

Brillon Joseph

Professor Morten Lykkegaard

Concept of Evil in Contemporary Culture

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### **Obedience & Conformity: Evil Through A Social Psychological Lens**

One common, or almost worldwide, perception of criminal acts is that the acts and/or the people who commit them are simply evil by nature. However, such an absolutist or matter-of-fact mentality can be deemed quite hypocritical and is often viewed as an attempt by society to take the easy way out and avoid finding a deeper underlying explanation for many things. When discussing why society labels something or someone as evil, Calder states “categorizing actions and practices as evil helps to focus our limited energy and resources” (Calder). Such arbitrary labeling should not be what society resorts to after putting very little to no effort into gaining insight into why people commit some of the “evil” acts that they do. People are conditioned to obey authority and conform throughout their lives as a way of living in such a way that society claims is acceptable. Such an emphasis on obedience and conformity, in the pursuit of socially acceptable behavior, is ironically one factor that contributes to the willingness of individuals to perform “evil” acts that we witness throughout society.

Often, society leaps at the chance to label an individual as evil and pays little attention to the societal circumstances that may surround what it considers to be an act of evil. Philip Zimbardo’s Stanford prison experiment, and the literature that surrounds it, serve as a great starting point toward properly comprehending what causes seemingly normal individuals to commit certain horrible acts.

The Stanford prison experiment refutes the antiquated idea that individuals are simply evil by nature. In this experiment, Philip Zimbardo recruited a group of twenty-four boys to take on the role of either a prisoner or prison guard in a simulated prison environment. The observations that were made by Zimbardo and his team were numerous; however, some key observations were the fact that the individuals appeared to completely embody their roles beyond the instructions of Zimbardo and his team. This was rather surprising for the men in both roles, especially the men in the role of the prisoners. The “prisoners” suffered at the hands of the “guards” and some of them were emotionally traumatized. However, they chose to remain in the experiment despite their knowledge that they could leave whenever they wanted to; Zimbardo did not have the authority to keep them against their will. Still, they chose not to leave for the length of the study until Zimbardo himself had to terminate the experiment prematurely due to the observed detrimental physical and psychological impacts it was having on the participants.

Zimbardo’s experiment demonstrates two key facets of humans: our tendency to conform to our own perception of the roles that society assigns to us and a socially conditioned, unwavering obedience toward authority figures. Both are things that we give very little thought to daily while they have an indubitable impact on our daily lives, particularly regarding the things that we decide to do or not do. Zimbardo’s experiment was heavily influenced by the Holocaust and the individuals who became affiliated with the Nazi party as guards carrying out the most heinous and unspeakable crimes. It is important to note, as one author states very clearly, that “experiments on conformity and obedience cannot readily simulate the reality of the Holocaust” (Woolf 1). It is not my goal to excuse these individuals for their actions, nor is it to diminish or invalidate the experience of the victims and their loved ones. However, if one was to

view the actions of these individuals from such a perspective, it may provide a degree of insight into the way that these individuals may have approached such a circumstance.

The superior manner in which Adolf Hitler was regarded by the majority of Germany during his reign of power is almost unquestionable. He was a man of great authority and the same could be said for the individuals immediately following in that hierarchy of power and superiority. When discussing the idea of obedience in the context of society, Stanley Milgram states that “Obedience is the psychological mechanism that links individual action to political purpose. It is the dispositional cement that binds men to systems of authority” (Milgram 803). With that being said, it is rather simple to speculate the reason some of the Nazi guards may have decided to do the things that they did even if they may not have aligned with the core beliefs of Nazism, although this is quite difficult to determine with complete certainty.

This also directly plays into the idea of conformity. In simple terms, conformity refers to the tendency for individuals to perform the labels placed on them by society in the pursuit of doing what they perceive is socially acceptable. Newman and Erber make a rather important point when they explain the idea that “many of the direct perpetrators are usually not simply forced or pressured by authorities to obey. Instead, they *join* leaders and decision makers, or a movement that shapes and guides them to become perpetrators” (Newman and Erber 21). In the case of the Nazi guards, not only did they have leaders that they were being socially conditioned to respect and obey through the use of propaganda and carefully formatted and articulated speeches, but they were also plagued by a perception of the role of a guard as something that they should do willingly and with unwavering pride. All of this, combined with other factors such as fear of a lack of compliance among others, directly contributed to the heinous crimes that were committed during the reign of Adolf Hitler. These individuals may have been conditioned

to believe on some level that the socially acceptable thing for them to do was what was being asked of them by their superiors and, by extension, to fulfill the desires of Hitler.

One common argument, however, is that the Nazi guards committing these atrocious acts did not necessarily face many consequences in the event that they refused to perform the duties that they were assigned at the concentration camps. While discussing the idea of disobedience by guards in the camps, Fenigstein emphasizes that:

One of the most remarkable aspects of the authority-subordinate relationship operating among the perpetrators of the Holocaust was the extraordinary lack of pressure emanating from superior officers when asking for (rather than demanding) the participation of subordinates in the slaughter of Jews. (Fenigstein 59).

Therefore, this raises the question of to what extent the guards felt pressured to commit the acts that they did. However, I also consider the idea that, even though there may not have been any direct demands made by the superior officers, the perception of the guards plays a significant role in their actions. The absence of direct external pressure does not diminish the presence of perceived pressure and the manner in which that can influence an individual's desire to be obedient and conform and this may have been the case with the perpetrators.

In one way or another, each of us is a product of the society in which we exist and the same can be said for the guards. Hindsight allows us the privilege and opportunity to look at certain actions and easily determine that they were unethical or immoral decisions. However, having not been in that situation under those circumstances and during that specific historical period, it is a rather difficult, if not impossible, task to confidently say that these individuals acted out of an innate character of evil. It is possible that they simply conformed to what they thought was expected of them by authority figures whom they dared not to be disobedient to in

an effort to do what they may have perceived as the socially accepted thing to do. Unfortunately, however, this resulted in the worst genocide in the history of mankind that has had lasting impacts on many individuals and on society in general.

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