Bad Apples and Bad Barrels: Bad Metaphors and Blind Spots Regarding Evil?

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To the editor:

The subtitle of Philip Zimbardo's (2007) book, *The Lucifer Effect*, (reviewed by Wray Herbert, *Observer*, April 2007) is *Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. The book follows Zimbardo's talk of the same name at the 2006 APS convention, the crux of which, according to writer Eric Wargo (2006), was on the transformation of "good, ordinary people into perpetrators of evil" by situational pressures, using the torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib as a case in point .

Even someone fully convinced of the sufficient applicability of the empirical results marshaled by Zimbardo, and of the value of invoking explanations post hoc, is presumably forced by the existence of guards who did not "misbehave" to admit that a pure situational explanation cannot be at issue, but rather one involving the interaction of situational factors with those of the personality, attitudes, and expectations of convicted Abu Ghraib guard Sgt. Frederick and other perpetrators.

The point is important because the question arises as to why the battery of tests given to Frederick at Zimbardo's request (personal communication, October 8, 2006) did not pick out any predispositions to react to the situational factors in a pathological manner. The answer must be that the predispositions to respond to situational factors in an "evil" manner were not appropriately measured. Why?

Is it possible that American social scientists have a "blind spot" for the behaviors and attitudes that might be good predictors, but seem to them unremarkable? For example, is volunteering for the Army or the Army Reserve "normal"? Is the belief that one's country is the best in everything, and, especially, having a condescending attitude toward other peoples and countries, normative? Do such attitudes distinguish volunteers from draftees, and among the various groups of volunteers? Are future torturers more likely to subscribe to the "premise… that America possesses absolute power," as the London Times columnist Simon Jenkins (2006) has put it?

The United States is not among the 104 signatories (including the United Kingdom) of the International Criminal Court Treaty, and it has used controversial incarceration and trial procedures with no international oversight. Arguably, a considerable majority of Americans does not agree with such policies despite 9/11: The question is whether Army volunteers agree with them to an unusually high degree — even before they enlist. Have Frederick et al. been asked this simple question: "Do you believe that the wartime behavior of U.S. soldiers and occupation troops should be judged by an objective international court?"

Finally, one might ask: Why do American psychologists generally become motivated to explain "evil" in situational terms only when Americans commit the atrocities (Konecni, 2005)? Unlike Zimbardo in Frederick's trial, no American psychologist with a "situational" worldview was a defense expert

witness, for example, at the Hague trials of not just Miloševic, but also of his subordinates. Even the "situational" defense of a civil war having taken place (with all the "evil" that civil wars usually involve) was denied to these defendants by the Hague prosecutors. Victor's justice tends to impute exclusively "internal" causes to enemy atrocities.

Wargo (2006) quotes Zimbardo: "It's time we asked the big questions like the nature of evil." However, we seem to be no closer to a profound answer than the ones given by Dostoevsky, Robert Musil, and Hannah Arendt.

Vladimir J. Konecni
University of California, San Diego

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