

— The roots of evil – Ch. 2

Transcription of the interview with Philip Zimbardo¹

2. Where does **evil** come from?

Evil is a product of situational forces, right?

It's a combination of... situation is local. But then above the situation, and this is one of the things I claim that I was one of the first to talk about, is situations are always part of a broader system. A system is political, it's legal, it's cultural. So any prison in the world is part of a correctional system. They call it correction system.

And so here's laws, here's rules, here's economics. So, for example, one of the reasons prison populations have increased in America is prisons are a business. And many prisons are in small towns and everybody in town has their job in the prison, as a cook, bringing the mail in, many, many, many jobs.

"So these towns make money having a prison"

And once a population starts going down, they start releasing prisoners, the people in that town go to their politicians, they go to Washington to say, "Send more prisoners here". And so now, for example, in big cities like Los Angeles with big, again, big minority community, we have many prisons, they ship them from Los Angeles to Northern California. So that means it's almost impossible for families to visit. It's like a 10-hour bus drive. And nobody cares about so prisoners never get visitors which is horrible.

"Systems are the combination of economics, political, cultural, and historical forces that shape any particular situation"

¹ Prof. Philip Zimbardo, Psychologist, professor emeritus at Stanford University.

Biology and evil: what about the role of DNA?

It's not clear to me the impact of biological factors. The only thing we know is in terms of personality, there was something called psychopathic personality. And this is about 1% of any population in the world. And what psychopathic personality really is it's really the inability to feel positive emotions, inability to feel guilt, inability to feel empathy.

In my research, I don't focus on or I don't really know the importance of biological genetic factors. Now again, you say, crime runs in families. Well, again, that's systemic. Crime runs in mafia families because you grow up in a family where what you want, you take what you want.

My whole focus has always been that we underestimate the power of situations because we overestimate the importance of free will because...

"...we want to believe in human dignity, that people chose their destiny"

Rather than from birth, depending where you live.

"Doesn't matter how smart you are, how good you are, how kind you are, how empathy and stuff"

So what I'm saying is it's simply important for all of us, general public as well as politicians, lawyers, others not to underestimate how much, who we are, what we are, what we do is influenced by the situations that we grew up in. And when the situations are negative, we should work hard to make them more positive.

Is it possible to teach moral behavior?

Oh, I think so. Oh sure.

I think for my example in the ghetto in the South Bronx, me and the children who didn't do evil things almost always had a mother who had a moral compass, who said, "This is right. This is wrong. You should not play with these boys. You should not do this. Don't take money from strangers. Before you make a decision, come home and talk to me and your father about it".

Clearly it should be the role of religion. It should be the role of the church to teach moral behavior.

I grew up Catholic. I was very religious much of my life and the problem with the church, Catholic church especially, is it's all about sin. It's all about deliver us from evil. Lead us not into temptation. It's nothing in the whole thing about goodness.

The church should be teaching moral behavior, and what they teach is not about doing good things, only about avoiding temptation.

You're praying to God and you say, "Lead us not into temptation". That's an error. It's not God's job, that's the devil's job. I talked to many religious people, they said it's a mistake. It's a mistake in the translations that if you're praying to God, you don't say, "Please God, don't lead me into temptation". Because God says, "It's not my job. It's not my job."

That's the devil's job. Let him do that work".

[to be continued]