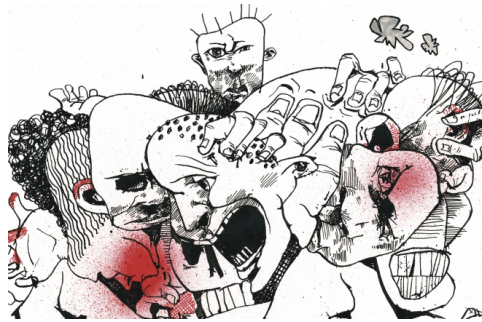


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Why People Kill



Jonathan Twingley for The Chronicle Review

By David P. Barash | NOVEMBER 08, 2015

Not surprisingly, violence is on our collective mind. Abu Ghraib, the brutalities of war in Syria and Iraq, its persistence in Afghanistan, the rise of ISIS with its shocking atrocities, murderous rebellions in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, gang violence in Central America, mass shootings at home along with police killings

of unarmed black men and boys. Are we fundamentally evil? Is the fault in our genes? Our experiences?

Such angst may be a reason two recent films are showcasing now-classic — and controversial — psychology experiments delving into the roots of violence. *The Stanford Prison Experiment*, released in July, dramatizes the 1971 project in which the social psychologist Philip G. Zimbardo, randomly assigned Stanford University students to play the roles of prisoners and guards: Within days, the guards began abusing the prisoners, the prisoners became passive, and the study had to be called off. Zimbardo's research seemed to suggest that we all are capable of nasty, evil, and bad behavior.

The film avoids editorializing, letting the events speak for themselves, and as far as I can tell, it is basically accurate (Zimbardo was an adviser and has acknowledged being happy with the production, even though he is portrayed as so focused on his research — at least at the study's outset — that he lacks sensitivity to its negative impact on participants).

The biopic *Experimenter* was released in October. Its subject is Stanley Milgram, the Yale University psychologist who in 1961 studied the conflict between obedience and conscience by asking some participants to administer increasingly strong electrical shocks to others. Those who gave the shocks didn't know they weren't real until after the experiment, and 65 percent were willing to go to the maximum 450 volts when directed by an authority figure.

Anyone who has taken an introductory psychology course has also probably come across the earlier work by Muzafer Sherif on how competition can escalate into conflict. Sherif's 1954 Robbers Cave Experiment divided adolescent boys at a camp in Oklahoma into two "teams," the Eagles and the Rattlers, which vied with each other in performing certain tasks. It, too, had to be called off when violence erupted. The Robbers Cave experiment has not to my knowledge — yet? — been made into a "major motion picture."

That we are returning to such old projects highlights not only our heightened concern about violence, but also how we understand — and misunderstand — why presumably good people sometimes do very bad things. In one of our most familiar clichés, a miniature devil whispers in our ear, "Be nasty, violent, evil, bad," while a tiny angel murmurs in our other, "Be nice, peaceful, benevolent, good."

This devil/angel, bad/good, violent/peaceful dichotomy is a caricature, but it reflects a genuine divide, not only in the popular mind, but also between two traditionally contending scholarly perspectives: one, known as the view from the social sciences, emphasizes the role of social learning and experience generally; the other, from the biological sciences, focuses on instinct as encoded in our DNA.

Our glorious, riddle-infused species listens to both a devil and an angel, depending on who is speaking more loudly.

The social-science view doesn't quite map onto the angelic voice but is allied to it. It presumes that bad people aren't born that way but are coerced, seduced, or otherwise led into violent behavior by their experiences. It's the one supported by Sherif, Milgram, and Zimbardo.

The instinctivist viewpoint also holds that we are predisposed to violence because of our experience — but by a different kind of experience, not so much at the individual level as at that of our species, our evolutionary inheritance. We are not necessarily at fault when we act brutally, in that we can't choose our genetic background. But part of being human involves a regrettable susceptibility to what that little devil is whispering, which makes us close to being inherently devilish.

Both views lend themselves to oversimplifications of what drives human behavior, in general, and violence, in particular. Of late, scholars may be increasingly nuanced about this debate, but they — along with the general public — can still be guilty of thinking in extremes.

Today's instinctivist perspective has a long intellectual pedigree. Paradoxically, given Christian fundamentalist opposition to evolution today, early Western theology helped pave the way for evolutionary theory with its notion that people are "natural born killers," irrevocably stamped with original sin (albeit disobedience, not violence) and the "mark of Cain." Adding seemingly scientific fuel to that already incendiary perspective, the anatomist and paleontologist Raymond Dart claimed that his discovery of the first Australopithecine fossil in 1924 was evidence that we are descended from predatory apes, with a murderous impulse.

Trying to understand why soldiers returned over and over to the traumas they had suffered in war, Sigmund Freud made a similar connection, postulating a "drive" toward death that "would thus seem to express itself — though probably only in part — as an instinct of

destruction directed against the external world." In *On Aggression* (1963), the ethologist Konrad Lorenz claimed that aggression over resources, particularly among males, underlies much of our "natural" behavior. In recent years, the primatologist Richard Wrangham has interpreted his research on chimpanzee "wars" as buttressing the people-are-instinctively-violent perspective.

Equating predation with aggression is outmoded among modern students of animal behavior, who point out, for example, that in intraspecies predation, the aggressor usually attempts to appear inconspicuous and avoids "anger" in favor of businesslike efficiency; aggression functions with exaggerated threat and other characteristics associated with "anger." It is also rare for biologists to claim that genotype is the only factor leading to violent behavior. Nevertheless, the pseudobiological take on human-human killing remains alive and well — especially in the public mind.

By contrast, the received wisdom among social scientists, although stopping short of seeing human beings as essentially angelic, follows the lead of Zimbardo and Milgram emphasizing that our susceptibility to violence depends very much on circumstances. Zimbardo's goal was to examine the effect of arbitrarily being placed in a situation of authority or of helplessness. Although he planned the experiment to run for two weeks, he was forced to call it off after just six days, when the guards became abusive and potentially violent, and the prisoners increasingly woebegone and at risk. Zimbardo has repeatedly emphasized that both guards and prisoners were well-adjusted prior to their prison experience.

His insights into how even good people quickly can become bad proved eerily relevant in late 2003, when the Abu Ghraib prison scandal broke. Seemingly clean-cut American soldiers were found to have violently abused Iraqi prisoners. Zimbardo's book *The Lucifer Effect* (2007) revisited his Stanford study in light of the Abu Ghraib revelations. Summarizing the social-science perspective, it noted that the perpetrators were not inherently "bad apples" who spoiled the whole barrel. Rather, Abu Ghraib was a bad barrel that spoiled otherwise good apples.

Milgram's study revealed a comparable susceptibility to violence — or, as Zimbardo might put it, to evil. The research was initiated in the immediate aftermath of the widely publicized trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, in Jerusalem. In Milgram's own words, he sought to learn: "Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?" Furthermore, he asked, was there something unique to World War II-era Germans that led them to such behavior, or, if placed in similar circumstances, might Americans have acted similarly?

Milgram focused on how ordinary people (he recruited them from advertisements in New Haven newspapers) responded to orders from an authority figure (in this case, to punish subjects who erred in remembering a sequence of paired words). As Milgram put it in a 1973 article, "The Perils of Obedience," "Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not."

He concluded, "Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority."

But can circumstances countermand bad behavior? Unlike Milgram's and Zimbardo's studies — which are the ones most commonly revisited — Sherif's Robbers Cave Experiment ended on a hopeful note.

It closed when the warring teams of boys were told that a water truck, upon which all the campers depended, needed to be pushed up a long hill, necessitating that everyone — Eagles and Rattlers — cooperate toward the same end. They did so, and in the process, conflict withered. Cooperation toward another goal (renting a movie) generated further benevolent interactions, such that the eventual result was no less impressive, and if anything, more quickly evoked, than the prior antagonism: If group competition had essentially involved giving the devil a megaphone, cooperation enabled the angel to drown it out.

Where, then, does this leave us? Insofar as a rigidly instinctivist perspective threatens to consign us to the devil, depriving us of agency, it also threatens to diminish personal responsibility as well as the capacity for change. At the same time, a rigidly environmental perspective leaves us equally at the mercy of events: not evolutionary history, but those we experience.

Although the human mind yearns for simple dichotomous distinctions, reality rarely obliges. Iconic studies from the social sciences demonstrate a powerful role for social situation in generating violence, but they do not exclude an underlying innate contribution: A hard-core instinctivist might point out that the tendency to obey authority (à la Milgram) — and abuse it (Zimbardo) — could be part of our biologically inherited nature. And most social scientists give at least lip service to the role of evolutionary factors (notably recent attention to individual differences in "temperament") in how we process experience.

Indeed, biologists and social scientists increasingly agree that the old nature/nurture dichotomy deserves to be buried; violence, like all behavior, derives from an interaction of biological potential and environmental circumstance.

We can be peaceful and good, just as we can be violent and bad. As Alexander Pope described our dual nature in his poem "An Essay on Man" (which applies no less to Woman):

Created half to rise and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl'd:
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

Our glorious, jesting, riddle-infused species listens to both a devil and an angel, depending on who is speaking more loudly, which in turn depends both on circumstances as well as underlying inclinations.

Teasing apart the experiential versus inherent contributions to human violence is not only difficult but impossible: The devil and the angel are inextricably combined. If you watch *The Stanford Prison Experiment* or *Experimenter*, you might want to remember Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's observation in *The Gulag Archipelago*: "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

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