

Zimbardo (1999) Perpetrators of evil

Evil does not reside in the genes, biology or temperament of particular people like sadists, deranged, psychopaths and their like. Most evil is the product of rather ordinary people caught up in unusual circumstances that they are not equipped to cope with in the normal ways that have worked in the past to escape, avoid or challenge them, while they are being recruited, seduced, initiated into evil by persuasive authorities or compelling peer pressure.

The horrors are spawned by the evil of leaders like Hitler, Mao, Idi Amin, Pol Pot and their like throughout history but the leaders themselves are seldom personally involved in the evil deeds. They have given orders and directions to others about what to do. The important point here is to analyse why the perpetrators followed orders and killed for their leaders, or why once they started the killing, their leaders became irrelevant, once the machinery of mass murder had been installed and lubricated, it requires only persistent dedication to one's job and the knowledge that it is being executed effectively. Compliant workers or willing soldiers are all that is needed.

Hannah Arendt wrote a book called 'The Banality of Evil' about her analysis of Eichman during the Nuremberg Trials. She found that he was just an ordinary normal man, and this is perhaps the most shocking. What is it then that make ordinary men and women cross the line from Good to Evil, to go from being a good family man, a dutiful citizen to a mass murderer with no conscience for his evil deeds and no remorse for destroying human lives.

Some would say that there are good and bad people, a dispositional analysis. Others would claim that situational determinants are the most important measure. Most human action is an interaction of person and situational variables, but we often make the 'fundamental attribution error', i.e. we emphasise dispositional factors while simultaneously underplaying the situational factors which may be more important.

Stanley Milgram's research on obedience showed that ordinary people could obey an order to inflict lethal electric shocks to another human being. His results in 18 experiments showed that ordinary people could be seduced, initiated into behaving in ways that might lead to killing innocent victims. Almost any of us could end up like Eichmann.