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Hell on Earth: An exploration into what drives evil

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Hell on Earth: An Exploration Into What Drives Evil

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JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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For
Mom

Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Abstract.....	iv
I. Introduction.....	1
Goals and Objectives	5
II. Literature Review.....	5
Defining Evil	5
The Myth of Pure Evil.....	7
Biological Influences	12
Morality	16
Instrumental Evil	25
Self-Esteem and Threatened Egotism	29
The Power of Ideology	38
Situational Forces.....	44
Obedience	53
III. Conclusion	63
IV. References	65

Abstract

Evil abounds. Even the most cursory glance at the news yields harsh headlines about bombings, school shootings, acid attacks, murder, rape, sex slavery, torture, and the occasional mass genocide. The 20th century alone featured roughly 135 million military and civilian deaths due to war and democide (White & Pinker, 2013). Recently, a cultural narrative has emerged proselytizing that evil is an aberrant, caustic mutation of the otherwise unsullied human soul. Philosophers and sociologists, among others, contend that “civilization needs to believe that it does not have an inhumane or barbaric side, leading members of the mainstream to constantly project unacceptable feelings onto those they deem ‘barbarian...’” (Chudzik, 2016, p. 586). Such explanations provide a veneer of logic inviting enough to keep people existentially comfortable by relying on an externalized notion that cruel, violent, and inhumane people are always “out there,” rather than coiled dormant inside each individual. The persistence of lying, neglect, psychological abuse, and physical violence across both time and culture suggests that increasingly sophisticated and empirical conceptualizations of the forces driving evil are of particular importance to the counseling profession given our occupational obligation to help foster personal growth and bolster well-being, abilities inexorably rooted in a thorough familiarity of the human organism. This paper will examine how ordinary people can behave with extraordinary malevolence due to their innate biology, threats to their ego, the gradual disengagement of their moral compass, ideological blindness, situational pressures, and more. The ensuing examination and synthesis of the prevailing literature on evil will ideally function to provide interested clinicians an introductory guide for understanding the etiology of human darkness.

Introduction

You think when you try to understand why men do evil things, you are going to learn something that might help prevent atrocities in the future. But really you are just excusing the perpetrators, justifying unjustifiable actions. The only thing you need to understand about evil is how to punish it.

–Dr. James Dawes, *Understanding Evil*

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

–Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

Humanity is no stranger to malevolence. Since the dawn of man, our species has resorted to deception, rape, thievery, and murder to expedite the actualization of some desirable end. As we relocated from cave to hut to house, our explanations to account for evil likewise grew in their complexity. Religious and philosophical thinkers attributed the darker facets of our being to the machinations of the devil, the abandonment of virtue, and the abdication of personal responsibility, among others. Each new generation encountered the problem of evil, each felt its merciless sting, and each sought to solve or at least explain it away. Yet, evil persisted. Civilizations devised increasingly creative, painful, and lethal methods to deter the propagation of immorality, but evil skulked sideways around each attempt to eradicate it. Even the most eminent minds in psychology struggled to explain the existence of human cruelty. Freud found his initial thinking flawed because his theories relied on ideas like malignant narcissism, splitting, and constricted consciousness which were

not exclusive to evildoers and thus insufficient for explaining evil (Naso & Mills, 2016b). Jung more closely approached the heart of human malevolence in his exploration into the shadow and the archetypal forces that bled into and shaped moral or immoral behavior. In a 1959 BBC interview with John Freeman, Jung emphatically stated that “the only real danger that exists is man himself. He is the great danger, and we are pitifully unaware of it...we are the origin of all coming evil.” In the ensuing years, the professional descendants of these early intellectuals added depth and breadth to our interpretation of evil. Theorists like Bandura, Milgram, and Zimbardo investigated seemingly separate paths that all led inexorably towards evil behavior. However, for reasons beyond the scope of this paper, these ideas never gained substantial traction in the public sphere.

As the evil of Lenin, Hitler, Pol Pot, Mao, and Stalin scorched the earth, our collective rhetoric regressed time and again to aphorisms about subhuman, barbaric “others” being to blame. As this paper will attest, dehumanizing language that paints the enemy in bestial, subhuman colors was and remains a viable strategy to galvanize ideological support and justify aggression. It also grants the psychological distance necessary to help separate the “good” people from the “bad” without clarifying precisely how the “bad” came to behave in such diabolical ways. In the absence of this understanding, people adhered to the half-truths and myths that conceptualized evil as anomalous, as the grotesque behavior of soiled souls. Such assumptions stifled people’s curiosity about the forces that precipitated wickedness because wickedness was not precipitated, it just *was*. Over time, the various expressions of this mentality coalesced to create what renowned social psychologist and author, Roy Baumeister, regarded as the *myth of pure evil*.

Comprised of several presuppositions about the origins and nature of malevolence, the myth of pure evil was tacitly adopted by parents, school teachers, authors, media

executives, and politicians, then circulated into the popular culture as truth - a truth echoed and reinforced ad infinitum¹ (Baumeister, 1999). The myth allows us to isolate evil inside a few individual actors, negating the need to truly confront humanity's profound capacity to harm one other. We then satiate our need to combat depravity by personifying evil in material things, resulting in us railing against environmental injustice, "fighting" cancer, and waging wars on drugs. Trimming the branches of evil provides the illusion of combating it without engaging the root. Individuals and groups perpetuate this practice by believing themselves incapable of committing horrors, insisting they are decent and that their decency is beyond corruption (Zimbardo, 1995). That the line separating good and evil is impermeable. However, such naiveté discourages the vigilance necessary to forestall and prevent the insidious emergence of the malevolence to which humanity is forever susceptible.

For example, during WWII altogether ordinary, middle-aged German police officers displayed loyalty to their government by meticulously rounding up Jewish men, women, children, and infants in "Jew Hunts," and executing them one after the other. This process repeated over 51,000 times (Browning, 1992). During the same period, reputable Japanese doctors and scientists worked within Unit 731, known publically as the *Epidemic Prevention and Water Purification Department*, to strengthen Japan's knowledge of chemical and biological warfare by purposefully injecting prisoners of war and wholly innocent civilians with the plague, completing vivisections, and freezing infants alive (Gold, 2003). During the Rwandan Civil War, fathers were forced to rape their daughters, and sons their mothers. Neighbors

¹ Clinicians, too, were not immune to these ideas and risked misunderstanding and mistreating the more intimate interpersonal manifestations of evil, including: physical abuse, marital rape, child neglect, avarice, pathological lying, anti-social behavior, sociopathy, volatility, and countless other presentations common to counseling (Chudzik, 2016).

slaughtered friends en masse. A surviving Tutsi woman captured the reconstitution of her world view, saying:

Before, I know that a man could kill another man, because it happens all the time. Now I know that even the person with whom you've shared food, or with whom you've slept, even he can kill you with no trouble at all. The closest neighbor can kill you with his teeth: that is what I have learned since the genocide, and my eyes no longer gaze the same on the face of the world. (Zimbardo, 2008, p. 17)

As a species, we tend to deny her conclusion and instead “hide behind egocentric biases that generate the illusion that we are special... Too often we look to the stars through the thick lens of personal invulnerability when we should also look down to the slippery slope beneath our feet” (Zimbardo, 2008, p. 6). The myth of pure evil both inspires and reinforces this mentality by obfuscating our understanding of the darker aspects of humanity, limiting our clinical conceptualizations, and neutering the viable explanations for minor and major injustices alike. Theorists countering the myth of pure evil assert that “all of us have evil thoughts, yet relatively few translate those thoughts into evil deeds” (Naso & Mills, 2016b, p. 517). This controversial conceptual reframe encouraged researchers to search for explanations in dispositional characteristics, belief systems, evolutionary biology, and the interpersonal ecosystem created by a given situation² (Staub, 1999). What follows is an attempt to better illuminate these forces and establish a preliminary understanding of what looms behind evil.

² Zimbardo (2008) recognized this ideological shift as pulling the discussion away from an *essentialized view* of evil (Good-Evil dichotomy) and reframing it in *incrementalist* terms, where anyone is vulnerable of being seduced or induced into evil.

Goals and Objectives

Therapists and psychologists bear a unique professional obligation to promote goodness while containing evil. However, our shared conceptions regarding what evil is, where it emerges from, and how it operates are predicated mainly on myths and cultural stereotypes that inhibit our ability to fully understand immoral clients and help affect meaningful change. A refined understanding of the altogether “ordinary psychological processes” underlying evil can permit clinicians to take informed steps towards discouraging the genesis of new evils while rehabilitating existing ones (Staub, 1999, p. 48). This paper is intended to function as an investigation into the literature of evil, both contemporary and timeless, to ascertain the complex mechanisms that contribute to ordinary people being induced into evil. This will entail examining the potential root causes of evil, influential precipitating factors, and the various systemic conditions that contribute to innocent beginnings escalating into evil ends.

Literature Review

Defining evil

In order to devise a shared conceptualization of evil, it is first necessary to define it. Evil, however, has evaded any singular universal operationalization precisely because of its universality. Disciplines ranging from religion to politics, art, criminology, evolutionary biology, and psychology all encounter evil uniquely. An entomologist perceives an altogether different evil than a stock broker, and neither know the visceral horror of torture, terror, and rape. One major definitional wedge splits evil into two varieties: natural and moral (Thompson, 2002). Natural evil pertains exclusively to the physical pain and intrapsychic suffering brought about by natural phenomena. The devastation wrought by the 2010

earthquake in Haiti or the burial of Pompeii beneath Vesuvius' caustic ash would be classified as examples of natural evil. Though natural evil results in immense misery for its victims, it falls outside the parameters of this paper given the absence of a human orchestrator to evaluate.³ Moral evil, however, entails the deliberate induction of pain and suffering by one human onto another,⁴ with the victim being altogether innocent or retaliated against in a manner exceeding their original provocation (Staub, 1999; Thompson, 2002). Agents of evil utilize their physical, intellectual, or institutional power as a fulcrum to dominate, dehumanize, and, at times, kill the innocent (Zimbardo, 2008). Other definitions extend to include any behavior or policy causing damage to a person's human potential (either physical or psychological) that handicaps their ability to pursue self-actualization (Staub, 1999). Baumeister (1999) believed the definition required further dilation to incorporate the idea of *chaos*. Maintaining an adaptive, well-functioning society depends partly on its constituents ongoing adherence to a tacit social contract that demands friendliness and orderliness. Mirroring our childhood needs, people prefer and strive to maintain a calm, predictable, and comprehensible existence (Baumeister, 1999). Chaos violates this social contract and fosters panic. War strategists, religious extremists, propagandists, and torturers sow fear and confusion by exploiting this very vulnerability.

Another central feature of evil is the disparity in its impact between perpetrators and their victims, termed **the magnitude gap** (Baumeister, 1999, p. 18). The magnitude gap describes how the victims of evil typically experience extensive physical and psychic turmoil that can extend indefinitely, while the perpetrator departs unblemished or perhaps better off.

³ For a similar reason, malevolence committed at the whim of insanity cannot be considered truly evil due to the actor's distorted perceptions. The behavior of the insane can be utterly devastating, but not evil. Evil requires volitional control and unsullied perception.

⁴ Or between groups, by a group towards an individual, or by an individual towards a group.

For instance, during the “red scare” era of McCarthyism, a few choice words could dismantle a person’s entire life. Serial rapists sate themselves as their victim is riddled with scars (Katz, 1992). The hangman pulls a lever *here* while a neck breaks *there*. Performers of evil traditionally gain far less than their victims lose, and forget it faster (Baumeister, 1999). This concept will be more fully fleshed out in the ensuing sections.

A final, disturbing concept to consider when defining evil is the notion of enjoyment (Naso & Mills, 2016a). After all, the word sadist exists solely to describe the subset of people who derive pleasure from deliberately hurting others. The Joker earned his moniker not by gently weeping as he tormented Batman but by laughing maniacally. Though a common caricature, the reality of evil requires a more complex level of analysis. Evildoers may not revel expressly in the infliction of pain but appreciate instead its material yields (e.g. information/money) or the gratification of believing their behavior is moral and necessary, as discussed later in the section on ideological evil (Baron-Cohen, 2012). Others operating within evil regimes work diligently to perfect their mercilessness in an attempt to impress their direct supervisors, not because they savor their victim’s suffering (Gold, 2003). Terrorists vaporize themselves to demonstrate loyalty to their respective God or ideology, but there is little joy in being a red mist (Post & Laqueur, 1998). Pleasure is by no means a prerequisite for evil. This myth, along with others, accidentally obfuscates our collective understanding of evil and developing a clear definition of what evil is might first require an explicit investigation into what it is not.

The Myth of Pure Evil

I believe there are monsters born in the world to human parents...and just as there are physical monsters, can there not be mental or psychic monsters born? The face

and body may be perfect, but if a twisted gene or a malformed egg can produce physical monsters, may not the same process produce a malformed soul?

–Steinbeck, *East of Eden*

Whirring away inside humans is a shared, though relatively tacit, cultural conception of archetypal evil. For Americans, it reveals itself in on-screen villains, the way presidents speak of terrorists, and our attitude towards convicts. Other cultures represent it in their mythology, art, and laws. Across time, every culture has given evil a face, attitude, and origin story. During the Inquisition in Europe, the German Inquisitors penned a manual for the identification and treatment of witches titled *Malleus Maleficarum*. In this book, which rivaled the Bible in both popularity and sales, the Catholic Church declared that all evil emanated from the Devil (Zimbardo, 1995). Being confined to Hell, Lucifer recruited witches, lesser demons, and other “intermediaries” to execute his plans. German citizens were instructed to scrutinize and report the misfits, deformed, and “marginalized” to the proper authorities for closer examination. If found guilty, these unfortunate souls were sentenced to death on suspicion of being extensions of, or emissaries for, Satan himself (Zimbardo, 2005, p. 126). Innocent people were arrested and murdered on a belief. Romanticizing evil allows people to frame revolting behavior as being altogether anomalous to the human condition (Staub, 1999). In this way, people born healthy get infected by evil. Or, as the Steinbeck quote attests, certain people enter the world already mutated beyond repair. Either way, evil is perceived as an unholy aberration, a twisted corruption, that imposes itself on the otherwise benevolent human condition. Today, this caricature of evil is reinforced ad infinitum in daily newscasts, television shows, and films precisely because it fascinates and terrifies viewers (Baumeister, 1999). People are drawn to the Myth of Pure Evil, and media outlets exploit this vulnerability by specifically selecting stories which perpetuate and reinforce it. Presenting

evil as ordinary or understandable, however, is rarely enrapturing and can even be experienced as immoral. Hannah Arendt, a political theorist and author of *Eichmann In Jerusalem*, attended the Nuremberg Trial of Adolf Eichmann for his logistical contributions that enabled the mass deportation, imprisonment, and slaughter of the Jewish populace. After observing Eichmann for the entirety of his trial, she concluded that Eichmann was neither sadistic nor a naturally born killer, despite the genocide he facilitated (Arendt, 1963). Regardless of the magnitude and depravity of the Nazi's injustices, closer examination into the regime's interior structure commonly revealed "faithful bureaucrats slavishly following orders," rather than bloodthirsty monsters (Gibson & Haritos-Fatouros, 1986, p. 246). Arendt's description of evil as "banal" was not well received. Her conclusions flew in the face of the prevailing conception of evil and spoiled the world's need to declare Eichmann a devil. People resisted having the wool pulled from their eyes. They yearned to believe that evil of such magnitude could *never* be perpetrated by ordinary people. However, the ordinariness of evil does not diminish its significance, but instead amplifies it (Staub, 1999). The truly terrifying realization being, as Arendt alluded, that the capacity for great evil lies forever inside each of us. Not surprisingly, however, the myth persisted and propagated across the world's stage.

Conventional stories tend to depict evil through the lens of either egotism or sadism (Baumeister, 1999). Murderers hunt and brutalize (typically) young, attractive couples without clear cause. Villains pursue wealth, power, and acclaim with ruthless zeal. Psychopaths do both. The myth of pure evil is a blending of these concepts, religious symbols, and mythological images to create a Frankensteinian monster incommensurate with reality. According to Baumeister, the myth of pure evil is comprised of eight ideas:

1. Evil involves the intentional infliction of harm on people.

2. Evil is driven primarily by the wish to inflict harm merely for the pleasure of doing so.
3. The victim is innocent and good.
4. Evil is the other, the enemy, the outsider, the out-group.
5. Evil has been [this] way since time immemorial.
6. Evil represents the antithesis of order, peace, and stability.
7. Evil characters are often marked by egotism.
8. Evil figures have difficulty maintaining control over their feelings, especially rage and anger. (1999, p. 72-74)

When manifested in a person, these facets coalesce into a creature whose *raison d'être* is to cultivate deep gratification from harvesting the screams and suffering and lives of the innocent...a corrupted beast incapable of being understood because his actions lack motive, except perhaps the destruction of order to further plunge the world into chaos. Many popular stories, fictional or otherwise, tend to adhere closely to this formula. As mentioned, the media writ large selects stories conforming to the myth precisely because they are atypical, even omitting facts or modifying semantics to further morph a story more into alignment (Baumeister, 1999). Admittedly, this is done partly because the viewers demand it. Our species seems drawn towards and mystified by such exceptional evil. Like a growl in the underbrush or a strange noise in the room next door, we are compelled to pay attention. We also prefer simplistic explanations over the nuanced and overly complex, declaring drugs, alcohol,⁵ poverty, and violent video games responsible for much of western civilization's

⁵ Statistics indicate that over half of all violent crimes do involve alcohol, yet Baumeister (1999) disagrees with rushed conclusions suggesting the alcohol "caused" the violence. After all, the vast majority of those who drink do so non-violently. Alcohol can weaken one's inner restraints and let free the aggression lying in wait, but it does not create violent impulses from nothing.

violence. By blaming things, evil remains an external force arbitrarily imposing its will on innocent victims while the deeper causes endure undetected (Baumeister, 1999).

The myth of pure evil has also been implemented strategically to foment hatred and grease the very wheels of war. The collective galvanization of a populace to participate in the wanton slaughter of strangers requires a vivid image of the enemy as subhuman, fiendish, and vile (Bandura, 1999; Baumeister, 1999). The more reprehensible the image, the more depraved the enemy becomes, and the more justified and righteous the reprisals against them. Aggression and cruelty require no explanation when unleashed upon devils and imps. Remorse is superfluous. During WWII, American soldiers were documented as desecrating Japanese corpses by urinating in their mouths (Dower, 1993). Others, blinded by pride, surprised their sweethearts back home with the ears, scalps, and skulls they collected from the degenerate dead (Baumeister, 1999). They each became Perseus holding the severed head of Medusa. Such barbarism was atypical for American soldiers, but their primal brutality was permitted expression due to the systematic dehumanization of the Japanese people via propaganda that conformed to the myth of pure evil.

Despite evidence disconfirming the myth's legitimacy, it will likely persist in our collective conscious to explain and justify human horrors. However, a thorough understanding of what twists us towards evil may eventually loosen the myth's firm grip on our minds. According to Baumeister (1999), evil emerges due to four fundamental reasons: material rewards, threatened egotism, ideology, and sadism. Despite his surety, a comprehensive examination into both these and alternative wellsprings of evil is warranted. This paper will cover the aforementioned four championed by Baumeister, as well as the potential biological, developmental, and situational forces that contribute to the perpetuation of inhumanities.

Biological Influences

One general law, leading to the advancement of all organic beings, namely, multiply, vary, let the strongest live and the weakest die.

–Darwin, *The Origin of Species*

For untold millennia, people relied almost exclusively on religious dogma to provide a coherent worldview and explanation for their untold suffering (Baumeister, 1999). However, modernity increasingly supplants myth with reason, religion with science. People are turning away from scripture and toward the natural world for answers. Thus, any investigation into evil requires assessing the natural factors which may contribute to its expression. This process entails adopting the Darwinian view of man as an animal, a risen ape, who manifests cruelty, malice, and violence pragmatically as tools to ensure the proliferation of his/her genes.⁶ The linchpin of Darwinian evolution is the notion of natural selection, an ongoing violent and bloody individual battle against predators, competitors, and prey to survive (Thompson, 2002). Paradoxically, in the dog-eat-dog world purported by Darwinists, explaining *altruism*, rather than interpersonal aggression, is the predominant challenge. Darwinism's near lawlessness almost beckons those creatures prone to cold-blooded interpersonal tyranny - those who will sacrifice or enslave anyone, or ruin anything, to earn a material advantage and bolster their survivability (Thompson, 2002). Despite this, humans manifest the capacity to cooperate or subvert their individual needs to encourage the survival of the group. Selfless though this behavior appears, social organization, like "any behavior, whether genetically or culturally transmitted, that enhances the generational

⁶ Contemporary research on criminology echoes this sentiment, contending that both biological and environmental factors contribute to deviant behavior. Though the full nature and effect of the interaction between biology and environment on evil remains unclear (especially when subdivided into their various constituent parts), the *field* of criminology appears reluctant to honor the influence of biology on behavior for fear of exonerating unlawful behavior (Denno, 2007).

survival of individuals in a population,” is an expression of evolutionary selfishness (Thompson, 2002, p. 242). In other words, humans contributing to the creation and maintenance of a stable environment by behaving pro-socially do so in their own self-interest and the interest of their progeny (egocentric altruism).

Groups help satiate our basic needs by providing safety, protection, and an ever-changing potpourri of potential mates. As the descendants of the original altruists multiplied, their interpersonal template for optimal survivability became internalized (Fleck, 2011). People began defining behaviors as moral or immoral, good or evil, partly based on whether they reinforced or ruined the group’s cohesion and chances for survival. In this context, evil encapsulates any behavior that “enhances one’s individual fitness at the expense of the short or long-term perpetuation of the population to which the individual belongs” (Thompson, 2002, p. 246). Evil encapsulates those behaviors that, if adopted by the larger group, diminish its long-term fitness, an undesirable outcome even for the malignant egotist. A humanity dominated by violent selfishness would enjoy a brief existence. However, to entirely strip humanity of its strength, conniving, and capacity for violence would result in a dangerously vulnerable society populated and governed by the meek (Fleck, 2011). A tribe comprised entirely of altruists risks being robbed, raped, and killed by other marauding factions. Throughout time, our survival was partially contingent on people possessing the latent ability to retaliate. Existence demands resiliency and, at times, wild displays of ferocity. Therefore, traditionally evil behaviors are not biologically aberrant, only situationally misapplied⁷ (Fleck, 2011). Ironically, evil also inadvertently reinforces group cohesion and collective altruism as it momentarily destabilizes the social surround. Evil people function,

⁷ We possess internalized templates for both altruistic and selfish behavior, with evil being an overemphasis on the latter at the expense of the former.

unbeknownst to them, as a kind of sheep dog keeping the flock unified and oriented in a shared direction⁸ (Fleck, 2011). Tribes coordinate and align to push out evil. Provided the proportion of violent/selfish individuals remains low relative to the larger population, it is evolutionarily advantageous for evil to exist *and* extend into subsequent generations. One method to ensure the intergenerational transmission of violence is via genetics.

Though the literature is too vast to fully encapsulate here, one 2002 study on *The Cycle of Violence in Maltreated Children* suggested that evil individuals who successfully propagate their genes might also propagate their evil via vulnerabilities in their children's genotype (Caspi et al.). The longitudinal experiment followed a cohort of ~1000 maltreated male children from birth to adulthood (26) in an attempt to better ascertain why only a portion developed antisocial traits. Researchers identified a "functional polymorphism in the gene encoding the neurotransmitter-metabolizing enzyme monoamine oxidase A (MAOA)" that influenced the impact of parental neglect and abuse (Caspi et al., 2002, p. 851). In both mouse and human trials, defects in the MAOA gene that decreased enzyme production (responsible for neutralizing serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine) were associated with increased volatility and aggression. Conversely, individuals and mice whose genotypes produced larger quantities of the MAOA enzyme displayed markedly decreased or altogether absent anti-social behaviors regardless of maltreatment (Caspi et al., 2002). Abused adolescents with low-MAOA activity were observed to be 2.8 times as likely to be diagnosed with conduct disorder than their non-abused peers with equally low-MAOA. When this portion of the sample aged into adults they were 9.8 times as likely to commit a violent crime. This study tentatively demonstrated that evil's intergenerational propagation may be partly due to aggressive fathers passing along defective MAOA genes to their offspring, thus

⁸ Consider the unified, proud, and patriotic America that materialized in the wake of 9/11.

priming them for similar conduct, then almost assuring it through their abuse (Caspi et al., 2002). Despite requiring further research, these findings reinforce the notion that an individual's biology (nature) can influence a child's vulnerability to environmental factors (nurture). Additional investigations into this dynamic focus on the underlying neuroanatomy contributing to certain styles of behavior being emphasized over another (Bhattacharjee, 2018).

Mirroring the sentiment of developmental psychologists, select neurologists view *empathy* as a powerful mediating factor for pro-social or anti-social behavior (Bhattacharjee, 2018). Neuroanatomists identified an “empathy circuit”⁹ in the brain whose development is either nurtured or suppressed depending on the individual's biopsychosocial milieu. This dynamic dance between nature, environment, and temperament ultimately generates a degree of empathy ranging from extreme altruism to cold, calculating psychopathy. Researchers suspect the empathy circuit can be nurtured in early development via witnessing a friend cry, encountering a wounded animal (e.g. whimpering dog, limping cat), perspective taking, and experiencing a well-attuned relationship with a formative attachment figure (Bhattacharjee, 2018). Empathy development can be equally arrested or corroded via sustained childhood neglect, physical and sexual abuse, brain injury, prolonged stress, inebriation (alcohol or drug induced), hunger, fear, and ideological possession. Until recently, knowledge about exactly how these various transient and perennial preconditions impacted brain development remained a mystery.

Kent Kiehl, a neuroscientist working for the Mind Research Network, sought to rectify this by devising a study meant to identify neuroanatomical differences between

⁹ The empathy circuit is comprised of the somatosensory cortex, inferior parietal lobe, temporoparietal junction, inferior frontal gyrus, frontal operculum, anterior insula, middle cingulate cortex, medial prefrontal cortex, orbitofrontal cortex, and amygdala (Bhattacharjee, 2018).

violent criminals, psychopaths, and ordinary civilians using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Since 2007, Kiehl has overseen nearly 4000 brain scans. He observed the most severe abnormalities among diagnosed psychopaths, who displayed decreased activity in their amygdalae, the area largely responsible for processing emotional material, and the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, a region integral to moral reasoning (Bhattacharjee, 2018). Though psychopathy is relatively rare, affecting roughly 1 in every 150 people, the underlying significance to Kiehl's findings is that physical regions in the brain related to humane behavior are vulnerable to vast fluctuations. Genetics, temperament, and environment can physically degrade our ability to be reasonable, empathic people, thus setting the stage for potential evil regardless of psychopathy (Bhattacharjee, 2018). After all, the vast majority of the world's citizens reside in the chasm between angelic altruism and emotional destitution, yet genocides and war always include the ardent participation of thousands or millions of just such people.

Morality

[Jewish people] kill children and collect their blood in order to knead it into the bread that is eaten on Passover. Today, they are trying to say these things never happened, and that it was a joke or a lie, but these are the facts of history.

— Hamas official, *Gaza News network*

All humans are predisposed to occasionally think outrageously violent thoughts (or entertain satisfying fantasies about taking vengeance), yet the vast majority of these thoughts go unactualized. True road rage is rare compared to the amount of rage on the road. Racism seldom results in genocide. Sexual attraction can flare and fade without a rape. It is morality,

among other deterrents, that keeps these thoughts as thoughts.¹⁰ What happens, then, when morality is disengaged? At its most fundamental, level morality is a template for delineating good and bad behavior. Morality manifests in a set of behavioral guidelines meant to propagate conduct most beneficial for the individual that then radiates outward to improve or maintain allegiances within the family, group, society, and world. We as a species “know” moral principles through inherited instinct, learned intuition, and thoughtful consideration (Watson, 1997). Religions tend to introduce morality via incontrovertible dictates provided directly by God, Yahweh, Muhammad, Shiva, Zeus, and other supremely intelligent and wise beings. History affirms that groups who generally adhere to well-defined moral edicts, regardless of origin, enjoy more order and goodness when compared to groups who do not (Watson, 1997). When paired with punishment, cosmic or otherwise, discrete codes of conduct help promote virtue and well-being while discouraging evil. However, evil can be stimulated by the deliberate or inadvertent blurring of the normally distinct lines separating moral from immoral behavior (Baumeister, 1999). Circumventing our inner restraints against savagery merely requires the introduction of “ambiguity and misinformation” (Baumeister, 1999, p. 255).

In a 1999 article titled *Moral Disengagement in the Perpetuation of Inhumanities*, Albert Bandura, renowned for his work on social learning theory and self-efficacy, articulated several social and intrapsychic phenomena intended to foment ambiguity and undermine the morality restricting evil. He asserted that, among others, the selective alteration of language (euphemistic labeling), systematic diffusion of responsibility, and steadfast dehumanization of the enemy all function to deactivate the internalized mechanisms normally responsible for preventing the expression of our innate inhumanity. Baumeister echoed Bandura’s

¹⁰ Morality, and laws. Laws, however, are the codification of fundamental moral precepts.

suppositions writing, “to produce violence, it is not necessary to promote it actively. All that is necessary is to stop restraining or preventing it. Once the restraints are removed, there are plenty of reasons for people to strike out at each other” (Baumeister, 1999, p. 263). Several studies investigating the salient dispositional attributes of criminal offenders attributed their unlawful behavior to low self-control and a paucity of discipline (Marcus, 2004; Gottfredson, 2011). Bandura and Baumeister evinced a similar view, but saw self-control as fluid and malleable, vulnerable to external influence and manipulation. Moral sanctioning must be actively engaged by each individual, and many “psychosocial maneuvers” exist to keep our moral sensors from being tripped (Bandura, 1999, p. 1). In other words, when a person believes their actions moral, self-control is superfluous. Immoral conduct can be distorted to appear neutral or, in extreme cases, altogether virtuous. We can minimize our personal role in enacting violence, redefine the consequence of inhumanity, dehumanize the victims we perpetuate evil upon, and even consider them deserving of their mistreatment, torture, subjugation, and death. According to Bandura, many accomplish this mental restructuring via *moral justification* (1999).

Moral justification allows for the unfettered enactment of human behavior ranging from mild to grotesque to deadly by restructuring the meaning and purpose of the behavior itself. Vital meta-cognitive processes and self-sanctioning tasks can remain inactive merely by recasting the larger context in which the reprehensible behavior occurs to render it noble, honorable, and worthy of admiration (Bandura, 1999). Rather than adhere to an immutable transcendent morality, the State and collective become the adjudicators of moral action. People, generally speaking, refuse to perpetrate extreme violence or cruelty without this justification. The deliberate supplanting of transcendent morality with a morality of convenience, one that expedites the actualization of a desired end, allows otherwise

indefensible behavior to be recast both at the individual and (at times) societal level as altogether admirable, as serving a higher purpose or conveying one's allegiance (Bandura, 1999). Within these contrived paradigms, miscreants commit their cruelty unencumbered by doubt or guilt because they act on a moral imperative. They maintain their virtuous self-concept as lawful, dutiful citizens while surrounded by corpses and scorched earth. Not only the faithful followers of a despot are vulnerable to this manipulation. Individuals experience a similar imposition of alternative values and morality during many forms of military training (Gibson & Haritos-Fatouros, 1986). Research suggests that soldiers are not indoctrinated to enjoy exacting harm on innocent people (as the Myth of Pure Evil would suggest), nor do they undergo major alterations in their personality, core temperament, Freudian drives (aggression/death), or basic morality. Instead, their occasionally violent, ruthless, and lethal behavior is enabled "by cognitively redefining the morality of killing so that it can be done free from self-censure" (Bandura, 1999, p. 3). Legitimate and unscrupulous operations alike are executed in the name of peace and prosperity. According to Bandura, one of the most effective means of accomplishing this is through what he terms *euphemistic labeling*.

Euphemistic labeling entails the manipulation and sanitization of language to conceal the depravity of a particular action well enough for it to bypass an individual's moral self-sanctions. George Orwell is partly renowned for showcasing the power of euphemistic labeling in his famed dystopian novel *1984*, branding it as "newspeak" and "doublethink." The most recognizable example of doublethink is the infamous slogan of Oceania, "War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength" (Orwell, 1949, p.7). Orwell intimately understood how language is the fundamental mortar that shapes and binds a person's beliefs about the world, beliefs that dictate subsequent attitudes and behavior (Bandura, 1999). Thoughtful manipulation of language can encourage or discourage particular outcomes. The

field of psychology experienced a relatively benign version of euphemistic labeling when certain psychopathologies were redefined as being mental “illnesses.” This singular, medicalized term automatically influenced the framing of clinical concerns and constricted viable forms of treatment (Frances, 2014). “Illness” implied an external locus of control that necessitated more medicalized (and manualized) interventions and put the impetus for change squarely on the professional rather than the client. Within this framework, the absence of meaningful change can be ascribed solely to the clinician, encouraging enmity and helplessness, and reinforcing the client’s identity as a hapless victim.¹¹ This relatively innocuous example cannot, however, be considered true euphemistic labeling because the intentions behind the selection of the term “illness” over alternatives such as “dysfunction” or “disruption,” were not malevolent. Euphemistic labeling, as Bandura describes it, is implemented intentionally as misdirection at the mildest level to quietly encouraging comprehensive savagery at the extreme (1999).

Bandura concentrated mainly on the artful sanitization of words to facilitate immoral and violent behavior. People, leaders, and governments can intuitively or deliberately employ hygienic terminology when referencing disturbing behavior to reduce its repugnancy. The less repugnant, the less immoral; the less immoral the less need for self-restraint. Among military personnel, instead of murdering people, they “neutralize” or “waste” targets with “surgical” precision (Reich, 2001). The death and dismemberment of innocent civilians becomes “collateral damage.” Terrorists label themselves “freedom-fighters” and domestic abusers teach their battered spouse “a lesson” (Reich, 2001; Klein, 2015). Research suggests that the deliberate obfuscation of truth through sanitized language not only facilitates violence but actually increases cruelty compared to when equivalent actions are labeled

¹¹ Victims can be prone to retaliation, but that comes later.

accurately as aggression, torture, and murder (Diener, Dineen, Endresen, Beaman, & Fraser, 1975). Testimonies from members of Japan's infamous Unit 731 showed how calling their captive subjects "logs" eased their conscience when conducting their grotesque experiments (Gold, 2003). The term was originally somewhat of an inside joke due to their facilities being constructed on the remnants of an abandoned lumberyard. But the flippant label stuck for utilitarian reasons. After all, logs are unfeeling, interchangeable, and their primary purpose is to be cut down and torn apart to serve a greater good. Logs by their nature are impervious to mistreatment. Referring to human beings in this way provides an aura of abstraction around their suffering that permits the perpetrators to effectively conceal the depravity of their actions, even from themselves (Milgram, 1974; Baumeister, 1999). These linguistic diversions have a palliative effect that redefine even the vilest behavior as altogether ordinary¹² (Baumeister, 1999).

Another method Bandura posited for disengaging morality and bypassing self-censure is through **advantageous comparison**. Individuals or groups utilizing advantageous comparison contrast their actions against ostensibly worse ones to shade their behavior in more forgiving colors (Bandura, 1999). This technique is observable across all gradations of disobedience and evil. For instance, when precocious adolescents get caught sneaking out, they often attempt to soften the inevitable punishment by declaring through their angst, "It's not like I was driving drunk/doing crack/etc." Juxtaposed against more deviant behavior, sneaking out appears far less significant. However, advantageous comparison can be coopted by the resentful, contemptuous, or ideologically blinded to legitimize the otherwise

¹² Clients intuitively sanitize morally ambiguous, hurtful, or outright repugnant behaviors (e.g. As noted, a domestic abuser may say he "taught her a lesson" instead of admitting to beating her mercilessly with little to no legitimate provocation.).

illegitimate. Ted Kaczynski, the domestic terrorist known as the Unabomber, killed three people and maimed or wounded 23 others using hand-crafted bombs delivered anonymously through the postal service. In his famous 35,000 word manifesto published by the Washington Post, titled *Industrial Society and Its Future*, Kaczynski rationalized his decision to murder and disfigure unsuspecting people by describing the global zeitgeist as being far more inhumane:

The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race. They have greatly increased the life-expectancy of those of us who live in “advanced” countries, but they have destabilized society, have made life unfulfilling, have subjected human beings to indignities, have led to widespread psychological suffering (in the Third World to physical suffering as well) and have inflicted severe damage on the natural world. (1995, p.1)

Though his description is not wholly inaccurate, Kaczynski sought to solve these exceedingly complex problems by using bombs, fear, and death. He exploited advantageous comparison to turn the reprehensible into the righteous. Similarly, Eric Harris, the co-conspirator of the Columbine massacre, wrote in his diary 11 months prior to the shooting how:

The human race sucks. Human nature is smothered out by society, jobs, and work and school. Instincts are deleted by laws. I see people say things that contradict themselves, or people that don't take any advantage to the gift of human life. They waste their minds on memorizing the stats of every college basketball player or how many words should be in a report when they should be using their brain on more important things...The human race isn't worth fighting for anymore, only worth killing. Give the Earth back to the animals, they deserve it infinitely more than we do. (1998)

In each scenario, their victims deserved death. The world sowed the seeds of its own devastation. No amount of murder from Kaczynski, Harris, and Klebold could compare (in their minds) to the profound evil that justified them. All three were attempting to improve life on Earth, though not necessarily for humans. Terrorist also operate inside this paradigm when considering themselves faithful martyrs retaliating against sinful and tyrannical oppressors (Post & Laqueur, 1998). Advantageous comparison also provides evildoers a road to self-exoneration (Bandura, 1999). When used purposefully in this way, groups and individuals qualify their bad behavior as moral by using utilitarian justifications. Killing can be framed as an objectionable but necessary last resort by assuming all non-violent alternatives to be ineffectual, and the suffering prevented as far exceeding the harm caused (Bandura, 1999).

For example, intellectuals under the Khmer Rouge were identified as a grievous threat to the regime's initially tenuous power. When detecting intellectuals via their credentials proved difficult, the descriptive criteria dilated to include anyone wearing glasses or resembling a caricature of an intellectual (Ung, 2006). Neutralizing these "intellectuals" immediately, either through imprisonment, hard labor, or death, was considered reasonable when juxtaposed against the imagined inevitability of them destroying the egalitarian utopia the Khmer Rouge intended to usher in. The Soviet Union espoused a similar mentality and arrested, tortured, and imprisoned¹³ millions based on mere rumors about their potential disloyalty to Stalinism (Solzhenitsyn, 1973). Anyone who questioned, or maybe questioned, the benefits of communism and a totalitarian centralized government, was considered a far greater threat than Stalinism could ever be. Inaction against such apostates became the new

¹³ Though the precise statistics remain unknown, estimates suggest that nearly 10 million Russian citizens were imprisoned in forced labor camps called Gulags between 1934 and 1947. Over 1 million of them perished inside the walls.

immorality. Any action, no matter how vile or deadly, to prevent the proliferation of dissent became virtuous and a potential source of pride. Bandura asserted that the combination of “moral justifications, sanitizing language, and exonerating comparisons” was *the* most expeditious to disengage a person or group’s previous moral anchoring (1999). These three methods for evading moral self-censure may clear the road to hell quickly, but slower methods also exist to lure ordinary people into a malignant mind frame.

Seduction into evil can also occur through what is called gradualistic moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999). This concept is predicated on the belief that previously kind and considerate (i.e. morally sound) people do not instantly surrender their goodness in favor of cruelty, and instead moral self-censure is shut down or bypassed progressively. Gradualistic moral disengagement is comparable in many respects to systematic desensitization, or habituation, except individuals are corrupted to eventually tolerate the self-sanctioning of malevolence. The ordinary men of the German police (Battalion 101) tasked with carrying out Hitler’s Final Solution in Poland experienced this moral conversion firsthand when hunting, corralling, and executing the Jewish citizenry (Browning, 1992). When first receiving their orders, many officers reacted with confusion and disgust. Some refused outright to participate in the slaughter. Alcohol was distributed and ingested almost unceasingly to numb their nerves and quench reservations. At first, officers often “missed” their Jewish targets despite firing from point blank range. Eventually, however, their revulsion subsided, their moral outrage dissolved, and their originally repugnant responsibilities were carried out with increasing efficiency and nominal torment (Browning, 1992; Miller, 1999). Time and again, in and outside tyrannical regimes, “inhumane practices become thoughtlessly routinized” (Bandura, 1999, p. 12). As immoral actions grow ordinary, the newfound practitioners of evil shift their focus away from the victim’s suffering (or

larger moral implications), and instead become preoccupied with the minutiae of their task. The executioners, scientists, and surgeons employed by vile regimes often endeavor to hone their skill and proficiency (Gold, 2003). Discerning the more and less efficient ways to load dead children into a furnace required thoughtful consideration (Goldhagen, 1997). Vivisections, done sloppily, reflect poorly on the surgeon. When our instinctual drive to improve and impress is applied in this context, evil is increased. Attention tends to narrow, thinking rigidifies, and the individual forfeits higher-level thinking to focus on the details of their performance (Baumeister, 1999). A preoccupation with the *how* eclipses any consideration of the *why*. Exerting self-control requires a certain degree of transcendence over the immediate moment to grasp the larger implications of a given decision, a process prohibited by this attentional shift. In this way, malevolence is meted out in increasingly streamlined ways with fewer complications (Baumeister, 1999).

Instrumental Evil

Anti-Semitism is exactly the same as delousing. Getting rid of lice is not a question of ideology, it is a matter of cleanliness. In just this same way anti-Semitism for us has not been a question of ideology but a matter of cleanliness.

—Heinrich Himmler

When morality is thoroughly disengaged, it permits the emergence of baser and more reckless impulses ranging from greed to lust to ambition. Though the inverse path is also true. Professor and psychologist Ervin Staub posited in his work *The Roots of Evil* two fundamental motivations for harmful behavior: to injure a person or group, or to use violence to actualize a larger goal that is not innately evil (1999). Baumeister termed the latter motivation *instrumental evil* (1999). Insatiable longings for wealth, pleasure, and power

can be satisfied expediently if a person is only willing to rob, rape, and kill. In cases of instrumental evil, wicked means function to acquire normative ends. Humans are predisposed to desire riches, respect, and adulation, but tend to rely on more legitimate and conventional methods to attain them. Perpetrators of instrumental evil presume those methods to be ineffectual. In fact, the “defining criterion for instrumental violence is that the perpetrator would be willing to abandon violence if he or she could achieve the same goal without it” (Baumeister, 1999). This was vividly brought to life in Asia and Europe during the 13th and 14th centuries as the Mongolian Empire spread across the land, consuming smaller civilizations. The Empire’s policy on conquering entailed treating civilizations who voluntarily opened their gates with relative kindness, yet utterly decimating those who did not (Carey, Allfree, & Cairns, 2015). Violence and cruelty emerged only after their material desires were thwarted.

Disregarding the Mongols temporary historical success, the question remains if instrumental evil functions as an effective alternative compared to more conventional means. Criminals may forego making the necessary sacrifices to obtain the wealth and respect common to doctors, lawyers, and businessmen because they believe an easier road exists, despite it shortcutting directly through hell. The effectiveness of instrumental evil depends entirely on the time frame selected when evaluating it (Baumeister, 1999). Reprehensible behavior can help individuals acquire desirable material ends in the short term. However, these gains quickly dissolve due to reckless spending, drug addiction, in-fighting, and imprisonment (Baumeister, 1999). After multiple incidents, the felon may be saddled with a criminal record beyond repair, drug addiction, disease, and enemies. Their future becomes a desolate morass. Evil has repeatedly proven to be a tenuous and altogether ineffective approach for actualizing medium to long-term goals (Staub, 1992). Having said that,

guaranteeing failure does little to dissuade current and prospective criminals.¹⁴ Many criminals and evildoers lack a cohesive, over-arching perspective for their lives. They remain utterly transfixed on satisfying their most proximal needs, rather than cultivating a life of stability through self-control and sacrifice. Convicts tend to smoke, drink, and abuse illegal drugs at rates well above the national average (Baumeister, 1999). They are sexually promiscuous, experience more unplanned pregnancies, have volatile marriages, fight, gamble, and generally find nurturing secure roots wearisome (Katz, 1992). For such individuals who lack patience, perspective, and inner restraint, violence becomes an increasingly attractive method to attain their goals. However, to suggest that they, or anyone else, are incapable of exerting self-control is a myth. People voluntarily surrender their will, “allow[ing] themselves to lose control. And they do so in part because they learn to regard certain impulses as irresistible” (Baumeister, 1999, p. 274). They momentarily abandon the belief that they are capable of sustaining self-control and instead become a passive victim of their devious desires. Once certain impulses are regarded as irresistible, assigning blame becomes unnecessary. In other words, the apple cannot be shamed for landing on Newton (It was, after all, merely gravity’s plaything). When this method of self-exoneration is unavailable, perpetrators of evil may rely on dehumanization strategies to make the victims appear deserving of their treatment, thus softening the criminal’s sense of culpability. Society may similarly dehumanize the criminals when determining their prison sentence.

Our species tends to dismiss social deviants outright as ruthless monsters, and monsters traditionally deserve to rot in solitude. In fairy tales, villains are stored in the

¹⁴ When contemplating motivation, clinicians must concede, at least momentarily, that illicit and reprehensible behavior does help clients achieve their material goals with moderate success in the short term. Clinicians can acknowledge and communicate the legitimacy of violence, cruelty, and evil in achieving desirable ends, then invite the client to project further into the future to perceive the consequences of their approach across time, both on themselves, others, and society.

smallest cell in the highest tower or forced to mold and mildew in the deepest dark. No punishment was too severe for them, no mistreatment unjust. Witches burned to reestablish moral symmetry. The merits of this approach are tenable when applied to instances of extravagant, almost mythical evil (i.e. Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot), but what happens when ordinary people are undeservedly relegated to the realm of demons and tyrants? The term for this is **dehumanization** (Zimbardo, 2008). Dehumanization enables moral disengagement and inhibits self-censure by shedding victims of their human qualities. A dehumanized person is robbed of their idiosyncrasies and uniqueness, transformed into a subhuman or bestial caricature without “feelings, hopes, or concerns” (Gibson & Haritos-Fatouros, 1986). Citizens from every walk of life employ dehumanization to rationalize hate, mistreatment, and violence (National Research Council, 1993). American soldiers turned the Vietnamese into “gooks,” the Japanese froze “logs” alive, and the Greeks tortured “worms” (Gibson & Haritos-Fatouros, 1986). The larger the disparity between the pejorative label and the person - the more deranged and animalistic they become - the less guilt the aggressor is burdened by. Flattening a worm with your heel is hardly worth remembering, but nailing an innocent woman to a wall by her tongue leaves an impression without first dehumanizing her (a common practice during the Rape of Nanking). Dehumanization allows the perpetrators of evil to preserve their unblemished goodness by blaming the victims, considering them deserving of the harm they suffer (Staub, 1999). This mentality, when properly stoked, can metastasize into the ferocious hate that compels the “citizens of one society to hate the citizens of another society to the degree that they want to segregate them, torment them, even kill them” (Zimbardo, 2008, p. 11). The abstract other, despite being remarkably similar in enumerable ways, is transformed into the enemy. Individuals accomplish this intuitively at times, but the transformation can be manufactured and greatly

expedited by a larger group or government. Propaganda is the visible, deliberate outgrowth of this process.¹⁵

Carefully crafted images and messages circulated through the media volunteer a stereotype of the other, painting them as a profound threat to a respective group's most fundamental beliefs and values (Baumeister, 1999). Expert propaganda effectively disinhibits a group's collective guilt prior to engaging the "enemy," thus opening the door to evil, by severing the tacit social bond established when viewing others as unique people with identities, families, and fears. Any details liable to evoke sympathy for the enemy are undermined by the caricature presented by the regime. I-Thou relationships are hammered and beaten into I-It relationships (Buber, 1996). Successful propaganda establishes a moral double bind, or "reversal of morality," wherein *not* working to eradicate the "enemy" is viewed as cowardly or traitorous (Staub, 1999). To preserve social harmony, the citizenry is required to act, act quickly, and act without remorse to neutralize the spreading scourge (Baumeister, 1999).

Self-esteem and Threatened Egotism

No one is worthy of shit unless I say they are, I feel like GOD and I wish I was, having everyone being OFFICIALLY lower than me. I already know that I am higher than almost anyone in the fucking [world]... no one is worthy of this planet, only me and who ever I choose.

– Eric Harris, *Columbine Shooter*

¹⁵ Propaganda is the deliberate attempt to skew a person or group's opinion of another group, but this perceptual shift can occur in the absence of any manufactured stereotype. Consider how a misogynist may develop a loathing for powerful, independent women or how racists come to hate a specific minority. We may learn to dehumanize others via indoctrination from our parents, friends, community, and society (Zimbardo, 2008).

In the devastating wake of a school shooting, large-scale inquiries tend to emerge investigating the personality of the person who pulled the trigger. These assessments yield commonalities consistent enough that a quasi-reliable profile for school shooters can exist: male, Caucasian, introvert, loner, reclusive, bullied, poor hygiene, obsession with weapons (O'Toole, 2008). Parents issue stern warnings to their children about the quiet, insecure kid “snapping” after receiving enough abuse and encourage them to show compassion. Over the years, this stereotype of violence, along with others, has slowly seeped into our collective conscious and shaped conventional wisdom. The foundation of this wisdom rests on the presupposition that criminal offenders, across the various gradations of evil, suffer from low self-esteem and a diffuse sense of worthlessness (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). Paucities in self-esteem are also paired with global devaluation, immense personal dislike, and a firm belief in one's inability to successfully travail life's challenges (Fitch, 1970). Researchers, criminologists, and psychologists who espoused this belief viewed evil actions as highly misguided attempts to acquire esteem and assert worth (Baumeister et al., 1996). These attitudes received further reinforcement when the intelligentsia attempted to marry low self-esteem with terrorism, gang violence, and domestic abuse (Long, 1990; Anderson, 1994; Renzetti, 1998). A naïve societal belief began to take shape that all crime, violence, and evil would simply vanish if everyone was made to feel valuable¹⁶ (Baumeister, 1999). Except this notion and the supposed solution were both flawed. An examination of the panoply of infamous despots (e.g. Lenin, Hitler, Mussolini, Kim Jung-Il) returns a noticeable lack of meek, submissive introverts. Where are humanity's quiet and humble butchers?

¹⁶ The self-esteem movement resulted in an entire generation of American youth being inoculated against rejection and disappointment by parents with the noblest of intentions, except it has since proved utterly disastrous (Baskin, 2011). The artificial inflation of self-esteem invariably nurtured obnoxiousness, hostility, aggressiveness, and profound entitlement.

Crime and mental health statistics further refute the idea that low self-esteem produces violence. Men traditionally have higher self-esteem than women and commit the majority of crimes and the *vast* majority of violent crimes (Baumeister, 1999). According to a 2013 report by the National Research Council, a strong positive correlation exists between diagnosable depression and low self-esteem, but no such relationship exists between depression and crime/violence. Robert Hare, a criminal psychologist who devised the Hare Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-Revised), attributes approximately half the serious crimes in the U.S. and Canada to psychopaths, a population he describes as having a “narcissistic and grossly inflated view of their self-worth and importance” (Hare, 1999, p. 38). Part of the cruelty psychopaths inflict on their victims derives from a fundamental investment in the victim’s comparative inferiority (Hare, Hart, Forth, Harpur, & Williamson, 1993). A microcosmic re-creation of this phenomenon is even visible in individuals with bipolar disorder. Manic episodes classically feature a preponderance of risk-taking behavior, promiscuity, and aggression when the individual is experiencing euphoria, grandiosity, and the abundant energy required to capitalize on them. In contrast, the depressive trough of bipolar disorder prompts more paralytic emotions such as worthlessness, inferiority, and guilt. Based on the preponderance of evidence contradicting the previously axiomatic belief that low self-esteem causes violence, swaths of researchers reformulated their investigations to look instead at *threatened egotism*.

Hans Toch, a social psychologist studying criminal behavior, observed that young male gang members “encountered, sought out, or deliberately instigated challenges to their egos... As soon as anyone showed any disrespect, questioned them, or offended them in any way, they would respond with violence” (Baumeister, 1999, p. 149). Often the reaction was wildly disproportionate to the original transgression, with mild verbal insults or unfavorable

insinuations triggering violent physical retaliation (Toch, 1992). Both Toch and Leonard Berkowitz, another social psychologist, attributed this patterned behavior to the perpetrator's flattering but fragile self-opinion (1992; 1994). Rather than suffer from low self-esteem, the most aggressive gang members considered themselves exceptional, and relied on threats or violence to reaffirm and maintain their tenuous self-perception. As their favorable self-concept and sense of superiority bloomed beyond what was warranted, the likelihood of them encountering disconfirmatory evidence increased substantially (Baumeister et al., 1996). Any ego threat created a momentary surge of anxiety, confusion, and despondency that needed to be immediately defended against (Baumeister, 1999). Over time, the criteria for what constituted a credible threat dilated considerably as the viable strategies for navigating them without violence narrowed. Eventually, perpetrators began acting preemptively to subdue potential ego threats before they materialized (Baumeister, 1999). Violence, being a swift mechanism for reestablishing interpersonal dominance, serves those ends well. This strategy is problematic, however, because the justification for preemptive violence is predicated on incomplete and potentially inaccurate social data. The aggressor must quickly infer the "offender's" intention or risk momentary ruin. Always better to act and be wrong than delay and be threatened. From a psychologically utilitarian perspective, preemptive aggression is the far safer option. Several researchers examined populations of violent criminal delinquents to better understand this relationship, with a primary focus on *attribution error*. Attribution theory is a social psychology construct "concerned with the cognitive processes that individuals use to justify the events that occur in their social and physical environments" (Waytowich, Onwuegbuzie, & Elbedour, 2011, p. 2). The idiosyncratic ways people interpret interpersonal data determines their subsequent responses. Violent offenders tend to locate the cause of a potential threat as being inside the

offending individual (dispositional) rather than resulting from situational forces (Waytowich et al., 2011). For example, a bloody brawl may ensue after one convict notices another grimacing during lunch. The instigator interprets the expression as disgust directed towards him that demands immediate retaliation. The grimacer had bitten his tongue.

When attributional errors persist unchecked, they ossify into rigid interpretive schemas that reinforce maladaptive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors which then increase an individual's propensity for, and reliance on, violence (Dodge, Price, Bachorowski, & Newman, 1990). Correcting this pathological spiral is difficult because most errors in causal attribution are rooted in irrational, subjective beliefs and highly resistant to outside influence. Violent offenders may overreact due to miscalculations in their cognitive heuristics, a violation of the Just World Theory, a fundamental attribution error, or a defensive attribution bias (Waytowich et al., 2011). When woven together, these four processes serve as the interpretive scaffolding that form a person's moral and social behavior. Approximately 80% of the delinquents studied showed marked decreases in their ability to accurately explain the violent behavior of others. Waytowich et al. (2011) devised a descriptive subcategory called "violent attribution error" to account for offenders who consistently ascribe blame to the victim or circumstance rather than the perpetrator of the crime itself. The rape victim *deserved* to be brutalized based on her salacious outfit. The bank *should* have coughed up the money for better security. The bank teller *asked* to be shot for tripping the silent alarm. And so on.¹⁷ Similarly, in a sample of juvenile delinquents, the most severely aggressive among them were shown to be "50% more likely than average children to attribute hostile intent to a hypothetical peer after an ambiguous provocation by the peer,

¹⁷ Victim blaming allows perpetrators to eschew the guilt, shame, and remorse associated with committing inhumanities by abdicating personal responsibility for their evil.

particularly when the provocation is directed towards the aggressive child” (Dodge et al., 1990). Participants were shown detailed photographs and videos of common interpersonal encounters, and consistently misperceived neutral or benign features (including subjective qualities like intention) as hostile. However, those with inflated but unwavering self-esteem were far less likely to engage in the misattribution of hostility (Dodge et al., 1990)). Generally speaking, people can be filtered into four groups depending on their self-esteem (high or low) and its consistency over time (stable or unstable). The misperception of hostile intention from benign stimuli was highest among delinquents with high, but volatile self-esteem (Dodge et al, 1990). Lacking any alternative coping skills or the self-control necessary to sublimate their rage, people in that classification respond by unleashing anger, violence, and cruelty upon their “aggressor.” In many ways, this pattern resembles the cycle of revenge, a concept predicated on a modified version of equity.

Religious conceptions of revenge distill the definition down to “an eye for an eye.” The essential meaning being that perpetrators ought to be punished to the equivalent degree as their original injustice. An eye for an eye is fair; your head and home and wife for an eye is not. When applied to material matters, the appropriate recompense is rather clear, but what about immaterial and subjective abuses? How does one measure and mete out punishment for ego threats (Baumeister, 1999)? The simple answer is *badly*. Victims base the nature and intensity of their retaliatory efforts solely on their perceptions, and perception, as stated in the aforementioned articles, can be disastrously inaccurate. Being attacked on any “dimension of worthiness” threatens the recipient’s ego beliefs and prompts their reflexive aggression, but the severity and meaning of each ego-threat depend entirely on subjective interpretation (Baumeister, 1999, p. 132). The lethality of peanut butter is determined by the one ingesting it. Potentially innocuous glances, comments, gestures, and ideas threaten the

vulnerable ego and provoke powerful impulses for retribution (that reestablish dominance and cohere the ego). The avenger perceives their retaliation, regardless of brutality, as proportionate to the original threat, while the victim and onlookers are mystified by the massive disparity between stimulus and response.¹⁸ Such “extremely harmful acts...are not commensurate with any instigation or provocation...” and far exceed what is warranted (Staub, 1999, p. 48). Since aggressors views the original instigator as profoundly evil, and themselves as a victim, even extreme cruelty can be justified and meted out with “self-righteous zeal” (Baumeister, 1999, p. 162).

Domestic violence research similarly posits that abusive husbands and boyfriends batter their significant others to reestablish and preserve their dominance within the dyad or family system following an ego threat (Baumeister, 1999). In the abuser subpopulation, many times, male superiority is consecrated as a virtue the family must honor. Any violation of this edict then functions as a convenient justification for retaliatory abuse. Interestingly, the wives of tyrannical husbands often “outclass or outrank” the abuser either in education or occupation (Baumeister, 1999, p. 120). This chasm separating the abuser’s self-concept (“I am the successful, impressive one.”) and reality is termed **status inconsistency** and accounts for a substantial percentage of domestic abuse incidents (Hornung, McCullough, & Sugimoto, 1981). Many dimensions of status inconsistency exist (e.g. education, income, prestige), but the permutation most associated with abuse entailed a highly educated and qualified male employed in an inglorious, modest career. These men, who felt deeply resentful of a life that failed to confirm their lofty and dignified self-concept, abused their wives at rates six times above the national average (Hornung et al., 1981). When

¹⁸ As mentioned earlier, Baumeister labels the disparity between a victim and aggressor’s experience the **magnitude gap** (Baumeister, 1999).

underqualified men held more prestigious positions, abuse dropped to six times *below* the national average. Abusers demand a level of respect and adoration far exceeding what is reasonable.

The primal impulses people experience following ego threats are occasionally powerful enough, they are willing to hurt themselves to get even. Participants in a 1968 study titled *The Effects of Need to Maintain Face on Interpersonal Bargaining*, observed that participants made to feel humiliated about their poor performance on a test sought revenge by surrendering a portion of their earned money to hinder other participants during their tests. A second study group who performed similarly during the experimental portion was provided more encouraging feedback and metabolized their failure without seeking revenge (Brown, 1968). The first group transformed their humiliation into an intense, fiery rage that functioned to “burn [their] humiliation up...[or] scare it off,” even at their own expense (Katz, 1992, p. 312).

Despite mounting evidence suggesting high but insecure self-esteem as a feasible explanation for much interpersonal evil, many critics continue to avow that “deep down,” beyond the conceited façade, the individual still suffers from low self-esteem. Arrogance, entitlement, and self-glorification function as artful flourishes that lend credibility to the expertly crafted mask that veils their core vulnerability (O’Toole, 2000). All their braggadocio serves as a disingenuous veneer. Critics account for violent behavior by arguing that people unequipped with the prosocial skills needed to nourish healthy relationships or experience academic/professional competence instead affirm their identity and accumulate worth by dominating, threatening, and hurting peers (Staub, 1999). Dan Olweus, a famed psychologist and forerunner of bullying research, spent a career studying bullies, juvenile delinquents, and violent criminals and unearthed a preponderance of evidence suggesting

that low self-esteem was common among the victims of bullying, but noted little to none in the bullies themselves (1994). Olweus stated definitively that his research never once suggested that bullies suffered from low self-esteem “under the surface” and instead had “unusually little anxiety and insecurity” (1994, p. 1180). Additionally, low self-esteem causes individuals to consistently internalize blame for their failures, stimulating an inward crumpling rather than an outward explosion. Conversely, in an attempt to avoid the unacceptable downward revision of their self-concept, high self-esteem individuals externalize blame and find fault in other people or the situation itself (Baumeister et al., 1996). The chronic externalization of blame results in individuals constructing a world view rife with aggressors, oppressors, and bastards wherein they assume the role of perpetual victim. Superficially, this appears an undesirable cross to bear, yet it permits the preservation of their identity and way of being, while justifying untempered retaliation against any wrongdoers.

Lastly, adherents to the low self-esteem conceptualization must reconcile how individuals experiencing *observably* low self-esteem tend to be nonviolent, while those concealing their insecurity tend towards violence (Baumeister, 1999). As previously argued, the most sensible conclusion based on the prevailing literature suggests that those most prone to reflexive violence develop a grandiose, conceited, borderline narcissist self-concept, exceeding the world’s opinion of them (Fitch, 1970). Their life becomes a series of relentless attacks against their prodigious ego which cannot go unaddressed. Rather than revise their self-concept in a downward, unflattering direction and shrink the painful disparity between self-concept and reality, they lash out against the hostile people around them (Baumeister et al., 1996). Aggression allows perpetrators to orient their attention immediately outwards, thus circumventing painful feelings of shame or anxiety. Their reflexive hostility

fundamentally restructures their perception of the scenario in a way which “enhances” their self-image as a brave, courageous, bad-ass railing against interpersonal injustice (Fitch, 1970).

The disputation of a person’s favorable self-concept is the poisoned soil that violence can sprout from, but it hardly guarantees violence. People predisposed to react to ego threats with aggression and cruelty account for a small minority of people with high self-esteem (Baumeister, 1999). Idiosyncratic moderating variables can help quell, offset, or displace a threatened individual’s anger, eliminating the need for violent reprisals. However, healthy, ordinary people still remain capable of horrible violence. In addition to threatened egotism, corrupted ideologies can mutate a person or collective’s fundamental perceptions and meaning-making schema to increase their propensity for cruelty, mercilessness, and murder.

The Power of Ideology

Beasts kill for food, humans kill for ideology. Beasts kill just enough to eat. Humans can kill endlessly.

–Ali Suni

Bandura, as outlined earlier, examined evil predominantly through the lens of moral disengagement via the cessation of self-censure. He contended that morality is malleable, forever subject to influences from *without* reconstituting aspects *within*. Whereas Bandura focused on a series of singular phenomena working independently or in chorus, an ideology envelops a person or collective’s entire being. Crusaders, zealots, terrorists, tyrants, and regular citizens alike have all fallen prey to ideologies. Certain words said in certain ways have morphed people’s understanding of right and wrong, good and evil, sufficiently enough to rationalize some of our species’ most heinous atrocities (Baumeister, 1999). Believing their

behavior good and actions righteous, they wrought horrible evil on the world while working to improve it. The road to hell is paved with good intentions for a reason. Evil committed under the auspices of a corrupted ideology does not require the circumvention of morality or virtue because pursuing the edicts embedded in the belief structure, at any cost, becomes moral and virtuous (Baumeister, 1999). Immorality is measured by disloyalty. Doubt is tantamount to betrayal. Within a given ideology, a lucrative “reality” is determined, protected, adhered to, and enforced.

A classic and contemporary source of ideological belief can be found in the world’s various religions (though secularism is replete with ideologies as well). Religion tends to imbue Gods and their emissaries with near infallibility: the Judeo-Christian God being omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Gods wield this knowledge and power to establish the parameters of a moral existence and the actions required of adherents to carry a clean conscience. Regardless of the dictate (e.g. female genital mutilation, honor killings, blood sacrifices), adherents may obey to preserve their morality, sense of duty, and goodness, while apostates view their actions as profoundly disturbing (Sarkin, 2018). Rejecting religious law, even if violent and reprehensible, can be considered blasphemous and evil. Parents may disown, beat, banish, or murder children who refuse to participate in, or submit to, their traditions (Sarkin, 2018).

According to Baumeister, the higher the moral principle the less room for compromise. Religious adherents who approach such doctrine rigidly, without nuance or discretion, are vulnerable to acting with impunity to actualize idealistic ends (Baumeister, 1999). In classic Machiavellian fashion, the noblest ends can justify the vilest means, though rarely do people rely on cruelty and violence as the preliminary approach. Those who profess themselves the virtuous servants of an idea might prefer more respectable means

when possible, then relinquish this ideal once obstacles repeatedly interrupt the actualization of their ends (Baumeister, 1999). Additionally, they may come to view any opposition as evil, for what ethical, honorable person deliberately sabotages progress towards a more perfect world? Visiting violence upon heretics and infidels can even be experienced as a form of ritualistic “cleansing,” an extreme restoration of divine purity (Naso & Mills, 2016b). Subservience to an infallible source of good means any behavior can be recast as moral, any meaning redefined, allowing participants of evil to preserve their self-image as decent, loving, and altruistic beings despite the blood on their hands and corpses at their feet. Such patterns are visible in both religious and secular ideologies.

In the brief yawn between the first and second world wars, nearly 11 million Ukrainian men, women, and children starved to death in a famine deliberately produced by Soviet policy (Conquest, 1986). Rather than outright murder “rich” peasants and farmers using bullet and blade, the communist regime systematically robbed them of their food, seed, and grain. Stalin tasked average infantryman with the unfortunate job of traveling door-to-door to collect any concealed crumbs from their already skeletal countrymen. One infantryman announced how *any* action, no matter how disgusting, was justified in the pursuit of their noble ends, how the “great goal was the universal triumph of Communism, and for the sake of that goal everything was permissible” (Conquest, 1986). He went on to qualify that the slaughter of thousands or “even millions” of people was equally justified so long as they stood in Communism’s way. Another soldier recalled how he endured “the children’s crying and woman’s wails” by reciting, almost in a mantra, how the forced starvation of dissidents was integral to the “great and necessary transformation of the countryside” (Conquest, 1986). As is common, both repressed or relinquished questions

about the morality of their actions by orienting their attention on the overriding goal: *product* over *process* (Baumeister, 1999).

Similar to other manifestations of evil, practitioners of idealistic evil also justify reprehensible behaviors by dehumanizing, debasing, and devaluing the recipients of their cruelty (Baumeister, 1999). Once a person or group consecrates themselves as the faithful servants of an infallible good, any opposition is perceived as evil. In extreme cases, showing enemies any mercy might be misperceived as granting their respective ideology legitimacy. Such insinuation, no matter how slight, is intolerable because it dilutes the group's total ownership of the "good" (Baumeister, 1999). Purity of thought is integral to maintain the integrity of the movement. Consequently, the most fervent loyalists often experience the deepest hatred towards enemies of their belief system. They gain notoriety and respect, becoming an ideal that others turn to for guidance or inspiration when experiencing doubt. For example, Hitler's SS members were not sloppy, ignorant thugs; rather they were recruited specifically for being the finest, noblest, and most committed members of the regime (Baumeister, 1999). They functioned as an ideal that the less fervent soldiers could model and aspire to be. Generals and diplomats utilized these individuals strategically, both to carry out the most heinous orders and to tilt the masses into a more frenzied and radical form of support (Gibson & Haritos-Fatouros, 1986).

The metastasization of the collective causes their capacity for evil to grow substantially (Zimbardo, 1995). In fact, another integral attribute of idealistic evil is the necessity of group participation (Baumeister, 1999). An individual killing, raping, and stealing for personal ideals can be quickly disregarded as a vigilante or sociopath, or mentally ill. Group support grants otherwise reprehensible behaviors an air of legitimacy (e.g. lynch mobs, public stonings, and genocide). Groups discourage dissent, embolden the meek, and

provide continuous validation to each member regarding being positioned on the right side of history (Baumeister, 1999). Their subconscious says, “How could this many people be wrong?” This mentality partly contributes to what social psychologists term **the discontinuity effect**, where groups often display more extreme behavior and opinions relative to the individuals comprising it (Insko, Schopler, Hoyle, & Dardis, 1990). Groups, partly due to the diffusion of individual responsibility amongst the members, tend to behave with vastly more antagonism and violence than the individual component parts. Each act of violence functions to further bind the group together, increasing the members’ allegiance to each other while fomenting disdain for outsiders (Insko et al., 1990). Over time, maintaining the integrity of the group becomes more important than the principles that founded it. Rather than external attacks being perceived as ideological threats, they take on a personal flavor. They become an assault on brothers, sisters, parents, and children. Attacks on their identities. Attacks on their very peoplehood. Ideas can be debated with words, but threats against a person’s family or existence require more aggressive retaliation (Baumeister, 1999). When this mentality propagates, it may result in the loosening or complete removal of rules against violence (Baumeister, 1999).

One major criticism of idealistic evil argues that most violent ideologies construct their fanciful beliefs purely to provide a veneer of rationality to justify their dominance and barbarism (Baumeister, 1999). Moral ideals function solely as a fulcrum to leverage power, as cleverly disguised altruistic diversions designed to camouflage selfishness. In this way, any aggression and egocentrism can be adorned with a pro-social veneer (e.g. Imperialism can be viewed as bringing culture, infrastructure, religion, and military protection to otherwise

vulnerable people).¹⁹ Regardless of the creator's intention, individual members of an ideology will almost always capitalize on the power granted by the larger authority to satiate their baser cravings (Baumeister, 1999).

During the Khmer Rouge takeover in Cambodia, soldiers kidnapped mothers, daughters, and orphaned girls stationed in work camps under the guise of an interrogation (or general business matter with the regime). These women were led from the camp into the surrounding woods, gang raped, and shot (Ung, 2006). Prior to the Khmer Rouge's ascension, the regime's foot soldiers were the poor, uneducated dregs of Cambodian society (Ung, 2006). Their vicarious power granted by the regime allowed them to express their latent resentment of the middle and upper class citizenry, people they felt previously oppressed by. Higher ranking officials went so far as to codify certain grievances into law. As referenced earlier, Khmer Rouge soldiers were commanded to consider anyone who wore glasses as flaunting their intellectual and material superiority over their fellow Cambodians and thus deserving of severe discipline or death (Ung, 2006). Since intellectuals were incapable of spontaneously forgetting their knowledge under threat or lash, true equality between the classes proved unattainable (though was likely never the goal). To establish pseudo-equality, the Khmer Rouge debased intellectuals and other middle-class Cambodians by subjecting them to nearly endless hard labor in the country's vast rice fields. They carried machine guns and barked orders at an unarmed populace. They exchanged their sickles for

¹⁹ The universality of this criticism is difficult to determine when considering all the world's tyrannies throughout time, but I imagine clever people have absolutely cloaked their desire for evil inside a respectable doctrine. For instance, The Jonestown Massacre in 1978 saw 918 people, children included, die from "voluntarily" ingesting cyanide after being groomed and manipulated by their leader Reverend Jim Jones. Many of the survivors deemed the incident a mass murder rather than suicide after witnessing nearly all the members drink the cyanide under tremendous psychological distress caused by Jones.

rifles and defined *equality* themselves. Idealistic evil flourishes when those in power determine right and wrong in accordance with what suits their needs.

To the victims of the Khmer Rouge, the red-sashed soldiers were diabolical murderers; to themselves and each other, they were the heroic ambassadors of a glorious new future (Ung, 2006). As the once (perceived) oppressors grew oppressed by their former victims, both sides experienced a profound sense of moral superiority over the other (Bandura, 1999). The Khmer Rouge was rebuilding the nation as it *should* have been originally, before they were made to suffer. A common core attribute of idealistic evil entails the reframing of all manner of malevolent behavior as being beneficial to the victims or humanity writ large (Staub, 1999). Hitler, Stalin, and the martyrs of Jihad all believed themselves to be behaving nobly for the betterment of their people and the world. Each fought injustice. If the Jewish populace were truly corrupted beyond rehabilitation, then their extermination could be viewed as an improvement, even for them. Hitler would be doing them a courtesy by extinguishing them, thus helping the Jews, Germany, Europe, and the entire human race. Ideologies allow groups to sleep soundly after enacting relentless malevolence by convincing the individual actors beyond all doubt that their behavior is pure, moral, and altogether essential to keeping true evil in check (Zimbardo, 2008).

Situational Forces

The line between good and evil is permeable and almost anyone can be induced to cross it when pressured by situational forces.

–Phillip Zimbardo

Freudian and Jungian theory, along with others, tend to centralize the source of aggression and anti-social behavior as residing within the individual minds of each

perpetrator; a sentiment echoed by many contemporary law agencies, governments, and politicians (Zimbardo, 1995). Following most instances of unjustified police brutality, the public is told the officers under investigation are “bad apples” and not representative of the entire profession. This sentiment, regardless of truth, perpetuates the notion that the officers (and humans in general) were impervious to the systemic and situational forces that potentially fomented the mentality that produced the immoral or murderous behavior. It fails to honor the possibility that these officers were *turned* bad, and that every person is vulnerable to experiencing an identical metastasis. Phillip Zimbardo, a distinguished psychologist and author, suspects society’s certitude about individual evil persists mainly because it exonerates society itself, eliminating the need to examine and address the fundamental pre-conditions responsible for creating individual and group malevolence (1995). Whether born from intellectual dishonesty, ignorance, or fear, this blindness keeps civilization stuck. When investigating violence in any group, regardless of size (i.e. family, gang, society), it is imperative to consider both the individual psychology of the actors *and* the situation²⁰ they are embedded within (Staub, 1999). Bandura addressed this in his essay on morality saying, “people do not operate as autonomous moral agents impervious to the social realities in which they are immersed” (1999, p. 16). Social cognitive theory labels the reciprocal relationship between people and the larger situation they inhabit, as it relates to morality, as the “interactionist perspective” (Bandura, 1999, p. 16). From this perspective, morality becomes a fluid co-creation perpetually shifting and under revision.

In his article, *A Situationist Perspective on Recruiting Good People to Engage in Anti-Social Acts*, Zimbardo attempted to illuminate the remarkable complexity underlying the

²⁰ Zimbardo defines **systemic** forces, compared to **situational**, as being more diffuse, persistent, and complex (involving more people and their respective laws, norms, policies, etc.). Situational forces are briefer, involving fewer people, and fairly constrained geographically (Zimbardo, 2008). Both contribute to create the preconditions for evil (Staub, 1999).

widespread violence endemic to America (1995). Zimbardo adopted a “multi-level model of causality” that identified eight major situational forces he deemed capable of souring previously moral people:

1. Individual Factors
 - a. Genetics
 - b. Neurophysiology
 - c. Personality
2. Stimulus Factors
 - a. Violent media
 - b. Sweltering temperatures
 - c. Readily available weapons
3. Social Factors
 - a. Community norms
 - b. Gangs
 - c. Modeling behavior
4. Societal and Structural Factors
 - a. Belief and value systems
 - b. Institutional dominance structures
 - c. Family values, racism
5. Economic Factors
 - a. Relative deprivation
 - b. Unemployment
 - c. Living conditions
6. Political Factors

- a. Military force
 - b. Earned trust of citizens
 - c. Territorial ambitions
 - d. Use of scapegoats for political advantage
7. Historical Factors
- a. Traditional glorification of violence
 - b. Conquest
 - c. Idealized history of war
 - d. Maintenance of hatred toward traditional enemies
8. Ideological Factors
- a. Violence as an acceptable defense for honor and national security
 - b. Religious and political ideologies that create enemies of the church and nation state

Zimbardo cautioned against ordering these forces by their influence because determining the causal power of each is nearly impossible (1995). How these social and cultural factors generate malevolence, and to what degree, is far too variable to create exact “weighting coefficients” to accurately determine their societal impact (Zimbardo, 2008, p. 125). Their significance resides instead in their mere existence as identified sources of moral corrosion that must be monitored and reformed when necessary. A simplified list identifies roles, rules, norms, anonymity, dehumanizing processes, conformity pressures, and group identity as potential sources of extreme brutality. Many of these categories are covered in depth in other sections throughout this paper and are therefore omitted from this portion to avoid redundancy. What follows is an introduction into Zimbardo’s *Stanford Prison Experiment*, the role of roles, and the power of conformity to stimulate and amplify evil.

In the late summer of 1971, Zimbardo devised his most renowned study, *The Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE)*, to specifically test the degree to which a contrived situation can induce emotionally and psychologically sound men into behaving immorally towards strangers they know to be innocent. Zimbardo recruited twenty-four predominantly white, college-aged men with no criminal history, psychiatric concerns, or disqualifying medical oddities. He insisted on acquiring the most ordinary and average participants to nullify any future accusation about recruiting “bad apples,” and to better identify any emergent evil in the prison guards as anomalous (Zimbardo, 2008, p. 10). The twenty-four recruits were randomly assigned to fulfill either the role of prisoner (12) or guard (12). Zimbardo appointed himself the prison superintendent. The experiment was designed to last two weeks but terminated prematurely after six short days when a female graduate student, and Zimbardo’s future wife, shook Zimbardo from his moral stupor. Zimbardo was, retrospectively, appalled by the situation’s incredible power to seduce the participants and himself into thinking and behaving with cruel indifference or active aggression towards the inmates. Within the faux-prison walls, Zimbardo witnessed human decency mutate and disappear. Inflated with power, the guards appeared compelled to impress their unquestionable authority upon the often defiant and ornery prisoner population. While the study lasted, the guards mercilessly enforced arbitrary rules, pitted inmates against each other, demanded inmates repeat their identification numbers for hours, forced exercise as punishment, removed mattresses, withheld sleep, forbade inmates from emptying their rancid chamber pots, abused solitary confinement, required certain inmates to strip naked, and simulated sodomy between prisoners. At least four of the guards displayed genuine

sadistic fervor towards the inmates they knew to be innocent²¹ (Zimbardo, 2008). After reproducing a situation (he believed) capable of seducing everyday men into behaving immorally, Zimbardo sought to identify the exact systemic forces responsible for calling forth evil. The most immediately apparent variable was the **roles** his participants assumed upon entering the study.

A role is, effectively, a supplemental identity replete with beliefs, behaviors, and responsibilities beyond a person's normal personality (Zimbardo, 2008). Teachers, law enforcement officers, lawyers, torturers and practically anyone fulfilling a particular societal function is induced into behaving differently, or even *being* different, while inside their role. Being situationally bound, most people possess the ability to shed their role when returning to their "normal" life. However, Zimbardo asserted that certain roles in certain contexts resemble an invasive parasite, insidiously infiltrating and fusing with a person's "normal" personality and behavioral scripts. This process results in roles previously identified as contrived and situationally dependent, becoming internalized (Zimbardo, 2008). The line between person and role blurs. Depending on the internalized role (An internalized baker is unlikely to prove overly problematic.), the realm of acceptable behavior and belief may narrow and grow rigid. The principled morality which previously governed the individual is effectively distorted or shut off to perform in accordance with the expectations of the role. In the SPE, this process was facilitated by providing the guards identical uniforms, mirrored aviator glasses, whistles, and billy clubs (batons). The costume²² functioned to further separate the guards from and elevate them above the inmates, encourage loyalty among the

²¹ To this day, certain guards remain adamant about deliberately acquiring a vicious persona to provide the experimenters with interesting material to view. They claim the situation did not induce them into unleashing their baser, authoritarian attributes, and instead they were merely acting (Zimbardo, 2008).

²² Masks, uniforms, or any garb that increases one's anonymity and diminishes their connection to their usual personality and appearance can facilitate violence and brutality (Zimbardo, 2008).

guards, and solidify their identity as formidable, intimidating, and dangerous people (Zimbardo, 2008). Any compassion felt for the inmates clashed with their identity as a guard, but brutality and control did not. In this way, their role encouraged *and* justified moral transgressions²³ by augmenting their very perception of the situation and the people within it.

This reconstituting of reality is typically further reinforced by the situational or systemic support systems designed to discourage alternate interpretations (Zimbardo, 2008). Nazis who questioned Hitler's final solution risked being shamed and demoted (Browning, 1992). Suspected critics of Stalinism risked torture, imprisonment, and death for their alleged disloyalty (Solzhenitsyn, 1973). The systems demanded compliance. This compliance was partly achieved by assigning evil actions to roles rather than to people (Zimbardo, 2008). Roles are replete with expectations and consequences for poor performance. Torturers, executioners, and gulag personnel relinquished personal responsibility for their repugnant behavior by ascribing it to their position. Among them, murder became an occupational demand in the same way teachers must erase chalk from the board or barbers sweep hair. Any sincere moral consideration of their objectionable behavior was further avoided by attributing evil to the entity that assigned it (Zimbardo, 2008). The executioner abdicated guilt by blaming the superior who issued the order; the superior abdicated guilt by asserting that they did not swing the sword or pull the trigger (Bandura, 1999). Roles can function as walled oases, free from blame, that allow responsibility to ricochet around as evil spreads.

As alluded to earlier when referencing Nazi compliance, the fear of being shamed, shunned, and disrespected can also subtly coerce ordinary people into behaving immorally

²³ Consider, too, how the role induction experienced by Mussolini's black shirts, Hitler's brown shirts, the Khmer Rouge's red sashes, or today's black-clad and masked Antifa might have contributed to both their cohesion and violence.

(Zimbardo, 2008). Being social creatures who instinctually understand the risks of ostracization, people alter their behavioral repertoires in order to acquire and sustain social approval. In 1951, Solomon Asch conducted a series of experiments meant to assess the power of conformity to induce people into behaving foolishly or defying their better judgement in order to yield to the majority (Asch, 1956). Asch observed roughly 40% of participants routinely parrot the blatantly incorrect answers of their (actor) peers on a perceptual test in order to prevent standing out or being noticed. Though Asch's experiment was entirely benign, the results can be generalized and applied to more nefarious situations where calls for conformity exist. In the SPE, tentative and unsure guards relied on their more cocksure peers for guidance regarding how to behave and fit in (Zimbardo, 2008). Besides instinctual cravings for social approval, group compliance can also be assured through implicit fears of rejection or bodily injury. Having seen the reckless cruelty of their peers, SPE guards were highly incentivized to stay silent and get in step. Extending compassion towards the inmates meant risking being considered a deviant, becoming a pariah, or incurring a brutal guard's wrath.²⁴ As Zimbardo suspected, and history confirmed, abstaining from any established norm immediately reveals oneself as a potential rebel and malcontent. The more malevolent the overarching ideology, the more extreme its capacity for vengeance, and the less inclined an individual is to dissent (Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969). Conformity becomes the surest path towards self-preservation, as siding with the prisoners or any subjugated group yields little material support towards supplanting an armed and overtly aggressive tyrant. However, harboring hidden doubts while displaying overt devotion

²⁴ Zimbardo observed a similar dynamic materialize within the ranks of American soldiers stationed at Abu Ghraib prison during the Iraq war in 2003. Inmates were, among other things, stripped naked, sodomized with fluorescent lights and truncheons, raped, tortured, terrified, beaten, urinated on, and dragged by ropes tied to their penises (Zimbardo, 2008). Photos show the guards smiling, laughing, and generally enjoying tormenting their prey.

invariably amplifies evil by skewing the perceived degree of civilian and military support (Baumeister, 1999). The tenor of conversation remains sympathetic to the regime. Members may even attempt to circumvent potential accusations of disloyalty by volunteering increasingly harsh solutions to the regime's problems. Others, fearing their comparatively passive ideas will be experienced as being sympathetic to the enemy, suggest even more brutal alternatives to avoid allegations of faithlessness (Baumeister, 1999). Then, as the bloodshed and body count increase, the possibility of defecting diminishes, and the regime's minions spiral deeper into darkness.

After marching in step long enough, forced conformity can result in previously repulsive group opinions being embraced and reclassified as personal opinions (Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969). This convergence between a group's collective and personal beliefs further binds the group together, fueling each member's identification with, and loyalty to, the collective (Baumeister, 1999). A shared group identity further enables violence as members reflexively begin to view themselves, and their mutual ideology, as superior to others. In an almost intuitive form of dehumanization, members begin instigating and validating any inhumanity directed towards those they deem "sufficiently different and inferior" (Baumeister, 1999, p. 168). When their attacks fail to result in the complete eradication or suppression of the enemy, an **ideology of antagonism** can form wherein their shared detestation of the "other" becomes an integral aspect of their collective identity (Staub, 1999). The original ideology expands to subsume the group's vitriol. Two groups tangled in ideological antagonism risk entering a fatal dynamic wherein their reciprocal enmity escalates with each new attack and retaliation. Attacks functionally confirm one group's belief in their collective victimhood and the subhuman barbarism of their enemy. They perceive their swift and violent retaliation as noble, and each kill weaves the group more tightly together.

Meanwhile, the enemy is engaging in an identical process and is forced, yet again, to retaliate against *their* relentless tormentor (Staub, 1999).

According to Staub (1999), not everyone is equally vulnerable to being seduced into evil by certain situational forces. Social conditions most acutely influence individuals whose basic needs were thwarted during their childhood and formative attachment years.

Adolescents and young adults may gravitate towards groups in a bid to satisfy their deep-seated longing for connection, security, and acceptance; ideologies help provide lost souls with a purpose and identity (Staub, 1999). Zimbardo refers to this allure as **institutional indirect power**, and as illuminated in the SPE, likewise demonstrates how something altogether innocent can still insidiously metastasize into pure, concentrated evil. Zimbardo partly owes his revelations and acclaim to renowned social psychologist Stanley Milgram. Milgram dedicated his short career to understanding the influence of *direct power* on obedience after being mystified by the Germans who supported or acquiesced to Hitler's genocidal demands (Milgram, 1974). Through obedience, Milgram unearthed an additional road leading into hell.

Obedience

Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.

—Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*

To ensure the productive functioning of any group or society, it must at least partly differentiate and organize itself into sets of superiors and subordinates, willing to obey reasonable demands (Ruzicka, 2010). Even chickens enforce a pecking order that requires the subordination of certain members of the collective. Similar to wolves and the great apes, humans are social creatures who function within complex hierarchies. The spontaneous emergence of dominance (or competence) structures is evolutionarily advantageous because it improves our ability to survive and triumph over an unforgiving natural environment, the perpetual threat of other species, and violent discord between group members (Milgram, 1974). Though the idea of an entirely egalitarian existence has a certain appeal, social hierarchies predicated on competence (not race, gender, or other superfluous factors) are integral to the acquisition and maintenance of group cohesion and stability. We are biologically predisposed to orient towards the most functional interpersonal organization, not the most superficially appealing. However, rather than being passively required to obey, Milgram (1974) asserted that humans have an instinctual potential for obedience mediated by society (on a macro level) and the situation (on a proximal, micro level).²⁵ What happens, then, when a society and situation imbue foul, malevolent ideologues with power? What compels the autonomous functionaries of tyrants to obey immoral orders? Milgram, a descendent of Romanian and Hungarian Jews directly impacted by the Holocaust, held a morbid curiosity for how, “with numbing regularity,” relatively ordinary people contorted themselves to follow callous demands that degraded, hurt, and occasionally killed innocent

²⁵ Without establishing certain individuals as passengers and others as pilots, a plane never departs (safely). A world-renowned dentist, perceiving her situationally bound role as a subordinate passenger, activates a deferential behavioral template and relinquishes power and control to the pilot. Later, the pilot who ferried her home might similarly cede authority to the dentist while enduring a much-needed root canal. Hierarchies appear fluid between situations but fixed within them. The dentist cannot, after all, become the pilot without causing catastrophe, and vice-versa.

others (Milgram, 1974, p. 123). Milgram possessed an intimate, though anecdotal, familiarity with the evil that emerges when subservience is blind, and he devised his obedience studies to further elucidate the close relationship between an unyielding respect for authority and genocide.

In the spring of 1961, inspired partly by the trial of Adolf Eichmann one year earlier, Milgram placed an advertisement in a local New Haven newspaper recruiting volunteers for a study on “learning” at Yale University. Ultimately, 40 men (later iterations included women), ranging in age from 20 to 50 and spanning the demographic spectrum, were selected to participate (Milgram, 1974). Though the experiment featured three major roles - learner, teacher, and experimenter - the participants were always “randomly” assigned as the *teacher* and led to believe the learner was another study participant (though actually Milgram’s confederate). Teachers watched as the learner was placed in a separate room, situated in an electric chair, and decorated with electrodes. Prior to leaving, the teacher was administered a mild 45V shock to familiarize themselves with the pain of lower voltages and infer the severity of higher ones. The teacher then accompanied the experimenter, adorned in a lab coat to elevate their prestige and authority, to an adjacent room which held an electric shock generator that featured 30 switches wired to deliver shocks ranging in intensity from 15V, labeled slight shock, to 450V, labeled “XXX” to insinuate “lethal” (Milgram, 1974, p. 28). The learner was instructed to memorize a series of word pairs; then the teacher tested his memory by saying a word and asking for its pair (e.g. nice → day). Teachers administered a shock for each incorrect answer, then increased the voltage by 15V for the next wrong answer (Milgram, 1974). The learner was directed to provide incorrect answers for most queries, thus requiring the teacher to steadily up the voltage. At no point was the teacher permitted to see the learner, and all information about his well-being was delivered through

pre-recorded audio cues tied to specific voltages (e.g. protesting about the pain at 50V, asking to stop at 150V, screaming at 300V, silence at 450V). Hearing the learner's tremendous suffering and pleas to stop, most participants expressed concern for the learner and voiced deep reservations about administering any additional shocks. Anticipating this, Milgram devised a series of "prods" the experimenter deployed as a means to stimulate further obedience:

Prod 1: Please continue, or, please go on.

Prod 2: The experiment requires that you continue.

Prod 3: It is absolutely essential that you continue.

Prod 4: You have no other choice, you *must* go on.

Special prod for when subjects showed concern about the learner

suffering irreparable injury: Although the shocks may be painful, there is no permanent tissue damage, so please go on. (Milgram, 1974, p. 21)

By the experiment's end, 26 of the 40 participants (65%) administered shocks up to the 450V limit, despite the learner demanding the experiment be stopped, warning that the electricity might aggravate his pre-existing heart condition, screaming, and eventually going silent. All 40 participants delivered shocks of at least 300V.²⁶ In an attempt to mitigate inaccuracies stemming from experimental error, Milgram revised the study 18 times, and each returned similar results (Milgram, 1974). Milgram sought to further refine his understanding into the salient psychological mechanisms underlying the participants'

²⁶ When allowed to choose the level of shock administered in the absence of an authority (the experimenter), the vast majority of participants delivered the "very lowest shocks" (Milgram, 1974, p.72). These findings contradicted the Freudian hypothesis that men (and people) have latent aggression that permanently seeks viable expression.

continued obedience, especially among the teachers who voiced or displayed serious reservations about the experiment's morality yet persisted nonetheless.

Milgram began by identifying two paths to obedience: voluntary willingness and compulsion through fear. Considering that obedience attained by overt force or threat is hardly enigmatic, Milgram oriented his analysis around obedience willingly given in the absence of any immediate fear or consequence, instances where the mere reminder of the authority's power and right to issue demands were sufficient to secure compliance.²⁷ Echoed later by both Bandura and Baumeister, Milgram suspected that individuals who carried out immoral directives did so partly by reconstruing themselves as mere instruments designed to fulfill their superior's commands (Milgram, 1974). As alluded to in other sections, this permits the individual to relocate responsibility onto the superior, permitting them to continue their task without calling their personal morality into question (Diener et al., 1975). This subtle narrative shift has profound psychological implications as it divorces functionaries from their reprehensible behaviors (Milgram, 1974; Bandura, 1999). Individuals abandon their need to repudiate or refuse immoral orders because their conduct was not self-directed. Teachers were told, after all, that the *experiment* required they continue (Milgram, 1974). The abdication of personal responsibility permits people obeying orders to view themselves, like those they wound, as hapless victims of the authority's draconian directives rather than active agents capable of discerning when to acquiesce *or* resist. Practically every "socially sanctioned mass execution" included rampant self-exemption wherein the most wretched brutality was neatly excused as simply following orders (Bandura,

²⁷ Milgram believed understanding this facet of obedience was integral to deciphering how Hitler coerced millions of German citizens (e.g. engineers, chemists, contractors, doctors, etc.) and soldiers to participate in the systematic eradication of millions of innocent people (Milgram, 1974). One man's genocidal dream being insufficient to create the Holocaust, countless others had to follow his demands.

1999, p. 6). People ranging from ordinary corporate officials to police officers to the Nazis sentenced during the Nuremberg trials have all relied on this excuse, but it is not an altogether illegitimate alibi. Milgram believed that subordinates can become fixed in a fundamental mode of thought that induces obedience and discourages dissent (Milgram, 1974). Situational riptides can secure obedience through various **binding factors** that lock individuals in their role. Simple politeness can function as a binding factor as people fear the awkwardness of violating or withdrawing from particular tacit social conventions (Milgram, 1974). When asked to explain their rationale for administering shocks despite the learner's obvious anguish, many participants in Milgram's study said they felt obligated to continue after already agreeing to participate. These individuals desired to preserve their relationship with the experimenter and viewed dutiful compliance as a viable means of accomplishing this.

Individuals keen on conserving their relationship with an authority figure further succeed in casting aside personal moral grievances by reorienting their attention onto the minutia of the assigned task. Narrow attention focused on the technical aspects of a task allows the larger implications of a behavior to blur, thin, and vanish. The executioner who meticulously sharpened his axe-blade rarely contemplated the justice system that delivered him new necks. Such attentional shifts bind individuals to their role by altering their values. Moral concerns are abolished in favor of appearing competent and dependable, a process that demands concerted effort²⁸ (Milgram, 1974). The aforementioned executioner would be mortified by missing a victim. However, attempting to impress an authority first requires granting them legitimacy in their role and concreting their hierarchical superiority. Once this

²⁸ Milgram described this in detail saying, "the scene is brutal and depressing: his hard, impassive face showing total indifference as he subdues the screaming learner and gives him shocks. *He sees to derive no pleasure from the act itself, only quiet satisfaction at doing his job properly*" (1974).

legitimacy is established, the subordinate feels increasingly less capable of defying their commands. Milgram witnessed this firsthand when subjects exclaimed in one form or another, “I wouldn’t have done it myself. I was just doing what I was told” (1974, p. 8). The closer the subordinate to the superior, both in terms of proximity and loyalty, the more extreme their obedience (Bandura, 1999). Knowing this, tyrannical leaders expedite the cultivation of devotion by concocting benign primary orders and rewarding good performance, then incrementally increasing the immorality of the task until the subordinate feels too embedded to disobey (Zimbardo, 1995). Loyalty is exploited to ensure obedience by making the cost of disloyalty high (e.g. being labeled a traitor, terminated, or ostracized). Interestingly, not everyone is equally susceptible to this manipulation.

Milgram posited that a major determinant of obedience or disobedience is an individual’s personal history, or *antecedent conditions* (Milgram, 1974). Participants in his study were generally more obedient and responsive to prodding if raised in a family or community that nurtured a familiarity with and respect for authority (e.g. military family, religious community, etc.). Growing up, one’s immersion into a subordinate role often extends beyond the home and into church, school, sports, and eventually their respective vocation. These **institutional systems of authority** routinely punish insubordination and reward passive compliance. For nearly 20 years parents, priests, teachers, and coaches hammer this identity into place and effectively abolish hubris and extreme autonomy (Milgram, 1974). Upon graduating from school, people are often filtered into either the military or join the civilian work force where the same laws govern behavior. Both systems are structured to incentivize faithful obedience by offering pay raises and promotions. Eventually, the gradual coalescence of these rules results in the **internalization of the social order** that encourages an interpersonal posture of submission that helps ensure harmony, procure social approval,

and gain material compensation (Milgram, 1974). Within a benevolent ideology, the repercussions of this stance are relatively benign, even lucrative. Inside a malignant philosophy, however, it can inspire soldiers deprives farmers of food, Jews to be hunted, women raped, and entire cities leveled.

Ordinary, non-sadistic functionaries who contribute to the actualization of inhumanities undergo an alteration in their autonomy termed the **agentic shift** (Milgram, 1974). Milgram viewed the agentic shift as an extension of cybernetics, a science concerned with how organisms subvert their behavioral templates for autonomous need fulfillment, through regulation and control, to function successfully inside a larger group. Without an inborn capacity to regulate or redirect our templates for personal need fulfillment, cohabitation would be impossible (Milgram, 1974). Theft, murder, rape, and chaos would reign. The agentic shift encourages cooperation and subservience in the pursuit of a sustainable and mutually lucrative order. An individual who enters a hierarchical system becomes, in many ways, a different person than they were outside the system. Their attitude and self-perception shift to view themselves as agents responsible for fulfilling the organization's wishes, rather than their own (Milgram, 1974). Inside this mentality, personal discomfort and moral perturbation lose their relevance. Besides the historical antecedent conditions outlined in the previous paragraph, the most powerful (and proximal) influence on whether a person experiences an agentic shift is their perception of the authority as having legitimacy (Milgram, 1974). However, a person or organization's legitimacy is largely determined by superficial factors such as their **appearance** (e.g. lab coat, uniform, medals), **attitude** (e.g. confident, demanding), and **surround** (e.g. ornate office, professional-looking laboratory). Designating something as legitimate is largely a personal decision predicated on subjective belief. Milgram clothed his confederates in lab coats rather than leather jackets to

encourage the subjects to view the study as a legitimate enterprise run by professionals, thus fostering subservience. For most of history, kings sat atop gilded thrones. Hitler demanded complete perfection from his generals and military personnel, hoping the entire world would recognize their incontrovertible superiority, and kneel. As Milgram astutely noted, “It is the appearance of authority and not actual authority to which the subject responds” (Milgram, 1974, p. 140). The perception of legitimate authority is integral to functionaries obeying orders voluntarily rather than via coercion and threat. In short, authorities induce agentic shifts by engineering situations to ensure that employees view themselves as less knowledgeable and less powerful than those who command them²⁹ (Milgram, 1974).

Once squarely in an agentic state, individuals adopt new properties via a process Milgram terms *tuning* (1974). Tuning was described in several previous sections and entails the functionary prioritizing their relationship to the authority at the expense of larger moral considerations. Subordinates strive to appear competent and impress their superior by attending to the more technical aspects of their task (Milgram, 1974). This stance generates a relational chasm between the functionary and their victims characterized by a remoteness from, and indifference to, their suffering. To an outside observer they may appear malicious and cold, when psychologically, they are more preoccupied with excelling at their task (and avoiding negative attention) than with enjoying, or even attending to, the consequences of their behavior (Milgram, 1974). Through this lens, a victim’s suffering can be viewed as an irritating impediment to the subordinate forming a closer relationship with their superior. Screams, pleas, blood, and corpses become the unpleasant stage dressing in the drama unfolding between superior and subordinate (Milgram, 1974). Within this play, a

²⁹ Loyalty and obedience are further strengthened when the authority espouses an appealing ideology that sufficiently justifies their immoral requests (Bandura, 1999).

functionary's morality is not altogether lost, but rather redefined to prioritize "loyalty, duty, and discipline" (Milgram, 1974, p. 146).

According to Milgram, obedience ensues when the binding factors in a given situation and relational dynamic exceed the **net strain** (1974). Conversely, disobedience results when the net strain surpasses any binding factors. Strain represents the authority's failure to fully indoctrinate the functionary into believing their behavior is altogether shameless. Strain signifies psychological and moral tension, intimating that fragments of selfhood endured the agentic shift (Milgram, 1974). Functionaries may experience strain stemming from a primitive automatic revulsion to stimuli such as "the sound of screams, the feeling of being splattered with a victim's brains, or just the horrible gut feelings of killing a person" (Baumeister, 1999, p. 211). Other sources of strain include: the implicit fear of eventual retaliation (karmic retribution), legal repercussions, conflicting orders (internal vs. external mandates), violations of their self-image, and physical or emotional proximity to the victim (Milgram, 1974). The only definitive way to absolve oneself of strain is to disobey, but rebellion is not always a feasible strategy. Because strain is experienced by the subordinate as a threat to the relationship with their superior, the organization, and the overarching ideology, functionaries work to mitigate the strain prior to openly dissenting. Milgram (1974) noticed his study participants mainly modulated strain by implementing avoidance strategies. Teachers would turn their heads away or loudly enunciate the prompts to mask the learner's cries. Others deployed denial and subterfuge to rewrite reality, making it more easily metabolized. Some abdicated personal responsibility by blaming the victim, convincing themselves that they deserved their mistreatment for previous mistakes and immorality³⁰ (Milgram, 1974). The remaining participants unconsciously alleviated strain through somatic

³⁰ In this way, the tormentor effectively becomes an emissary of God tasked with distributing justice.

conversion. They shook, sweated, trembled, and laughed. Many German police officers vomited after murdering their first Jewish prisoner³¹ (Browning, 1992). These deliberate and automatic responses absolve strain enough to alleviate a functionary's need to openly revolt against the authority, so they can maintain their obedience and continue complying with evil orders.

Conclusion

In myths the hero is the one who conquers the dragon, not the one who is devoured by it. And yet both have to deal with the same dragon.

– Jung, *The Tavistock Lectures: Lecture III*

Encountering real evil often inspires revulsion and disgust (Chudzik, 2016). Instinct and culture instruct us to reflexively stereotype the world's miscreants, to see them as mutated beyond redemption, to run, and to fight. Rather than lean towards humanity's dark shadow, many people, counselors included, turn a blind eye or race through the gloom grasping for antidotes. In a desperate bid to curtail the existing violence or thwart the emergence of new evil, we chase legislative solutions, change school policies, march, ban weapons, and boycott. This well-intentioned zeal is not intrinsically wrong, but rushing with one eye blinded can inadvertently exacerbate the problem or produce fresh misfortunes. Stamping towards progress leaves us vulnerable to ideological possession and poised to adopt nefarious means to actualize our benevolent ends. Practitioners can help dispel the myths surrounding evil and calibrate our collective understanding by first cultivating a

³¹ A common method for resolving their revulsion was to supply nearly endless crates of hard liquor (Browning, 1992). Alcohol consumption was encouraged and, at times, mandated to reduce the soldier's inhibitions, alleviate guilt, and induce low-level thinking unencumbered by the moral implications of their behavior (Baumeister, 1999).

comprehensive understanding of the ordinary psychological processes that contribute to unlocking evil. After all, clarifying how corrupt regimes corrode morality makes for more effective prevention and resistance. Understanding the consequences of unbridled self-esteem helps society reorient its collective parenting approaches to encourage humility and more pro-social perspectives. Grasping the seductive power of obedience preserves disobedience as an alternative. Rather than race blindly toward a better world, we must first fully understand this one. Paradoxically, acknowledging our demons might help illuminate a path through the dark. We as a species will remain forever susceptible to the same biological, temperamental, and situational forces that drove the inhumanities outlined throughout this text. A new devil is always lurking around the corner, and we must ensure it is not us.

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