

## WHAT IS EVIL?

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### Abstract

This paper explores the differentiation between “bad” behavior and “evil” behavior. Studies and commentaries about people who have engaged in bad and evil behavior, both in research settings and in real life, are reviewed. The elements which constitute evil are identified, with focus being on lack of empathy and intent to harm. Evil is discussed as value transpositions in Formal Axiology and approaches to address counteracting evil are offered.

### 1. Introduction

“I had seen Hitler organize evil, and I had determined to try to organize good....But I could see that to organize good I had to know ‘what *is* good?’”

Robert S. Hartman, *Freedom to Live*, p. 43

In this presentation I would like to use Dr. Hartman’s thinking to help us understand “what is evil?” We will avoid religious and theological discussions and focus on manifestations in behavior. What is loosely referred to as evil seems to be everywhere in the media. But, is evil an appropriate description in all cases? What motivates otherwise decent people to participate in bad behavior or to treat others in demeaning and dehumanizing ways? How can we understand this perplexing and disconcerting issue in terms of Formal Axiology and how might we address it?

### 2. What Evil Is Not

Let us start by mentioning the idea of “natural evil” which is identified in some discussions in the literature. “Natural evil” refers to natural disasters such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, floods, etc. Even though for the people in their paths the impact of such events may be unfortunate, catastrophic, and very bad, these are natural processes, not evil events.

It is important to note that a person perceiving something as evil does not make it evil. Their response to someone or some event may be as if it were evil, but this is influenced by their own overlay of beliefs, apart from the more objective approach we are seeking. We often see people responding to good things as if they were bad!

Let us begin by attempting to understand what evil is not. My premise is that not everything which is bad is evil and we need to be able to differentiate. Some actions by people can be bad without being evil. How can this be? In the rhetoric of Formal Axiology we understand “badness” in terms of transpositions of value, disvaluations which occur in each value dimension. As we move from the Systemic transpositions through the Extrinsic to the Intrinsic, the quantification of disvaluations becomes more and more serious (no matter what mathematics are applied). Somewhere along this continuum, do we cross a line from being “bad” to being “evil?” We will explore these thoughts later.

For clarification in terms of Formal Axiology, the concept of “badness” can be applied to people in contexts which have nothing to do with moral badness. For example, a person might be described as being a “bad piano player,” but there is no moral badness in this valuation. Any number of similar examples of a person being a bad “X” without being morally bad can be imagined.

So what are some reasons people may behave badly without being evil? Wayne Carpenter, in “Why Good People Do Bad Things,” identified lack of value capacity and misinterpretation of value situations as risks for people to choose to exhibit bad behavior (Carpenter 1991). Bad behavior may be a response to feeling threatened, desperation, poor judgment, misdirection, misinterpretation, impulsivity, or irrationality.

Most of these responses can be related to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1954) which is made up of these five levels:

1. Physiological: The basic elements for survival – air, water, food, sleep, physical functions
2. Safety: Involves both the need for physical and psychological/ emotional security.
3. Love: to belong and be nurtured; friendship, family, intimacy

4. Esteem: to feel good about accomplishments, be recognized and respected.
5. Self Actualization: to move toward maximizing potential; seeking knowledge, peace, beauty, esthetics, self fulfillment, unity.

Maslow thought of these needs as being lower order to higher order values and he related easily to Hartman's concept of good. He believed that when basic needs are not met, people turn to undesirable behaviors, including violence. Threats to the first two levels – the basic survival needs and safety – may prompt some people to be reactive, impulsive, and irrational which they may believe is necessary for their defense, whether it really is or not. Thus the reactionary mode may result in poor value judgments and “bad” behavior. Even feelings of alienation might adversely affect Level 3 – love and belonging – possibly leading to skewed value patterns and undesirable responses.

Another possible example is that of a basically “good” person who deviates from his/her usual behavior because of some opportunistic circumstance – tempted beyond their capacity to resist – and chooses to do something “bad.” For instance, greed kicks in and a person takes advantage of an “opportunity” to do something illegal for profit.

In all the aforementioned situations, we have ordinary people who behave badly under stress; people whose value capacities may be lacking or whose good judgment is overridden. I do not believe that anything I have described thus far constitutes evil behavior.

### **3. Related Literature**

One of the classic research projects about how far people would go when instructions might lead to harming another person was conducted in 1963 by Stanley Milgram (McLeod 2007) in studying obedience at Yale University. Briefly, subjects (in the role of “teachers”) were instructed to press a switch to shock a “learner” (a confederate in the experiment) when a wrong answer was given. The shocks (all fake) were presented by 30 switches progressively from 15 volts (slight) to 375 volts (Danger: severe shock) to 450 volts (XXX). Each wrong answer (and wrong answers were purposely given) received a higher level of shock. The subject/teacher was not able to see the learner after the session started, but could hear a sound track at each shock administration (from “ugh” to screams to silence). Milgram found that 65% of the subjects continued to the 450 volt level with the urging of the experimenter, and all went to at least the 300 volt level. The conclusion was that “ordinary people are likely to follow orders given by an authority figure, even to the extent of killing an innocent human being.”

The second hallmark study is referred to as the Stanford Prison Experiment and was conducted by Philip Zimbardo at Stanford University in 1973 (McLeod 2008). Zimbardo recruited college students for the roles of prisoners and guards and chose subjects who did not display psychological abnormalities on screening tests. The guards were given uniforms and instructed to maintain order, but no physical violence was permitted. The prisoners were arrested at their homes by the local police, processed at the police station, and delivered blind folded to the fabricated jail in the basement of a campus building. Both the guards and the prisoners adapted to their roles quickly and the outcome was that the guards' behavior toward the prisoners became brutal and abusive. The study was supposed to last two weeks, but terminated

after six days. The conclusion was that “people will readily conform to the social roles they are expected to play, especially if the roles are as strongly stereotyped as those of prison guards.”

Zimbardo (2007) has subsequently written an extensive account of the Stanford Prison Experiment in *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. An interesting aspect is his description of how he and the other researchers were so caught up in the experiment that they became inured to the brutality. Only when his psychologist girlfriend (who later became his wife) confronted him after observing the degrading behavior did he finally realize “what had been gradually happening to him and to everyone else in the study: that they had all internalized a set of destructive prison values that distanced them from their own humanitarian values” (p.171). At this point, he stopped the study.

However, there are other considerations about both these studies which we will explore shortly.

Concurrent with the time frame of Milgram’s study was the trial of Nazi Adolf Eichmann, architect of “the final solution to the Jewish question,” for war crimes. Hannah Arendt (1963) observed the trial and coined the term “the banality of evil” based on her impression of how “normal” Eichmann seemed. She posited that acts of evil through history, and in particular in the Holocaust, were not carried out by “fanatics or sociopaths,” but by ordinary people who accepted the authority of the state and regarded their actions as normal.

Edward S. Herman (1995) calls this “normalizing the unthinkable.” He says that “doing terrible things in an organized and systemic way rests on ‘normalization.’ This is the process whereby ugly, degrading, murderous, and unspeakable acts become routine and are accepted as ‘the way things are done.’”

Haslam and Reicher (2008) have challenged the conclusions of both Milgram and Zimbardo, and question the concept of the banality of evil. (By the way, neither of these studies would be allowed today because they violate current ethical research guidelines.) They point out that the experimental designs and the experimenters’ involvement, when examined closely, may have influenced the outcomes. While the results are disturbing, it is interesting to note that Milgram obtained much more obedience in subjects when the activities were conducted on the Yale campus than at another location in a less privileged area. In the Zimbardo study, the real police involvement in the “arrests” was seen as disorienting to the subjects and they were never informed that this was part of the experiment – even when they asked. Some indicated that they thought they were actually being charged with a crime. Reality and role playing became confused.

Erich Fromm (1973) also published a lengthy challenge to Zimbardo’s conclusions. He observed “If in spite of the whole spirit of this mock prison which, according to the concept of the experiment was meant to be degrading and humiliating,...two thirds of the guards did not commit sadistic acts for personal ‘kicks,’ the experiment seems rather to prove that one can not transform people so easily into sadists by providing them with the proper situation.”

David Cesarani (2004) published a book about Eichmann and suggests that Arendt’s assumptions about him were incorrect. She attended only the beginning of the trial when Eichmann was presenting himself as an “inoffensive pen-pusher.” As the trial progressed he revealed more and more of his true character and that he “was well aware of what he was doing and was proud of his murderous ‘achievements.’”

#### **4. Defining Evil**

Now let us turn to a definition of evil from Ervin Staub (2011), professor at the University of Massachusetts and author of *Overcoming Evil: Genocide, Violent Conflict, and Terrorism*:

Evil is commonly associated with conscious and deliberate wrongdoing, discrimination designed to harm others, humiliation of people designed to diminish their psychological well-being and dignity, destructiveness, motives causing pain or suffering for selfish or malicious intentions, and acts of unnecessary or indiscriminate violence. (p.32)

Inherent in this definition is the element of intentionality.

Simon Baren-Cohen (2011) in *The Science of Evil* focuses on empathy – that capacity for understanding and caring about how other people feel – as being the pivotal common element which is absent in those who behave cruelly and evilly. He identifies three personality types in which the element of empathy is lacking, N (Narcissistic), B (Borderline), and P (Psychopath). Certainly these disorders have been known for many years, but Cohen believes that viewing them as having a “common underlying mechanism” of “Zero-Negative” empathy can lead to deeper understanding of how to address the deficits. He points out that not everyone who lacks empathy behaves cruelly, but cruel behavior indicates lack of empathy. Types N, B, and P have the “trait” of lack of empathy, trait being an ongoing characteristic (as opposed to the “state” of lack of empathy which is transient and influenced by the environment, as has been discussed elsewhere). Cohen examines the neuroscience of brain activity associated with empathy and calls attention to deficits in the “empathy circuit” in the N, B, and P types. He offers some suggestions for possible treatment to affect change to overcome the developmental deficits.

A study at Duke University (2011) also highlighted some neuroscience issues. The research showed “through MRI studies that people normally activate a network in the brain related to social cognition – thoughts, feelings, empathy, for example – when viewing pictures of others or thinking about their thoughts. But when participants in this study were asked to consider images of people they considered drug addicts, homeless people, and others they deemed low on the social ladder, parts of this network failed to engage.” This particular study has nothing to do with evil, but it delineates again the brain’s involvement / or lack of involvement in empathic responses, a critical issue in evil behavior.

One of the qualities of evil I would like to propose is that of “organized badness,” either on an individual level or collectively. My “triad of evil” which feeds into this paradigm is unchecked greed, ego, and power. Inherent in this triad are lack of empathy and intent to harm or lack of concern about the harm actions produce.

From the above, it appears that lack of empathy and intent are core issues in defining evil.

## **5. Examples to Consider**

On an individual level, classic sociopathic behavior fits the definition, embodying using others and things for personal benefit without regard to impact. Such people have a kind of personal organization of badness – the organization of the Self is infused with badness (transpositions). They are without conscience and may even enjoy inflicting physical or emotional pain or at least don’t care. They lack empathy and do not value others intrinsically. Neither are they likely to value the world around them intrinsically.

Collectively, we have the horrid examples of the Nazis, genocide in various other places, torture practices, war crimes, and perhaps, in a completely different arena, unscrupulous Wall Street traders and multinational corporations. These groups display the same types of behaviors and disvaluations as the individual sociopaths.

To quote Haslam and Reicher (2008) again:

Until recently, psychologists and historians have agreed that ordinary people commit evil when, under the influence of leaders and groups, they become blind to the consequences of their actions. This consensus has become so strong that it is repeated, almost as a mantra, in psychology textbooks and in society at large. However critical scrutiny of both historical and psychological evidence – along with a number of new studies...\_ has produced a radically different picture. People do great wrong, not because they are unaware of what they are doing but because they consider it to be right. This is possible because they actively identify with the groups whose ideology justifies and condones the oppression and destruction of others.

In short, the true horror of Eichmann and his like is not that their actions were blind. On the contrary, it is that they saw clearly what they did, and believed it to be the right thing to do.

Our world seems beset with examples of behaviors which display the same disvaluations seen in individuals. Let's examine a few of these situations in light of the previous discussion.

- Torture represented at Abu Ghraib.

Seven soldiers were prosecuted for torturing prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. However, it appears that they were subject to the same influences demonstrated in Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment. Zimbardo indicates that there existed a "culture of torture" which was administratively sanctioned and, if not overtly, then tacitly, condoned. While politicians may deny this, Zimbardo points to the overwhelming paper trail. Regardless of the rhetoric and the effort to redefine "torture," the result is still the same Intrinsic disvaluation and dehumanization (I sub I). So we can conjecture that we may have some good people influenced to behave evilly due to the culture which created systemic evil.

- Police brutality

Recent incidences which have received national media attention (Ferguson, MO, Baltimore, North Charleston – all of which involved the death of a minority person when there was no apparent threat) have brought to question what may be described as a "culture of brutality" directed at minorities in some instances. What is observable is the disvaluation of the person and lack of empathy / compassion which may be a manifestation of systemic evil (tacit policy) or the behavior of individuals. This is being said with some hesitation, recognizing the dangers police officers face regularly, but also recognizing the high calling for responsible actions and treating people with dignity.

- Genocide.

Genocide Watch (2014) lists 16 countries involved in genocide, politicide, or mass atrocities, most in the Mid-East and Africa. Another 19 countries are indicated as being highly at risk. One of the stages of genocide is "Dehumanization" in which

One group denies the humanity of the other. Members of it are equated with animals, vermin, insects or disease. Dehumanization overcomes the normal human revulsion

against murder. At this stage, hate propaganda in print and on hate radios is used to vilify the victim group...(Stanton 1998).

-ISIS.

The Islamic State's barbaric and horrific actions are all over the media. ISIS is continually referred to as "evil." In the face of the hate filled rhetoric, graphic beheadings, genocidal assaults, and destroying antiquities, it is not difficult to see why. Michael Austin (2014) states:

ISIS is evil, but their evil is neither "pure" nor "inhuman." It is a very human evil and, like everything human, it is messy, chaotic, contingent and firmly tied to a specific time and place. It is an evil born out of the collision of the worst elements of human nature and a specific set of historical circumstances that we are all, in some ways, a part of.

Robert Smith (2001), in his essay on "The Mind of the Terrorist," presents his perceptions of the components of terrorist thinking. They do not value others or themselves intrinsically (lack empathy) and, therefore, see nothing wrong with killing others – especially others different from them. In fact, it is good to do so. They identify with the organization and blindly follow, deriving their only sense of self from the group.

- Corporate misconduct

In the United States, we have experienced a long series of corporate scandals including WorldCom, Enron, Arthur Anderson, Bear Sterns, Lehman Brothers, AIG, and Bernie Madoff, to name a few. The result of the behaviors of people in some of these organizations was, at least in part, responsible for the recession of 2008, which affected markets worldwide. Herein are examples of my "triad of evil" – unchecked greed, ego, and power. Once again we have behavior which disregards impact on others – lack of empathy – in favor of personal gain. The actions of employees in these companies was governed by the standards of behavior they saw at work – not by the eloquent Codes of Ethics statements, such as Enron's which was 64 pages (2006). Quite likely we can produce a list of corporations abusing the environment without regard to consequences.

In all these instances , we see lack of intrinsic value sensitivity in all dimensions.

## **6. Summary**

To summarize, evil is characterized by a mind set which disregards the value and values of others. It may be manifested in behavior which is purposely cruel and malicious and which inflicts pain directly, or it may be manifested in behavior which causes harm to others or the world in which we live without the direct physical violence (i.e. destroying people's lives financially or exploiting resources in a way which causes environmental degradation). Either case reflects a diminished capacity to value intrinsically in all dimensions.

Returning to the question of disvaluations on the Formal Axiological hierarchy, is there a point in the descention from a systemic value disvalued systemically (e.g. "nonsense" "on the standard Hartman Value Profile) to an intrinsic value disvalued intrinsically ("torture"). In my thinking, I sub E (slavery), S sub I (burn a heretic), E sub I (blow up an airliner), and I sub I (torture) all may qualify – realizing that any of these disvaluations could be committed without being evil. For example, a person could kill someone (I sub I) in self defense, accidentally, or even impulsively as a "crime of passion" and it would not meet the specifications discussed here

to qualify as evil. Even the law recognizes different categories of murder, from first degree to involuntary manslaughter. What about the disvaluations from S sub S through I sub S. I am unsure! All of this needs our collective thinking.

## **8. Conclusions**

What to do?? How can we work toward Dr. Hartman's quest to organize good? I do believe there is hope! There are arenas in which positive impacts can occur which can contribute to helping counteract the "bad" and "evil" in our world.

We have many demonstrations in business and educational settings that the power of Formal Axiology can make a difference – decision making can be improved, ethical behavior can be learned, value sensitivities can be sharpened, and empathic responses heightened. Fundamentally, this is an affirmation that people are capable of making positive changes in their lives.

Organizations emulate the culture created by leadership. The Ethics Resource Center (2009) stated in the conclusion of a national business survey:

Lead by example; talk the talk and walk the walk. Senior leaders have the greatest impact on their companies' cultures and should take advantage of the opportunity it presents. By keeping employees informed, living up to promises and commitment to ethics and setting a good example, they can have a profound impact on their companies' cultures and ethical health.

This statement, of course, refers to any kind of organization - the military, the U.S Government, the U.S. Congress, police departments, and business entities. We need to demand the end to unethical cultures of all kinds and promote applied Formal Axiology wherever we can.

Neuroscience may eventually offer some interventions for those who have deficits in the "empathy circuit" and/or the "social cognition" area which will contribute to reducing "bad" (and potentially "evil") behavior.

Zimbardo (1999) states, in an address at the Holocaust Studies Center at Sonoma State University in California, about those who do evil:

We must not make them our Enemies in the abstract, but monitor their ideas and actions in the concrete, and do all in our power to oppose their distorted values by promoting human understanding, compassion, and commitments that foster peace at home and abroad....the first step in preventing Genocide begins by promoting peace, love, and understanding in Your Minds and in mine. It is our first line of defense against Evil, and it is the source of strength we all need to resist the ever-present, pervasive, powerful forces in the world that would lure us across that Seductive Line to descend into the realm of the next generation of evil perpetrators.

In closing, let me say that we must always proceed with caution. People are far too complex to submit to the stereotypes and descriptions discussed here. Not everyone who has a diminished capacity to value behaves evilly. The threats are real from the evil we experience, but the tendency is to be divisive and see "us" and "them," interfering in moving toward any productive means of resolving the issues. Part of our initiative here at this Institute is to make the



world a better place, and who but you who are versed in the richness of Formal Axiology can respond as well in pondering how to address evil behavior and how to improve bad behavior.

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