

Humanizing Monsters

Casey Dorman

Editor, *Lost Coast Review*

Alliant International University, retired (Alhambra, CA)

I was listening to NPR recently and an interviewer was talking to Thomas Hegghammer, a Norwegian professor of political science, who had just published an edited collection of essays/research studies called *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*. One of the interviewer's questions was "Aren't you afraid that your book will humanize jihadists?" This struck me as strange. Could seeing anyone as human, even someone who engaged in systematic killing, be harmful? We often describe the most horrific crimes, such as genocide in terms of one group viewing the other as less than human. We are all aware of Hitler's genocidal actions against Jews, whom he believed were biologically inferior to what he called the Aryan race. When Hutus in Rwanda killed nearly a million of their Tutsi neighbors, they described them as "cockroaches." Even the American founding fathers were only willing to count each African American slave as worth 3/5 of a White person. These are instances, not uncommon in history, when embracing an ideology that involved viewing others as less than full human beings led to systematic mistreatment, killing or enslavement of people. But should we then turn around and view those who subscribe to such ideologies as also less than human?

What does it mean to regard another person as a human being? Although many racist ideologies have based their prejudices on notions of "inferiority," most of us reject such views. Some individuals are stronger, taller, smarter, slower, fatter, etc. than others, but it does not lessen their humanity in most people's eyes. We tend to see others as less human when we see the trait they express as "evil"—when they show themselves as capable of cruelty that we do not regard ourselves, or any "normal" person, as capable of producing. To many Westerners and also to many from other parts of the world, including mainstream Muslims, jihadists such as al Qaeda or ISIS are seen as "evil." They rape women, chop off heads, and they conduct deadly terror attacks on civilians. After recent White Supremacy demonstrations in places such as Charlottesville, VA, many Americans view those who espouse neo-Nazi or KKK-like racist views as evil enough that they have become unrecognizable as fellow human beings. They have crossed a line beyond which normal human beings never tread. We view all or most members of such groups as, in the words of Chloe Valdary, "hateful monsters."

There are two broad theories of how people can embrace actions we typically regard as "evil" as a way of behaving toward their fellow men: One theory, embodied by the work of

British psychologist, Simon Baron-Cohen (2011), is that some people lack or suffer from a reduction in empathy, and those people are not sensitive to how others feel. At this extreme of the distribution of empathy, along with some people with relatively rare developmental disabilities, are psychopaths. The other theory, embodied by the work of American psychologist, Philip Zimbardo (2007), famous for the Stanford Prison Experiment, is that anyone can be coaxed into behaving evilly toward his fellow man, using the proper social techniques. Baron-Cohen's theory is a dispositional one; Zimbardo's is a situational one.

Baron-Cohen defines empathy as "*our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion.*" He claims that, "we all lie somewhere on the empathy spectrum (from high to low). People said to be evil or cruel are simply at one extreme of the empathy spectrum." Despite describing empathy as "more like a dimmer switch than an all-or-none switch," he also describes people with "zero degrees of empathy," who may be "Zero-Negative." Those who are Zero-Negative include psychopaths, those with borderline personality disorder and narcissists. Their lives, and the lives of those around them, are affected negatively by their lack of empathy combined with impairment in their experience of emotions. Although Baron-Cohen does not dismiss the role of social pressures, such as conformity, in producing cruel acts, he insists that "when cruel acts occur, it is because of malfunctioning of the empathy circuit." This may be only temporary, but in those who are truly evil and capable of long-term, systematic cruelty, he says the empathy system is "permanently down," due to a variety of biological and environmental factors and their interaction. In other words, the truly evil are not like the rest of us.

Philip Zimbardo describes what he calls, "The Lucifer Effect," or "How Good People Turn Evil." His point is that evil behavior, as demonstrated in examples such as the behavior of Nazis killing Jews or the inhumane treatment of prisoners by the American guards at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, is something of which we are all capable, and he tries to show the social forces that contribute to it. He uses many examples, but three are particularly telling: his own 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment, Stanley Milgram's 1960's experiments on obedience, and psychologist Christopher Browning's 1992 account of *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*.

In Zimbardo's own experiment, college students and young men from the community around Stanford were randomly divided into "guards" and "prisoners" and within a week the behavior of the guards became so abusive toward the prisoners that the experiment had to be stopped. Milgram famously asked a variety of people in a series of experiments to administer what they assumed were real electric shocks (they weren't) to "learners," and the majority of his subjects were willing to follow the instructions of those in charge and administer the shocks even when they were aware that the levels were potentially lethal and the recipients were heard to scream and beg and finally become unresponsive. Many participants thought it would have been "unethical" to refuse to follow instructions once the experiment began, even though they knew the supposed consequences to the person they were shocking. In Browning's account of a group of 500 German civilian and career policemen who, when ordered to do so, either shot or herded onto trains for death camps, 83,000 Polish Jews, the psychologist found that the pressure for conformity and the fear of

damaging their careers by refusal to do the killing, led “ordinary men” to become routine executioners.

In a set of experiments by Albert Bandura in the 1970's, college students were instructed to administer (fake) shocks to other students in an experiment that was purported to teach “decision making.” The supposedly to-be-shocked students were either described as members of “an animalistic rotten bunch” or “a perceptive, understanding... group.” The object was to see if the use of dehumanizing labels affected the likelihood of administering severe shocks. In fact it made a dramatic difference with the “animalistic” students being shocked much more severely. It was also found that students were more likely to administer severe shocks if they thought that the administered shock was an average response of they and their fellow students rather than just their own individual response. In other words, lessening personal responsibility made it easier to administer greater shocks. Bandura analyzed his results in terms of what he called conditions that elicited “moral disengagement” from the consequences of one's actions. These conditions were “dehumanizing” the object of the behavior and lessening individual responsibility for the action.

For Zimbardo, “dehumanization is the central construct in our understanding of ‘man's inhumanity to man.’” Based on Bandura's (1999) model of dehumanization and moral disengagement, Zimbardo posited four “cognitive mechanisms” he says are involved when we “disengage morally from any sort of destructive or evil conduct.”

1. We shroud our cruel actions in euphemistic language that makes them honorable, righteous or morally imperative.
2. We “minimize our sense of a direct link between our actions and its harmful outcomes.” We do this by “diffusing or displacing our personal responsibility” in the actions (e.g. “we were only following orders;” we act as part of a group).
3. We “ignore, distort, minimize, or disbelieve any negative consequences of our actions.”
4. We “reconstruct our perception of victims as deserving their punishment.” By dehumanizing them, often using pejorative labels for them, we perceive them “to be beneath the righteous concerns we reserve for fellow human beings.”

While Baron-Cohen's research reveals some of the developmental events and neurobiological correlates of empathy and the lack of it, and may be applicable to certain apparently conscienceless psychopaths or other types of destructive character disorders, the extensive history of interpersonal cruelty on a large scale makes it clear that it is often “good people” who become evil. Zimbardo's own research and that which he cites, demonstrates this time and again. This means that, in understanding those we regard as doing evil things, especially on a large and systematic scale (e.g. neo-Nazis, KKK, al Qaeda, ISIS, American soldiers at Abu Ghraib, racist policemen perhaps), labeling them as inherently “evil,” as “monsters,” or as “animals,” not only discourages our understanding of how they can do what they do, but it encourages us to *disengage our own moral standards when dealing with them*. We can deplore violence but approve of “punching a neo-Nazi in the face,” because of the evil he personifies (we may feel more comfortable doing this when we are masked and part of a group, so our individual responsibility is lessened). Israel can

make an exception to its policy of not employing the death penalty when it comes to Adolph Eichmann, because he is “the embodiment of evil,” despite Hannah Arendt’s (1963) description of him as “banal.”

The danger in not recognizing that most of those who do evil are very much like us, rather than inherently evil misfits, is that it does not prepare us with ways to combat the conditions and methods that lead people to behave in evil ways. This is something that Muslim communities must face as they worry about their young people becoming radicalized and White American communities must face when they worry about their young people becoming followers of White Supremacists.

We appear to have an aversion to recognizing our own vulnerability to engaging in morally repugnant behavior. Although in every experiment recounted by Zimbardo there were some “heroes” who did not succumb to the psychological techniques and retained their moral compasses, such heroes were a tiny percentage (less than 10%) of participants; yet nearly 100% of people, when told about the experiments, predicted that they would be immune to the psychological methods. We are not good judges of ourselves. Haslam et al. (2005) have related this to what they call a “self-humanization bias.” We view ourselves as possessing more “human essence” than others. Leyens (2000) has studied “outgroup infrahumanization,” which refers to the tendency to view members of an “outgroup” as less human and less capable of the full range of emotions than members of the group to which we belong. Viki et al (2012) found that dehumanization of sex offenders led to the belief that they could not be rehabilitated and this view supported ill treatment and exclusion of them; likewise, Viki et al. (2013) discovered that guards were more likely to torture prisoners of war if they saw them as inhuman, and Christian guards based such judgments on the prisoners being Muslim. Demoulin et al (2009) found that any meaningful dimension of group membership can serve to produce infrahumanization of those in the outgroup. Park, Haslam and others (2016) found that, for some, the *self-humanization bias could be reduced by encouraging empathy with others*.

It is one thing to hypothesize that so-called “evil” people may be similar to the rest of us and to try to understand what social psychological forces led them to pursue their cruel activities. But there is also the issue of whether recognizing the humanity of someone whose behavior is evil interferes with our ability to combat his or her behavior. In short, if the best defense against an evil force is to be ruthless in our fight against it, does seeing those who embrace evil as similar to us inhibit our ability to be ruthless? Can we afford to see Nazis as humans, or by doing so do we lose something in our fight against acts of radical evil?

It may be pertinent to keep in mind that, of the 500 men involved as “police” in German Battalion 101, only 18 were ever indicted for war crimes and two were executed. The rest returned to normal lives in post-war Germany. The same was true of most Nazi soldiers and members of the Nazi party. Although the KKK still exists, it is significantly smaller than it was 60 years ago, and many of its former members now remain at a distance and no longer engage in active racist activities. As ISIS is defeated and its territory diminished, no doubt many of its members will be reabsorbed into the communities from which they came. In other words, just like the students in Zimbardo’s and Milgram’s experiments, those who acted horrifically will resume their lives as normal citizens. What are we to

think? Are these people monsters who have now gone underground, or was their monstrous behavior simply a reflection of the societal influences that acted upon them? The research and findings from studies such as Zimbardo's and Milgram's and Browning's suggest the latter, and if such is the case, then it remains a possibility that in combating evil, our goal can be to rescue the perpetrators of it and bring their behavior back into the range of benign normalcy. Even more pertinent, it means that our first priority should be to attack the societal influences that promote such behavior in otherwise normal humans.

If evil behavior is simply the consequence of allowing people who are inherently evil to gain power, then we protect ourselves from it by identifying such people and preventing or removing their access to power and influence. In fact, that is how most people think the fight against evil should be fought. But if evil behavior is the consequence of allowing evil influences to have sway over normal people, then we protect ourselves by removing or neutralizing those influences in our society. What are those influences and how can they be countered? If we go down the Bandura/Zimbardo list of ways in which we, as ordinary humans, may be led to "disengage morally" from the consequences of our actions, some protective actions seem evident: in terms of shrouding our cruel actions in euphemistic language, we can do such things as stopping sanctifying violence as a routine remedy to injustice, or "celebrating" the death of our opponents (e.g. Osama bin Ladin), even if they are demonstrably bad actors. We can avoid euphemisms for morally questionable behaviors, e.g. "collateral damage" for deaths of civilians in war, "capital punishment" for killing a fellow human being, "white nationalism" for racism. We should encourage and protect "whistleblowing" activities that represent an employee or group member speaking out against or refusing to follow policies that he or she believes may cause harm to others. We can expose and publicize negative consequences of social policies that result in limitations of educational or economic opportunity, perpetuation of income and wealth disparities, or poor health outcomes, especially if they affect one segment of society to the benefit of another, rather than claiming that one segment (to which we, perhaps, belong) is more deserving of the benefits than another.

Most importantly, we can refrain from labeling anyone as less than human, regardless of the malignancy of his or her behavior. Clearly, labeling people as "animals" or "monsters" allows us to pursue whatever cruelty we want and we habitually do this to terrorists, child abusers, gang members, foreign leaders who commit violence against their own people... and it easily reaches over to those with malignant beliefs, such as neo-Nazis, White Supremacists or Islamic jihadists.

Once we begin to think of one segment of our society, or one ideological group, as less than human we give ourselves permission to "disengage morally" from our actions toward them. In the pursuit of fighting those who dehumanize others, we dehumanize *them* and allow ourselves to engage in, or even celebrate, cruelty that otherwise would fall outside of our own boundary of decent behavior. That is why there is no danger in humanizing our opponents, be they jihadists or neo-Nazis. In fact, there is a much greater danger in dehumanizing them.

References

- Arendt, Hannah (1963). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Viking Press (originally published as a series of articles in *The New Yorker*).
- Bandura, A., Underwood, B., & Fromson, M. E. (1975). Disinhibition of aggression through diffusion of responsibility and dehumanization of victims. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 9, 253-269.
- Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3, 193-209.
- Baron-Cohen, S. (2011). *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*. New York: Basic Books.
- Browning, C. (1992). *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York : HarperCollins.
- Demoulin, S. et al. (2009). The role of in-group identification in infra-humanization. *International Journal of Psychology*, 44, 4-11.
- Haslam, N., Bain, P., Douge, L., Lee, M., & Bastian, B. (2005). More human than you: Attributing humanness to self and others. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89(6), 937-950.
- Hegghammer, T, Ed. (2017). *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leyens, J. Ph., Paladino, M. P., Rodriguez, R. T., Vaes, J., Demoulin, S., Rodriguez, A. P., & Gaunt, R. (2000). The emotional side of prejudice: The attribution of secondary emotions to ingroups and outgroups. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*. 4 (2): 186–197.
- Milgram, S. (1963). Behavioral study of obedience. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67, 371-378.
- Park, J., Haslam, N., Kashima, Y. and Norasakkunkit, V. (2016), Empathy, culture and self-humanising: Empathising reduces the attribution of greater humanness to the self more in Japan than Australia. *International Journal of Psychology*, 51: 301–306.
- Valdary, C. (2017, August 22). Why I refuse to avoid white people. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Viki, G.T., Fullerton, I., Ragget, H., Tait & Wiltshire, S. (2012). The role of dehumanization in attitudes toward the social exclusion and rehabilitation of sex offenders. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 42, 2349–2367.

Viki, G. T, Osgood, D, & Phillips, S. (2013). Dehumanization and self-reported proclivity to torture prisoners of war. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. 45. 325-328.

Zimbardo, P. (2007). *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. New York: Random House.