanding that what hurts me would feel the same way to you".¹⁴

When you do not have that foundation, you cannot have a common morality. Normal, emphatic humans, functioning well in the society, do not wish to harm others for no reason at all. Many might fantasize about killing an annoying neighbour, but they let it stay at that: a fantasy.

Immanuel Kant argued that evil depended on free will.¹⁵ For somebody to be morally responsible they would have to choose to commit an evil deed, and they would have to have alternative choices. An event that has not been chosen deliberately by the perpetrator cannot be evil; what he calls *Böse*, but must be an evil: *Übel*. Examples are

13 Author unknown, «Herbert Mullin» (Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 2011) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Mullin

14 Kluger, Jeffrey, «What Makes Us Moral» (Time Magazine, 2007) - http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1685055_1685076_1686619,00.html

15 Svendsen, Lars Fr. H., *Ondskapens filosofi* (Universitetsforlaget, 2001)

natural disasters, also known as natural evil. This form of evil is evil because it harms others, but since there is no one who is morally responsible, it is *Übel*, not *Böse*. This could be relevant here, because it might not be right to hold serial killers morally responsible for their actions. We might be dealing with natural evil, instead of moral evil.

Christian thought since St. Augustine, claims that all people are born in sin, and therefore have to be cleansed through baptism.¹⁶ In other words, people are born evil, and have to become good. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is to be found at the other side of the scale. He argues that we are essentially good, but it is society that corrupts us and make us evil. Rousseau might have been more right than Christianity, but I do not think he is there yet. It is reasonable to believe that some people are more likely to commit evil acts, from birth. Some people, such as those who end up as serial killers, are more disposed to end up that way. But it all depends on their childhood and early experiences as well. If people were to be essentially evil, they would have to be born that way, because you can not become essentially anything. "Essentially" is a synonym to "inherent", which means that you have inherited it, ergo you are born with it. The only way a person could become essentially evil, is if he or she became occupied by another essence. That was the idea behind the Inquisition: to find those who had been taken over by the devil himself. As this an unlikely explanation, from a scientific point of view, I will leave it at that.

So, people do not commit evil deeds because they are essentially evil. They can commit acts of evil because of mental issues, because of their genes and their childhood, but it will be a combination of these factors. I chose to focus on individual perpetrators of extreme evil, namely serial killers. I have generalized the group, and not examined the individual cases. So, there will of course be important differences I have not focused on, but my main point is that they are not essentially evil. They are products of nature and nurture, and people with serious mental issues. Instead of labelling them essentially evil, we must try to understand them. This view on evil is what Phillip Cole, in *The Myth of Evil*, called the psychological conception of evil. It basically advocates that no evil deed is committed because of free will. The explanation is to be found either in madness or necessity. Either a person does it because he or she is mentally disturbed, or it is committed because the perpetrator was in a desperate situation. The problem with this view on evil, is that it actually indicates that there is only natural evil, and no *Böse*. It reduces humans to mere

16 Redaksjonen, «Arvesynd» (Store norske leksikon) - <http://snl.no/arvesynd>

pawns, with no free will, whatsoever. A professor of psychology at Durham university made a relevant point in the television documentary, "Hjernevask".¹⁷ She emphasized that different people have different dispositions, but that a disposition is not determinate; there is still an element of free will. But to what degree are the perpetrators I have discussed, mainly sociopaths and serial killers, responsible for their evil acts? Only by closely examining each individual case can one find the answer to that; if even then.

Collective evil

People Are Situationally Evil

I have just left behind the extreme cases of individual evil, and shall now move on to the extreme cases of collective evil. The statement: "people are situationally evil", is the one I will be using as the basis for this second part of the essay. In the first part I assessed the statement: "people are essentially good or evil", and I ended up arguing against it. I will now discuss the second notion to figure out if I find it more accurate. The thing to notice with this statement, is that it does not mention good. That was a deliberate choice on my behalf, because it emphasizes that everyone can commit evil deeds if the situation calls for it.

The conception that some people are evil, and some good, is part of our culture. Whether we are aware of it or not, we have internalized the idea that there is a clear line dividing these two kinds of people. It is always "us" that are on the right side of the line, and the "others" who can be found on the wrong side. It is a person's disposition that causes a person to commit evil deeds. I discussed this to some extent in the previous part of this essay, but things are not as black-and-white as that. When someone has committed an evil act, we usually turn to that individual, and search for explanations, such as mental problems. This is of course the right way to react in cases of individual evil, like serial killers. But it cannot help us explain the cases of collective evil, such as the persecution of the Jews. Could everyone involved in the systematic killings of the Jews have been crazy or sadistic?

17 Eia & Ihle - «Hjernevask» (NRK, 2010)

Stanley Milgram pondered this question, and wondered if the same thing could have happened in America, under the right circumstances. To find out, he constructed the Milgram Experiment, and carried it out in '61.¹⁸ He ingeniously constructed a situation where he could test obedience to authority, when that authority told you to hurt another person. First, two participants in the experiment met with the researcher in charge, and were randomly assigned to either take on the role as learner or teacher. It seemed random, but in fact it was not. Both the researcher, as well as the participant that was chosen to become the learner, were actors. The real participants would always be assigned to the teacher role. They were told that the experiment was trying to find out how punishment affects learning. The “learner” was then strapped to a chair and electrodes were attached. The “teacher” saw all this, before he (in the first experiment all participants were male) was lead into another room where he could not see the “learner”. He was seated in front of a shock generator, which started at 15 volts and went all the way up to 450 volts. The “teacher” learned word-pairs to the “learner”, which he had to remember. When he did not answer correctly the “teacher” was to give the “learner” an electrical shock. For each mistake he had to increase the shock with fifteen volts. An important detail is that all participants had been informed that they would receive the payment “no matter what happens after they arrive[d]”.¹⁹

Before Milgram went through with the experiment, he polled fourteen psychology majors and his colleagues as to what they presumed the results to be. Generally, they believed that about one per cent would go all the way to 450 volts, because that is thought to be the general amount of people with sadistic traits. Therefore, the results must have been a complete surprise. 65 per cent went all the way to 450 volts, and only one person stopped before 300 volts. Every participant stopped at least once, during

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Advertisement for the Milgram Experiment¹⁸

18 Author unknown, «Milgram Experiment» (Wikipedia: The Free Eyclopedia, 2011) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram_experiment

19 Milgram, Stanley, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (Harpercollins, 1974)

the experiment, and questioned if they should move on. The “researcher”, the authority figure, had four answers, one for each interruption.

1. Please *continue*.
2. The experiment requires that you *continue*.
3. It is absolutely essential that you *continue*.
4. You have no other choice, you *must* go on.²⁰

So, most participants went on, because they were told to. Even when they heard the “learner” scream:

210 volts: “Ugh!! Experimenter! Get me out of here. I've had enough. I won't be in the experiment any more.”

330 volts: (Intense and prolonged screaming) “Let me out of here. Let me out of here. My heart's bothering me. Let me out, I tell you. (Hysterically) Let me out of here. Let me out of here. You have no right to hold me here. Let me out! Let me out! Let me out! Let me out of here! Let me out. Let me out.”²¹

Most participants asked the experimenter who was responsible, to which the experimenter answered: “I am responsible”. The participants then continued.

The Milgram experiment proved that the majority of us are able to hurt others if someone of authority tell us to, and if we think we can disclaim all responsibility for it. Milgram's experiment on obedience to authority figures was probably one of the two most important social psychological studies on the power of the situation. The other relevant study, which was conducted a decade later, in 1971, is called the Stanford prison experiment.

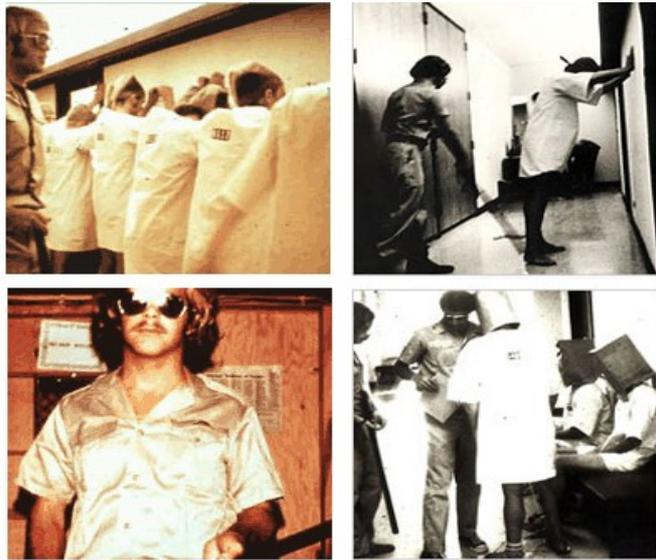
It was Dr. Philip Zimbardo, an American Psychologist and professor at Stanford University, who was in charge of the experiment. He had wished to understand the mindsets adopted by people when they become prisoners. However, the experiment became a study in the dark side of human nature. Zimbardo and his team chose 24 college students who were all male, white and middle-class. They had performed several psychological tests, to find the ones who were normal and in good health, both psychically and mentally. The participants were randomly assigned to be either prisoner or guard. The experiment was to last two

20 Milgram, Stanley, «Behavioral study of obedience» (The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 1963) - <http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=search.displayRecord&uid=1964-03472-001>

21 Milgram, Stanley, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (Harpercollins, 1974)

weeks in one of the university's cellars. Instead, it lasted only six days.

The guards were dressed in uniforms, and had to wear mirrored sunglasses. This was to make them more authoritarian, and to anonymize them. The prisoners were dressed in smocks and stocking caps, both very uncomfortable. They could not wear anything underneath their given clothes. Additionally, they were given numbers, and these numbers were to be their names in the experiment. These



Pictures from the Stanford Prison Experiment²²

conditions were set to depersonalise the prisoners, and to weaken the prisoners sense of self. This would cause them to more easily internalize their new roles. Lastly, there were rules for the prisoners to obey and the guards to execute. The most important rule on the guards behalf was that they could not execute violence against prisoners. The prisoners most important rule was number seventeen: "Failure to obey any of the above rules may result in punishment".²² Another important rule, or possibility, was that anyone could quit the experiment at any time. However, this rule was soon forgotten.

Throughout the course of six days, the experiment got out of hand. The participants quickly internalized their roles, and the fake prison became a real prison. The guards punished the prisoners in sadistic ways, and the level of cruelty kept increasing. The prisoners rebelled at first, but after a while they accepted their "fate" and complied to the guards treatment of them. Several of the prisoners broke down, and many became severely psychologically strained. Surprisingly, no one quit the experiment, instead they came to believe that they were living in a real prison, only a prison "run by psychologists, instead of run by the state".²³ Halfway through the experiment, some of the well-behaved prisoners got the opportunity to plead their case in front of a parole board. At the end of each session, the prisoners were asked if they would accept parole, even if that meant

²² Zimbardo, Philip, *The Lucifer Effect* (Ebury Publishing, 2007)

²³ Said by prisoner Clay-416. Goldstein, Larry, "819 did a bad thing" (The National Broadcasting Company, 1971) - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmwSC5fS40w>

they would leave with no payment for their participation in the experiment. All but one said they would, yet no one asked to quit the experiment. It seemed the prisoners had lost touch with the real world, and that the mock prison had become their new reality.

As previously mentioned, the experiment came to a halt after six days. It was Christina Maslach, a graduate student in psychology, who made Zimbardo realise that it was not ethically responsible to continue the experiment. Afterwards, Zimbardo said that he should never have been both the prisoner superintendent and the leader of the experiment, because he became more occupied with operating the prison than assessing the experiment.

In 2007, Zimbardo published *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*, a book based on the prison experiment and the investigation of the incidents in the Abu Ghraib prison in 2003. He had access to all the reports and evidence in connection to the Abu Ghraib prison, as he was defending one of the guards, Sgt. Ivan Frederick. In the book he tries to analyze what makes normal people “turn evil”, as he calls it. His theory, which I will now present, is based on the Stanford prison experiment, and the events that occurred in Abu Ghraib; two incidents with great similarities.

When the abuse and torture implemented on the prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison was known, state officials branded the incident the work of a few “bad apples”. Philip Zimbardo argues that it was not a few “bad apples”, but the “bad barrel” which was to blame. By that he means that it was a bad situation who made “good apples” commit these crimes. As seen in the prison experiment, the participants were affected to such a degree that they lost the sense of who they had been.

The most apparent thing I noticed was how most of the people in this study derive their sense of identity and well-being from their immediate surroundings rather than from within themselves(..)

(Jerry-5486 in his final evaluation)

This statement, by one of the prisoners, supports Zimbardo's view on the power of the situation. It was the situation which shaped the individuals, instead of the individuals shaping the situation. Below are two statements on the depersonalization caused from the

inhabitation of roles.

I began to feel (..) that the person I was, that had decided to go to prison was distant from me, was remote. Until finally I wasn't that [person], I was 416, I was really my number; and 416 was gonna have to decide what to do."

(Clay-416)²⁴

Once you put a uniform on and are given a role, I mean, a job, saying 'Your job is to keep these people in line', then you're certainly not the same person if you're in street clothes and in a different role. You really become that person(..)

(Guard Hellmann)²⁵

Both Hellmann and Clay talk about becoming the role you are given. In sociological terms, they internalized their given roles, and acted accordingly. They did not only act, they started to think and react in ways appropriate to their new roles.

Zimbardo gives an account of three approaches, or understandings, of evil acts. The first is the dispositional, which I have mentioned earlier. It is a person's disposition, his or hers qualities, that determines the consequences. This understanding of evil focuses on the individual, rather than the situation. The second approach is the situational one. Instead of asking the question of "who?", this approach asks "what conditions or circumstances might have led to this particular outcome?". Not surprisingly, Zimbardo presents the second one as far more important than the first one. In the quote below are his comments on the level of importance of the two approaches.

Most of us have a tendency both to overestimate the importance of dispositional qualities and to underestimate the importance of situational qualities when trying to understand the causes of other people's behaviour.²⁶

Lastly, he examines a third approach, which he calls the systemic understanding of evil. He proposes that it is not enough to understand the situation, you have to understand the

24 Goldstein, Larry, "819 did a bad thing" (The National Broadcasting Company, 1971) - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmwSC5fS40w>

25 Goldstein, Larry, "819 did a bad thing" (The National Broadcasting Company, 1971)

26 Zimbardo, Philip, *The Lucifer Effect* (Ebury Publishing, 2007)

system as well. What creates “the bad barrel” is the system, and it is the system that corrupts “the good apples”. Not unlike Rousseau's view on society. Further, he argues that you have to change the system to change the situation, to prevent the outcome from repeating itself. Moreover, he presents the influences on the systems, what creates the systems, which again creates the situations. The influences that have impact can be political, economic or cultural. Additionally, legal power can also influence systems a great deal. Think of the situations created in prisons, with the extreme examples of the Stanford prison experiment and the Abu Ghraib prison.

Let us take a closer look at what caused the guards in the Abu Ghraib prison to act as they did. Were they all sadistic, cruel and evil, waiting for the right opportunity to come along? Moreover, were there any significant similarities to the Stanford prison experiment that might indicate otherwise?

The Abu Ghraib prison has been the platform of torture and abuse for a long time. Before the American military took charge of it, it was filled with political prisoners during Saddam Hussein's tyranny²⁷. It was infamous for its torture, executions and horrible living standards. There is no accurate number of inmates during that period, but it could have been as much as 50,000. In the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq the media got hold of pictures showing American guards abusing Iraqi prisoners with shocking cruelty. The prisoners were forced to act in tremendously degrading manners, such as faking fellatio and masturbating in front of the guards and other prisoners. The list of horrors goes on, from sexual degrading acts to actual violence. The international community was outraged by the inhumanities that had taken place in the name of a mission that was meant to promote freedom and democracy. The blame pointed at the guards, Ivan “Chip” Frederick, Lynndie England, among others. They were branded “bad apples”, and General Richard B. Meyers quickly denied that the abuse was systemic. Perhaps his denial came too quickly? How could he know for certain without any investigation?

Two reports were written, one in 2003, and another the following year. Both of these reports contradicted with what General Meyers stated shortly after the pictures were released. The first one, conducted by Major General Donald Ryder, “concluded that there

²⁷ Hersh, Seymour M., «Torture at Abu Ghraib» (The New Yorker, 2004) - http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/10/040510fa_fact

were potential human rights, training, and manpower issues, system-wide, that needed immediate attention”²⁸. In the second report, Major General Antonio Taguba wrote this:

*That between October and December 2003, at the Abu Ghraib Confinement Facility (BCCF), numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees. This systemic and illegal abuse of detainees was intentionally perpetrated by several members of the military police guard force (...) In addition to the aforementioned crimes, there were also abuses committed by members of the 325th MI Battalion, 205th MI Brigade, and Joint Interrogation and Debriefing Center (JIDC). (..) (ANNEXES 26 and 53).*²⁹

Here it explicitly says that it not just happen in Tier 1-A (which is where the pictures were taken), but similar abuses took place in other units as well. Thus, it was not an isolated incident, which increases the chances of it being something more than just a few malicious guards. An interesting detail to notice in the first report is the fact that he calls the issues “system-wide”. This is exactly what Zimbardo stressed, the power systems have to create situations. As he points out in *The Lucifer Effect*, there were several factors, induced by the system, that had profound impact on the situation that emerged in Abu Ghraib. First, and perhaps most importantly, there was a lack of supervision and leadership in the prison. General Janis Karpinski was put in charge of three military prisons in Iraq. She had no previous experience in running prisons, and obviously did not supervise sufficiently. In an interview, she said that “living conditions now are better in prison than at home. At one point we were concerned that they wouldn’t want to leave.”³⁰ This was obviously a faulty statement. The living standards were bad, for both prisoners and guards. Secondly, there were no clear guidelines for the guards to follow. They were all inexperienced and they were clearly not qualified for the job. There was no official training, but some of the guards had worked in small-scale American prisons. Ivan Frederick, was in charge of the night shift in 1-A, had previously worked as a correctional officer in a small medium-security prison in Virginia. However, this was far from what he encountered in Iraq. Suddenly he was responsible for 400 prisoners, a number which later increased to more than a thousand. Thirdly, the situation was chaotic. The prison was regularly attacked from the outside, and some prisoners charged on the guards with weapons they had bought from

28 Hersh, Seymour M., «Torture at Abu Ghraib» (The New Yorker, 2004)

29 Maj. Gen. Taguba, Antonio, «TAGUBA REPORT WITH ANNEXES (AR 15-6 INVESTIGATION OF THE 800TH MILITARY POLICE BRIGADE)» (The Office of the Secretary of Defense and Joint Staff, 2004)

30 Hersh, Seymour M., «Torture at Abu Ghraib» (The New Yorker, 2004)

corrupt Iraqi police officers. On top of that, there were far too many prisoners per guard. The fourth factor was significant in the development of the abuses. There were several military intelligence interrogators who were trying to get valuable information from the prisoners. Later accounts from the guards and military reports showed that the interrogators encouraged the guards to “loosen” the prisoners up, and give them “the treatment”, so that they would talk. They kept encouraging the abuses, and complimented the guards by saying “Good job, they’re breaking down real fast. They answer every question. They’re giving out good information”.³¹ Lastly, Zimbardo focuses on the influence of boredom. As he had witnessed in his experiment, boredom and absolute power led to abuse of authority and creative evil. In addition to the factors I have listed I would like to mention the ideological form of evil, one of Svendsen's four definitions. Because the guards were participants in a war, they were affected by the ideology of this war. Phrases like “the axis of evil”, and the fact that the war was promoted as a war for the cause of freedom, must have given the guards meaning and purpose. They might have felt that the end justified the mean. In other words, they were contributing to a good cause. Besides, by thinking of the enemy as a unit, instead of Iraqi individuals, they were classified as “the others”. The usual mindset here is that the good ones are “us”, and the evil ones are “the others”. By generalizing a people in this way, evil deeds are more easily committed.

So what caused these people to commit evil deeds? I cannot prove that they were not essentially evil, if there even is such a thing. However, if they were, they would probably have acted out sooner, in other situations. It is also highly unlikely that all psychopaths in the US military would be gathered in one place. Because they acted in such a manner in that particular situation, it is reasonable to believe that it was the situation that provoked it. This explanation is strengthened by the fact that similar incidents have occurred before. One example is the Stanford prison experiment, another is Camp Douglas, where prisoners of war were kept after the Civil War in America. It is definitely not unique in character.

Collective evil at its most extreme is genocide. It is defined as the “systematic killing of a racial or cultural group“ by the Princeton University's WordNet Search.³² The definition of genocide is much disputed, because of its legal consequences. Even so, I will stick to this

31 Hersh, Seymour M., «Torture at Abu Ghraib» (The New Yorker, 2004)

32 Author unknown (WordNet Search – 3.0) - <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=genocide>

definition, because I am not interested in the judicial or political aspect of the phenomenon, but the processes necessary for genocides to occur.

Thea Martine Ottmann has studied genocide, and especially the Rwandan genocide.³³ The important thing to note in regard to this particular genocide, is the perpetrators. Although Hutus in power may have provoked the genocide, it was mostly carried out by common Hutu people. You had a situation where Hutus were killing their own neighbours; people they previously had been friends with. At first this seems incomprehensible, but further analysis of the underlying processes can make it more understandable. Ottmann stresses the importance of the dehumanization process in this context. Furthermore, she says the process is an absolute necessity for any genocide to occur.

Her theory rests on the work of Nils Johan Lavik, a Norwegian professor of Psychiatry.³⁴ He points out that genocide relies on a simplified and generalized image of the enemy. The group is portrayed as dangerous, which arouses feelings of fear, loathing and aggression in the soon-to-be perpetrators. In Rwanda this kind of enemy image took hold partly because of media propaganda. Anti-tutsi hate speech was broadcast on radio before and during the genocide. The Tutsi people were described as cockroaches that needed to be exterminated. Here it is not difficult to see the connection to other genocides, especially the Holocaust. This process of making victims seem less than human creates a distance between “us” and “them” which is essential for a genocide to occur. If one sees the each and every human individual and not an inhuman, dangerous unity, then genocide would not take place. This perspective on evil strengthens the notion “people are situationally evil” further, and shows that the situation is indeed more important than the individual.

Conclusion

What I set out to find was the underlying reason for people committing evil deeds. I have approached the question from two different angles, individual and collective evil. Through those two angles I discussed whether people are essentially evil or situationally evil. Can anyone commit evil deeds, or is it reserved for the few ?

33 Hagtvet, Bernt(red.), *Folkemordenes svarte bok* (Universitetsforlaget, 2008)

34 Lavik, Nils Johan, «Folkemord – noen medisinske og psykologiske aspekter» *Tidsskrift for Den norske lægeforening* (2002)

The line between good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

(Alexandre Solzhenitsyn)

I have come to believe, as Solzhenitsyn so brilliantly put it, that anyone can commit both good and evil deeds. Some might be more likely to do so, because of their genes and their childhood. However, disposition is not the same as determination; people do have free will, although some might be more able to control their actions. Another conclusion I have come to, while working with this essay, is that evil is a dangerous term and must be used carefully. By branding “the others” as evil we name ourselves the protectors of good. If we do not realise that we have the capacity to commit evil deeds, we cannot be prepared to protect ourselves from powerful situational and systemic forces. Also, we must try our best to understand the perpetrators, and immediately naming them evil is not at all wise. Furthermore, we must be prepared to become deviants, for in some situations the right thing is to breach norms of a society or group. Lastly, we must not find comfort in calling others evil, because evil can be committed by anyone of us.

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