



THE
SYSTEMIZATION
OF
EVIL

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4 . 25 . 2016



AM: Good morning, Dr. Zimbardo, it's Aaron Moulton.

PZ: Yes, it's good to hear from you. What you're doing is really interesting. I give my talks on the journey from creating evil to inspiring heroism, so I used to actually start with evil images and then end up with kind of erring to the banality of people. It's a really interesting thing. I think you're really tying into irrational the fears that children have of, I think, of the dark. Fears of the dark. And then what could be hiding in the closet, what could be in the dark. And then creating the enemy in our own minds.

AM: That's a great starting point for what I'm thinking about. Because I do think the boogeyman is this idea that is easily referenced to childhood fears or irrationality, however I think there's something that's happened where he's gotten optimized in the 21st century with the aesthetics of paranoia. In the trajectory of your research, is that something you could comment on and whether there's a growing prevalence of evil as we've gone from the 20th to 21st century and whether the boogeyman has a different kind of agency.

PZ: The evil of the past has been much more real and sadistic. With lynching and public hangings. The way that evil was manifested, when you think about the history of good vs. evil, it was the Catholic Church with inquisitions. I argue that more evil has been done in the name of god than in the name of the devil. Evil in modern times has become psychologically based. It's the fear of atomic bombs that remains the global fear. And now, the new fear is the unpredictability of local terrorist attacks. None of which are significant in terms of the number of people killed in comparison to daily automobile fatalities. But it's the unpredictability that you could be sitting in a café, you could be at a concert, you could be at an airport and suddenly you get blown up. So again, the evil the terrorist manipulates is really the evil of the unpredictable event which reduces the confidence of citizens in their government to protect them. It ties back to the kid's fear that their parents can't protect them, that they're in their room and the boogeyman will appear and before they can yell for their parents help their calls are stifled. Their yells are stifled.

AM: The way I'm making this exhibition is really creating a spectrum, starting obviously with the childhood conception and moving into this general fear, the idea that any of us has this capacity for evil and anyone around us could be in fact that evil incarnate awakening. But then moving on to the dictator and the social structures.

PZ: What I was going to say that the phrase from Hannah Arendt about the banality of evil that I have always highlighted is that people like Eichmann are terrifyingly normal. He looks like your uncle Charlie when he's on the witness stand, when he's talking to the judges. You can't imagine that this guy could have been a mass murderer. In fact most mass murderers don't look strange. They don't



look distorted. You want to believe that you can identify them, prepare yourself for them. But in a funny way, just like you have Clark Kent symbolizing Superman goodness, again, is terrifyingly normal as Clark Kent with his high glasses and his ordinary appearance. The Good vs. Evil notion is in all of us to varying degrees. My argument has always been it's the situation, the circumstances, social setting, that encourages or springs up or suppresses one or the other. But see, the Stanford Prison Study, after 45 years, is more popular now around the world. I just got back from China, Beijing, Singapore and high school kids are reading it and coming up and asking me questions about it because it does tap into that notion that even really good people, people who acknowledge and identify and are measured as good, could be seduced to do bad things. Suddenly all of us are potentially vulnerable. That's the unique message of the study, is that it was not dramatized, because it's not one hour of events but it was day in and day out and things got worse and worse and worse and worse. There was almost no pause on how bad the evil could have become. How bad the evil did become.

AM: I have two babies, a 3-year old son and 4-month old son and I'm doing this research and the whole thing is interesting to me because evil is just a big turn of context. The human experience is this huge exercise in repression, trying to defeat these impulses, that within nature made sex and murder acceptable. Evil would be seen as a functional mode of survival in a different culture. How do groups like ISIS play into that and this banality of evil since it's confronting contrary orders or modus operandi of how a civilization is evolving. We don't agree with them and they don't agree with us. I'm not trying to say that ISIS isn't evil but I'm also coming at this from the western context of seeing this as a threat.

PZ: To me, what ISIS does as evil is that it encourages young people to commit suicide in the act of killing innocent people labeled as the enemy. That's evil in any higher order or sense. It doesn't matter to me what the justification is. Anything that leads to the murder of innocent people rather than opposing armies, opposing soldiers, those people did nothing to have their lives shortened by someone. The other problem is that ISIS is recruiting young people, an increasing number of young women, around the world, using Facebook recruiting and all that. That's completely new. I studied suicide bomber recruiting in Palestine and Israel and that went through a very standard procedure of senior people observing exactly who are the young people at a political rally and who might be mostly verbal in their intentions. And then going to get a small group of them and organizing whether they're just talking or if they're willing to do what you say. And then training them how to be a suicide bomber. And they would go through the training with the notion that they're going to be a hero. They produce these big posters of these people, even before they committed the act, and they would make the poster and that would socially and psychologically force them to go through with it. It's not a one-on-one small group dynamic to do this anymore. It's using technology to recruit young people. And then essentially you're going to die in the act of killing other people who are innocent victims. It's actually a new kind of evil. A new kind



of evil is young women who are willing to die in their 20s, in the prime of their life, in the act of killing strangers because some anonymous source tells you to do so. That's a totally new kind of evil that's never existed before.

AM: Leading from that, what about when you say that there's all these young people and that your book has never been this popular. I'm thinking about this weird shift we've had from the 20th to 21st century going from analog to digital, the idea that secondhand experience has become primary, what about virtual evil? Like no strings attached evil? The idea that we can find new realms of participating in evil without having the repercussions morally or physically or socially.

PZ: I gave a TedTalk two years ago on the demise of guise. Essentially, it's young men who are now giving up living in social reality to live their whole life in virtual reality. Playing video games that are all about destruction. The games are designed by men for male competitiveness and destructiveness. So they're becoming addicted to playing these video games, all of which (World of Warcraft, Mafia I) are about killing and destruction. So now you're living in an imaginary world where in one sense, you're surrounded by evil and your job is to kill the evil forces. But still, your orientation is to be a killer. But now you're a killer in your bedroom where it's safe to do so and you're not really risking your life and limb to be in the military. This is also totally new in history. The argument we're making is that these young men are addicted to the combination of video game playing endlessly combined with freely available pornography. And that's a killer combo. Everything in the world is boring compared to video games and pornography. Because they're multi billion dollar industries, meaning these companies are competing with each other for the brains, the minds, the fingers and eyes of young men. They're making everything more enchanting, more fascinating. And we know that with this generation of young men who now are addicted, it's not the number of hours they play, the addiction is the preference for that over anything else in the world. Anything else they're doing, they'd rather be playing video games. Whether they're in school or anything they're bored out of their mind. Even when they're with their friends they're bored out of their minds. Lots of the young men say I no longer chat, I only text. Chatting is a waste of time. When I text I can choose in between games. Chatting means I'm forced to interact with somebody in real time. I can't waste real time.

AM: It's lo-tech, low technology! It's optimizing the human experience. I'm scared of the world my kids will grow up in. It's like a breeding ground for sociopaths.

PZ: Sociopath often implies negative. It's simply absenting themselves from social reality. I would rather be looking at the messages on my cell phone than looking around at what other people are doing or saying or looking out at nature. I was on a train from Paris to Bordeaux recently with the most beautiful countryside. And the kid who sat opposite me, for the entire 3 hours, never took his eyes off his



video game on his cell phone. He had no idea what was happening outside and that was so sad to me.

AM: I would argue that cultural appreciation has resulted from boredom. The fact that we sit and think about these things, they increase in value, aura and cultural status because we don't have anything else to think about. We ponder them and they become magical. We're so scared of being bored that it's become like a disease. So then these things are losing value quickly.

PZ: How does anything maintain value over time? That's what we mean by something being valuable, it's not valuable in the instance or the moment, it's valuable over time. That is a big concern about the next generation. An evening news soundbyte now has gone from 7 seconds to 6 seconds. They say today President Obama made this important statement. They give him one sentence! You're the president of the United States and you get one sentence.

AM: Pick your emoji wisely. I wanted to ask you coming back into this idea of virtual evil. I'm interested in this way (connected to porn and video games), how evil is a form of the sublime. For the perpetrator, the victim and even the viewer. The idea of the boogey man was like the grim reaper in a way from all those points of view. The viewer having the safest vantage point. The attraction to horror movies, the idea of horror as sublime or the idea of boogeyman as the perpetrator of the sublime. Thinking of the sublime as the ultimate event, death or whatever.

PZ: I don't know how to answer that. Again, what we're talking about is how individual fears are collected in society to become these universal fears. Some are still private. I mean the fear of death, the fear of dying is the most. It's not clear what age that starts. Young kids don't have a fear of dying because they don't have a clear sense of the future. So maybe as you begin with this future orientation, ultimately the biggest fear is that there will not be a future at some point. Then the question is how would you die? Peacefully or violently?

AM: The question is also about the popularity of horror films and video games creating a certain level of endorphins. I like that it overlaps in this same terrain that we might consider transcendental beauty, the idea of experiencing an ultimate evil. There's something there, as a total form of experiential energy that's relating to something like the sublime.

PZ: There was the movie *Silence of the Lambs* with Jodie Foster. In a sense, that was a new kind of evil. We were becoming aware of a new category/type of evil that you'd never imagined before. And once you do, you shudder. You imagine: what if someone wanted to eat me alive. I think that's cycling back to the terrorist fear. It's not only that it's unexpected, but that it occurs in the most ordinary of places. I was in Bali recently and had a lunch at a fish restaurant where there are ten fish restaurants in a row where every night they serve fresh fish and you pick



your fish, live, in the restaurant and you either go on the beach or go inside to eat it. One of these was blown up by terrorist a couple years ago. Fortunately, people reacted by popularizing that restaurant more than any place else. Again, here in Bali you're on a beautiful beach with a sunset. Going there because they have the best seabass or turtle or whatever and you get blown up. It's so unimaginable why anyone would choose that location to do evil. So even though I was there a few years later it was still scary.

AM: I want to know your thoughts on superstitious/supernatural types of evil. The idea of the curse or natural evil.

PZ: My family comes from Sicily and that's supernatural.. The idea of the evil eye and condrocchia. The notion is that evil exists everywhere. There are some people who intentionally or unintentionally (that's the problem) can put an evil eye on you. So every baby carriage/crib has a horn, the horn is condrocchia, that breaks the evil eye. It's literally a horn that would go through the two fingers of evil. The last thing you want is for a stranger to say "What a beautiful baby," or "What a healthy baby," because that is calling attention on the evil forces of nature onto your child. Even if it's a relative, people will automatically make the condrocchia, to crush the finger. This is part of a cultural legacy of believing that evil is in the world and that it cannot be contained. Also it gets transmitted often in banal ways. Some ordinary stranger, some grocery man, even a relative could by mistake call down the evil forces by giving a compliment.

AM: You're clearly someone who has been exposed to all of the extremes we can imagine in our spectrum of what we're capable of, what's the most evil thing you've ever encountered?

PZ: Well, I mean, in a generic sense it was poverty. Being poor. I grew up in poverty in New York. My parents were uneducated, second-generation Sicilian, but they never went to high school. They didn't finish elementary school as far as I know. Poverty is a systemic evil. I separate systemic, situational and individual evil. So systemic evil is poverty, war, genocide, slave labor, sex trafficking; evil that is built into the fabric of a nation. The fabric of a society. For example what it meant to be poor, you had to depend on a whole array of social services. You had to go to a factory where they were giving away clothes. I still remember 75 years ago where girls went to one side and got dresses and boys went to the other side and got knickers. And in those days you didn't want the wide knickers because they made a noise when the legs rubbed against each other. You go through the pile looking for the other kind, and this man whose job it is to service me comes over and says, "Beggars can't be choosers. Take whatever and get out." I still remember crying. I'm not a beggar and it's your job. I was between 9 and 10. But literally as I tell this story, I feel the pain. It's the pain of poverty. It's the pain of being humiliated because you're poor. So that's a special kind of evil. It's not the evil of fearing. It's the evil of being denigrated, of being seen as worthless in the eyes of someone else.