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Bad Apples, Bad Barrels and Bad Barrel-Makers - Why Evil Exists

Donna L. Roberts, PhD

“The line between good and evil lies at the center of every human heart. It is not an abstraction out there. It’s a decision you have to make every day inside.”
- Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, Russian poet imprisoned under Stalin

“You can’t be a sweet cucumber in a vinegar barrel.”
- Phil Zimbardo, social psychologist

After his iconic, and controversial, Stanford Prison Experiment, Phil Zimbardo spent a career trying to understand the nature of evil, and particularly the influences on individuals to perform evil acts. He resisted the individualistic notion that evil was perpetrated solely by inherently bad people and strove to answer the age-old question of why “good people” do “bad things.” He concluded with a three-part schema of influences that spanned from the micro to the macro - from the individual to the larger institutions in society. He referred to these causes of evil as “bad apples, bad barrels and bad barrel-makers.”

Bad Apples

This is the straight-forward, linear cause-and-effect logic we’re used to. A bad person does bad things. And there’s certainly some truth to it. One does not have to ponder long before examples aplenty come to mind to prove its efficacy. Adolf Hitler. Charles Manson. Ted Bundy. But rarely are people - bad people - so one dimensional or extreme. As Zimbardo says,

We imagine a line between good and evil, and we like to believe that it’s impermeable. We are good on this side. The bad guys, the bad women, they are on that side, and the bad people never will become good, and the good never will become bad. I’ll say today that’s nonsense. Because that line is ... permeable. Because sometimes, just like human cells, material flows in and out. And if it does, then it could allow some ordinary people like you to become perpetrators of evil (Wargo, 2006).

Bad Barrels

Think about it for a moment. Are you a bad person? I’m guessing most people reading this would answer that “No.” But have you ever done anything “bad?” This time, I’m guessing that most would answer that one “Yes.” What is the nature of the disconnect? What happened to

make “good” you do a “bad” thing? I’m sure there are reasons, and some of them valid ones - youth, illness, stress, ignorance, peer pressure, a moment of temporary insanity, etc.

Reasons are explanations, not excuses, so perhaps in hindsight your take-away from this bad thing you did was enlightenment and a vow not to repeat the behavior. Whatever the specifics of the reason, some set of conditions encouraged you to act a certain way that was atypical. This is the essence of the lesson from the Stanford Prison Experiment - that circumstances can influence your behavior even to the extent of facilitating you to do something you would not ordinarily, under other circumstances, do.

We are all reactive individuals. We all respond to our environment. We can all be broken down. We can all be influenced. The question becomes, where is our tipping point? Where is that sweet spot (or perhaps more deftly termed, that sour spot) where we can be influenced to do something out of character?

Even serial killer Ted Bundy, previously noted as an example of a bad apple, cited situational factors that influenced his behavior. Ted Bundy killed more than thirty people and engaged in sexual assault and necrophilia, evidence enough for most to consider him a bad apple. In his final interview with psychologist James Dobson just hours before his execution in 1989, Bundy described himself as just like everyone’s son or husband, insisting that he was negatively influenced by pornography and violence in the media (Dobson, 1989).

It actually happens to us all, every day in small ways. Do you remember the first time you heard about a school shooting? While not the first deadly school shooting, the 1999 Columbine massacre (as it was to become labeled) was the first to unfold in real time over live television. Remember how shocked and horrified you were? How you couldn’t believe such a thing could happen in a safe place like a school? And then another happened . . . and then another. Certainly, you still think it is a horrible thing, but you are not as shocked when you hear about another incident. The unthinkable has become the possible. While not commonplace, it is no longer uncommon. We have become desensitized, a process also referred to as psychic numbing. It is a necessary part of our survival mechanism. As Darwin said, “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change.” We survive because we adapt to our environment. We change our behavior because of our situation. And yet, certainly there are some things that we should not become accustomed to – things that tolerating at that level changes our humanity.

Despite the various criticisms of the Stanford Prison study, it did show us - as did Milgram’s Obedience experiment, and to a lesser, more mundane extent, Asch’s Conformity study - that people (even overzealous professors) can be influenced to act badly under certain conditions. Zimbardo coined the term “The Lucifer Effect” to explain that transformation. Were they “bad”? In that context, yes. Were they bad apples? Probably not. Were they in a bad barrel? Decidedly so.

Bad Barrel Makers

Beyond the person and the situation, Zimbardo theorized another macro-level influence that holds the power to facilitate bad, even heinous, behavior. He termed this influence the Bad Barrel Makers, in keeping with the analogy of his construct. Zimbardo crystalized this concept after serving as an expert witness for the defense at an Abu Ghraib court martial. Speaking about the situation in that Iraqi prison, Zimbardo says,

When you put that set of horrendous work conditions and external factors together, it creates an evil barrel. You could put virtually anybody in it and you're going to get this kind of evil behavior. The Pentagon and the military say that the Abu Ghraib scandal is the result of a few bad apples in an otherwise good barrel. That's the dispositional analysis. The social psychologist in me, and the consensus among many of my colleagues in experimental social psychology, says that's the wrong analysis. It's not the bad apples, it's the bad barrels that corrupt good people. Understanding the abuses at this Iraqi prison starts with an analysis of both the situational and systematic forces operating on those soldiers working the night shift in that 'little shop of horrors' (Wargo, 2006).

Zimbardo was not the only one to cite his experiment as relevant to explaining the atrocities at the prison in Iraq. The 2004 *Final Report of the Independent Panel to Review DOD Detention Operations*, chaired by former secretary of defense and director of the CIA, James Schlesinger, included an entire appendix outlining the “conceptual parallels between the brutality that erupted in the Stanford Prison Experiment and the gross human rights violations that occurred at Abu Ghraib” (Harding, 2018, p. 131). Schlesinger further argued that the Stanford Prison Experiment “provides a cautionary tale for all military detention operations” (O’Reilly, 2013, p. 291).

Specifically, the parallels focused on “the creation of a context and environment where abuse is facilitated and where equivocal leadership subtly encouraged participants to adopt abusive and sadistic behavior and led them to commit heinous acts they otherwise would not commit” (Harding, 2018, p.131). Harding goes on to suggest that

What the would-be guards in the Stanford Prison Experiment ultimately had in common with the real guards at sites like Abu Ghraib is that they repeatedly played into expectations and were pulled in by the vacuum of an unwritten but hardly ambiguous script – understanding full well what the implicit directive was, not only tasking them with control and surveillance of prisoners while neglecting to provide them with clear guidelines but also, in the case of Abu Ghraib, placing them at a distant and remote site where neither the public nor existing legal structures would counterbalance the lack of clear guidelines with effective oversight” (p. 131)

Zimbardo's schema is fundamentally simple and enticingly intuitive. The discipline of social psychology already embraces, or more accurately is truly founded upon, the power of groups and their dynamics, including such concepts as group-think, mob/herd mentality, and diffusion of responsibility. Almost anyone can recall an instance where they were influenced by a group to do something they would not have done independently, and most concede, at least intellectually, that oppressive regimes affect the mind and spirit of those oppressed. The question then becomes, what do we do with this insight? How does it affect how and who we hold accountable for an injustice or a heinous act?

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