The Banality of Heroism

Required Reading

Franco, Zeno and Philip Zimbardo (2006) "The Banality of Heorism," *Greater Good*, Fall/Winter 2006/2007, 30-35.

Learning Outcomes and Connections to Course Outcomes

The idea behind this article is very clearly stated in the sub-head below the title: “Circumstances can force almost anyone to be a bystander to evil, but they can also bring out our own inner hero. Zeno Franco and Philip Zimbardo show how we’re all capable of everyday heroism” (Franco and Zimbardo, 30). After reviewing chilling evidence of how easy it is for ordinary people to become complicit in inhuman acts because of social pressure, the authors move on to the more hopeful idea that all of us can become more likely to act heroically if we stay awake and cultivate a “heroic imagination.”

After completing this lesson, you will be able to:

- Relate to questions around the degree to which we freely create “who we are” and the degree to which our identities are determined by forces beyond our control
- Show how social context and social conditioning shape behaviour.

Main Topics

- The Banality of Evil
- The Heroic Imagination
- Old School Heroes and New School “heroes”

The Banality of Evil

In order to appreciate fully the idea behind "The Banality of Heroism," it is helpful to understand the history and significance of the phrase the authors are doing a take-off on: "The Banality of *Evil*."



Source: By Israel Government Press Office (Israel National Photo Collection) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AAdolf_Eichmann_at_Trial1961.jpg)

Adolf Eichmann was a Nazi war criminal. He managed to evade prosecution after the end of the war and eventually escaped to Argentina under false papers. There, the Israeli secret service finally tracked him down in 1960. They kidnapped him, and brought him to stand trial for his crimes in Israel.

The philosopher **Hannah Arendt** reported on the trial in the *New Yorker* magazine for February, 1963 and subsequent issues. In a highly controversial argument, Arendt suggested that Eichmann was not a monster or even so much "evil" or "racist," but was instead just an uninspired bureaucrat, who — in the now classic line — was "only following orders." She famously referred to this version of human monstrousness as "**the banality of evil**."

Banality means "ordinariness." If something is banal, it is commonplace, uninteresting, so familiar as to be unworthy of notice. Eichmann was responsible for coordinating the trains that took the Jews and other victims to the concentration camps. Again and again during the trial, Eichmann showed his de-humanized conception of the process of transporting the Jews. He had seen it primarily as a logistics problem and a bureaucratic challenge. The transportation was a workflow, and he himself was an unimaginative functionary, largely alienated from the monstrous *purpose* of the process he was managing, much like the guy who organizes the trucks

that deliver chicken parts to McDonalds might have little concern about where the cargo started out from or where it would ultimately end up, and feels no responsibility for the deaths of the chickens.

Much of the public didn't like Arendt's conclusion. They wanted Nazi war criminals to be larger-than-life monsters, with evil imaginations like The Joker or at least Hitler, not unimaginative people just like themselves trying to get ahead in their organizations in a keep-your-head-down, single-minded manner.

But Arendt's arguments made terrifying sense to the psychologist **Stanley Milgram** when he was trying to come to grips with the results of a famous experiment he conducted shortly after Eichmann's trial. Partly because he wanted to understand how people like Eichmann could participate in such evil, Milgram set up an experiment involving one participant shocking another. The experiment was supposedly trying to find out something about learning, but it was actually trying to discover how far an ordinary American citizen would go in shocking another ordinary citizen if a scientist told him to continue increasing the voltage. Milgram discovered that two out of three volunteers will deliver what they think is a shock of 450 volts to another volunteer if a guy in a lab coat tells them to do it, and if the experimenter says he will take responsibility!

This experiment has been repeated many times since the 1960s, and the results are always similar. Incidentally, they weren't actually delivering shocks to the other participant, but they thought they were. The actor — who was out of sight in the room next door — made noises, yelled, and eventually complained and asked to be released, finally going silent altogether. Despite this, two out of three participants keep increasing the voltage, just to please the experimenter.

Milgram agreed with Hannah Arendt that the problem with someone like Eichmann was at least in part that he had been raised in a culture that believed in efficient means regardless of the ends, and in which personal responsibility tended to get obscured within the impersonal structures of bureaucracies and mechanized systems. In the reflections he wrote on his famous experiment, Milgram concluded that perhaps the chief cause of the horror of modern human "civilization," the horror of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, for example, was the *depersonalization and mystification of responsibility* caused by The Division of Labour, the dividing up of work processes into micro-jobs, with no one being responsible for the whole process.

> There was a time, perhaps, when people were able to give a fully human response to any situation because they were fully absorbed in it as human beings. But as soon as there was a division of labor things changed. Beyond a certain point, the breaking up of society into people carrying out narrow and very special jobs takes away from the human quality of work and life. A person does not get to see the whole situation but only a small part of it, and is thus unable to act without some kind of overall direction. He yields to authority but in doing so is alienated from his own actions.
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> Even Eichmann was sickened when he toured the concentration camps, but he had only to sit at a desk and shuffle papers. At the same time the man in the camp who actually dropped Cyclon-b into the gas chambers was able to justify his behavior on the ground that he was only following orders from above. Thus there is a fragmentation of the total human act; no one is confronted with the consequences of his decision to carry out the evil act. The person who assumes responsibility has evaporated. Perhaps this is the most common characteristic of socially organized evil in modern society. (Milgram 1973, p. 77)

The basic idea of the banality of evil, then, is that evil is just as likely to be done by "banal" individuals as by psychotic monsters: "under certain conditions and social pressures," as Franco and Zimbardo put it, "ordinary people can commit acts that would otherwise be unthinkable" (Franco and Zimbardo, p. 30).



A scene from "The Stanford Prison Experiment," a movie inspired by the famous study.

Source: PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY SPENCER SHWETZ/SUNDANCE INSTITUTE. Emery, B. et al. (Producers), & Alvarez, KP. (Director). (2015). The Stanford Prison Experiment [Motion picture]. USA: IFC Films. Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/the-real-lesson-of-the-stanford-prison-experiment (http://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/the-real-lesson-of-the-stanford-prison-experiment)

The authors then go on to give details of Zimbardo's own famous experiment, The Stanford Prison Experiment, in which student volunteers assumed the roles of guards and prisoners in a prison. After only a couple of days of this role-playing, some "guards" started abusing their power and even showed sadistic tendencies, while the "prisoners" displayed typical behaviours of those who are incarcerated, including passive aggression.

The Banality of Evil suggests that **social contexts** shape our behaviour to an extent that is truly frightening, and that, in Milgram's words, "relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority." Two-thirds of us are sheep, sleepwalking through life and trying to keep a low profile and toe the line. It is this lack of personal moral responsibility and thinking that feeds evil in the modern world.

The Heroic Imagination

One might learn about Milgram's Shock Experiment and Zimbardo's Prison Experiment, and be left cynical about human nature and fearful of our fellow beings. But Franco and Zimbardo want to go beyond the bad news.

There were a couple of small rays of hope in Milgram's findings. For one thing, we mustn't forget that one third of the participants ***did stop***. Perhaps their mothers had raised them right. Or perhaps they had more imagination than the other two thirds. We'll look at this unexpected idea of **imagination** closely.

Another finding was interesting. Milgram ran variations of his experiment in which other actors pretended to be the people doing the shocking and worked alongside the real subjects. Milgram discovered that conformity and modelling were powerful forces. Sometimes, Milgram had directed these actors to comply with the experiment; other times, they would refuse to continue. One variation had two actors and one subject, and Milgram found that when the two actors refused to go beyond a certain shock level, thirty-six of forty subjects also refused to go on. Even a single actor standing up and saying they refused to go on was enough to raise the awareness of some participants and lead them to realize what they were doing and that they could make other choices.



Source: © istockphoto.com/ Leontura

This is the value of the rebel, not just the rebel's own resistance, but the fact that it models resistance for others, and shows them there are alternatives to the path they are on. Milgram draws particular attention to this: *"The rebellious action of others severely undermines authority."*

Franco and Zimbardo want to go further. If it's true that ordinary people can be the agents of great evil, it is also true that they can be, and often are, capable of extraordinary heroic good. Franco and Zimbardo talk about a few examples of this, including Frank De Martini, a construction manager at the World Trade Center who, along with three other ordinary citizens, combed the building looking for survivors immediately after the 9/11 attack, and dragged many people out, saving lives. The four men themselves perished when the building collapsed on them. These were ordinary people, not superheroes or trained emergency rescue workers. If there is a Banality of Evil, Franco and Zimbardo want to argue, there is also a Banality of Heroism. Ordinary people are capable of extraordinary evil — or extraordinary good.

> The **banality of heroism** concept suggests that we are all potential heroes waiting for a moment in life to perform a heroic deed. The decision to act heroically is a choice that many of us will be called upon to make at some point in time. By conceiving of heroism as a universal attribute of human nature, not as a rare feature of the few "heroic elect," heroism becomes something that seems in the range of possibilities for every person, perhaps inspiring more of us to answer that call. (Franco and Zimbardo, p. 31)

What can ordinary people do so that they will be more likely to act heroically — or at least less likely to act as mindless agents of evil — in critical situations? Franco and Zimbardo focus on the curious idea of developing a "heroic imagination."

A Matter of Perspective

They tell the story of another government functionary during World War II, Chiune Sugihara. Sugihara was a Japanese consul



Source: Unknown [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sugihara_b.jpg)

working in the Japanese embassy in Lithuania at the time the Nazis were going to take it over.

… Sugihara, signed more than 2,000 visas for Jews hoping to escape the Nazi invasion, despite his government's direct orders not to do so. Every morning when Sugihara got up and made the same decision to help, every time he signed a visa, he acted heroically and increased the likelihood of dire consequences for himself and his family. At the end of the war he was unceremoniously fired from the Japanese civil service. (Franco and Zimbardo, p. 32-33)

Franco and Zimbardo suggest that among the reasons Sugihara had the inner moral resources to risk his own safety and livelihood, and even that of his family, for others was that he had previously in his life practiced resistance to authority in smaller ways. He had also been brought up in a Samurai tradition whose values were different from those of mainstream Japanese culture, which required strict adherence to the demands of superiors. When he felt a "moral tickle," unlike many of us who would simply try to bury it and plod forward, he looked into it and discussed it with his family, coming to the conclusion that it would be wrong not to help the Jews escape persecution, whatever his government told him.

Finally, perhaps, he had **imagination**. This may seem like an odd quality in a hero, but Franco and Zimbardo think it is crucial. Arendt and Milgram had explained Eichmann's participation in the holocaust as largely due to his lack of imagination. Imagination is key because it allows you to think about the *consequences* of your actions and to remember and re-enact in your head similar situations in the past.

Finally, it is key to **empathy**. Somehow, perhaps, the Japanese man was able to imagine himself as a Jew. He was able to imagine what it was like to be somebody else, to see how that somebody else was another human being just like him. He was able to imagine how he would feel in the future if he did not help them now.

Franco and Zimbardo point out that part of the heroic imagination is simply to *imagine* that you are capable of heroic action, to imagine yourself acting heroically in situations. This actually prepares you to do so when the real thing comes along. Throughout the second half of their article, they provide guidelines you could follow if you wanted to nurture your heroic imagination. Let's summarize the most important here:

Stand up to authority regularly, in small ways.

This will actually get us into "heroic condition" for when something bigger comes along.

Have values beyond following your most simplistic self-interest at all times.

Think about the consequences, for ourselves and others, of our acts — and the consequences of *not* acting.

Don't just live in the present.

We should always give some thought to the future ramifications or what we are doing (or not doing) now. We should be engaged in the current situation, yet also be able to detach part of our analytical focus to imagine alternative future scenarios that might play out, depending on different actions or failures to act that we take in the present. In addition, we should keep part of our minds on the past, as that may help us recall values and teachings instilled in us long ago.

If something gives us a “moral tickle,” we shouldn’t ignore it.

Instead we should think about it, hard and logically, like Sugihara did about the Jews. We should discuss it with others. If something pricks our conscience, there is probably something there; we should avoid the temptation to bury it.

Resist the urge to rationalize inaction or apathy.

We sometimes develop justifications that make evil deeds and complicity seem like acceptable means to supposedly positive ends. We need to avoid excuses like “everybody does it,” “anyone else would do the same thing in this situation,” and those kinds of things.

Avoid the Bystander Effect.

If someone else is doing evil in our presence, we must challenge it. If we look away and hope the bus comes soon or assume it is someone else’s job to intervene, we are partly responsible for the evil.

Be courageous about interpersonal conflict.

We all need to develop the personal hardiness necessary to stand firm for principles we cherish. We should challenge other people to support their own principles and behaviour.

Stay awake.

Don’t sleepwalk through life just “going with the flow.” We must stay engaged and present, and ask questions so that we get the information needed to take responsible action if necessary.

You don’t have to be one of the two out of three people who kept delivering higher and higher voltage because a guy in a lab coat told them to. You can be the one who stands up and refuses. And if you do, others will gain the courage and insight to follow you.

A Matter of Perspective

The Bystander Effect

On page 31, Franco and Zimbardo discuss what is sometimes called the Bystander Effect — the tendency of people to stand by while injustice happens because they feel it is not their responsibility as long as they aren’t personally committing the injustice: “Research has shown that the bystander effect is often motivated by diffusion of responsibility, when different people witnessing an emergency all assume someone else will help. … we fall into the trap of inaction when we assume it’s someone else’s responsibility to act the hero.”

Over the next week, try to watch for the Bystander Effect. It could be someone harassing a gay person at a bus stop, or an employee being treated less fairly because of her race or gender, etc. If you personally are doing the silent bystander thing, does it make it more difficult when you are consciously aware of yourself doing it? One of the ideas the authors explore is that simply being conscious and aware that we might be allowing evil to occur can lead us to saying something or taking action.

Old School Heroes and New School “heroes”



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Take a moment and write on a sheet of paper your hero or heroes if you have any. Turn the paper over and then continue reading this.

Thinking Critically

Did you have a hero at all? If so, who did you choose, and why are they your hero?

What do you think other people say when we ask them this question?

When we poll Humber students, by far the most common answer we get is one or another parent, or both. A few people mention superheroes. A few usually name Martin Luther King and Gandhi. Finally, many will mention successful entrepreneurs, people like Steve Jobs, athletes, and particularly celebrities, from Kanye to even Marilyn Monroe!

Franco and Zimbardo talk about the “dumbing down” of heroism in the contemporary world (p. 34). They say that our mass media tends to present people who are rich, narcissistic, sexy, powerful, or famous as “heroes,” while in the past heroes were more like Robin Hood or Frodo Baggins: people who had ideals beyond their own self-interest, followed a standard of right and wrong even if it was painful, and generally risked something important — if not their lives then their social standing, their livelihoods, their connections to their families or loved ones, etc. in the service of humanity and justice.

A Matter of Perspective

Do you have any heroes who are like the Old School heroes? If not, what do you find heroic and thus worthy of emulation today? Some would say that our culture tells you your heroes should be self-serving criminals getting all they can get. Are these values we should be applauding and encouraging in each other?

Summary



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Most of us are capable of doing evil or allowing evil to be done in our presence, if the social pressures are right and if we have no inner strength of resistance. Many of us, though, are also capable of showing true heroism in small matters as well as in times of crisis where we may need to risk even our lives or our livelihoods. What makes the difference? Franco and Zimbardo suggest that everyday heroism is probably more likely if we have an heroic imagination, one that allows us to imagine ourselves being heroic, that includes old school heroes who acted out of something other than self-interest, that lets us imagine the consequences and larger ramifications of current acts, and that allows us to empathize with people who may be treated unjustly. The implication is that we live in a culture that encourages us to participate in the banality of evil, and that we should be working on a culture that returns to the sense of true heroism that existed in the past.