K&A
Brand
Research

The Unmasking of Malice
The inside of human violence and cruelty.

Reading time 16 minutes

I wanted to write about the book: Don't Trust Your Gut, but recent events have motivated me to write about "evil". Normally not a suitable topic for a BrainCandy, as it is not really a relevant topic for brand, marketing or self-management, unless you follow the conspiracy theories about the alleged evil soul of all marketing.

A few hours before the terrorist attack on Israel, psychologist Rob Henderson published a [summary of](#) the book "Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty" by psychology professor Roy Baumeister. For me it was a real aha experience, as I myself adhered to some of the myths and evil. I only give the most important points here and have resisted the temptation to go directly into the Hamas terror attack. You will do that automatically when reading.

Baumeister's book is about the psychological understanding of evil, not a philosophical or moral treatise on what evil is. The most difficult part of it is to realise that one oneself would be capable of committing evil acts under certain circumstances. To understand evil, one should look at it through the eyes of the perpetrators. One way to avoid such acts is to understand that we are capable of such acts.
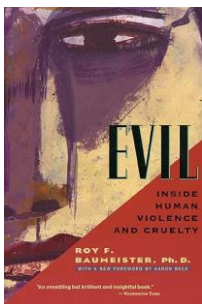
Evil is intentional

Baumeister defines evil as deliberately harming other people. He sees the loss of self-control as a possible cause of evil, since the unrestrained person still has control over his or her actions in an emergency situation. Psychotics usually do not have this. A conscious decision to act must be present in order to define evil as evil.

It is about the difference between a man who hits his wife in their sleep by an uncontrolled movement and a man who deliberately wants to hurt his wife and hits her in the face while she is sleeping. Only the latter is guilty.

The myth of pure evil

Baumeister is primarily concerned with the psychology of offenders and the myth that there are people who are evil to begin with. This myth has three beliefs:

1. Most evil deeds are deliberately committed by people who know they are evil

2. Most evildoers take pleasure in the damage they do

3. The victims are mostly innocent and good

People do not ask what unfortunate experiences led good and decent men like Josef Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot or Mao Zedong away from the path of virtue.

Rather, we ask how such obviously evil men could have gained so much power in the first place.
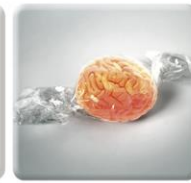
This idea is often used in fictional stories to create a clear division between good and evil. In reality, however, things are more complex. Many perpetrators act maliciously for various reasons and not always consciously. However, the myth of pure evil allows people to justify their own actions and condemn others, while portraying themselves as innocent and good, despite possible weaknesses.

People have plenty of reasons to be violent

With some social phenomena, people have difficulty distinguishing between explanation and justification. Baumeister: "I do not want to excuse or find excuses for people who commit terrible acts. However, I want to understand them, and therefore it is necessary to understand the excuses, rationalisations, trivialisations and ambiguities that characterise their state of mind".

Most perpetrators do not see their actions as evil and justify them in various ways. People do not need reasons to be violent - they already have enough triggers. Thank God for factors like self-control that prevent everyone from being violent. When these inhibitions are removed, violence can occur. Alcohol is often involved in violent crime, but it does not create aggression, it only reduces internal inhibitions. A high probability of being punished, on the other hand, is a wonderful amplifier of self-control.

The gap between victims and perpetrators

Baumeister describes the gap between victims and perpetrators, especially in terms of their memories of past events and the way they justify their actions. Victims of injustice remember what happened for a long time after it is over. Perpetrators, on the other hand, usually forget within a short period of time.

Victims often emphasise the senseless violence of perpetrators, while the latter blame external factors for their behaviour. The view of evil as sadistic is held by victims, while perpetrators often see it as an unfortunate by-product of circumstances.

These patterns are often observed in cases of ethnic conflict. Baumeister points out that violence can break out more easily when people focus on the differences between their own group and other groups.

Believe all victims

The question of who to believe - the victims or the perpetrators - is not easy to answer. In one study, participants were randomly assigned to 'victim' and 'perpetrator' roles and had to retell a story. It was found that both 'victims' and 'perpetrators' twisted the facts to the same extent. 'Victims' made an effort to make the crime seem bigger, while 'offenders' reinforced mitigating circumstances.

Perpetrators often see their crimes as complex and morally ambiguous and completely justified. Victims often see the world through the myth of pure evil. What happened to them was horrible, senseless and inexplicable.

Virtuous victims

Many perpetrators see themselves as victims. Baumeister goes into various examples, such as the serial killer John Wayne Gacy or the Nazis, who presented their acts as a reaction to a supposed victimisation. Baumeister notes that perpetrators can use this strategy to generate sympathy and reject responsibility for their actions.

Other research in the book documents how perpetrators of genocide and ethnic violence perceive themselves as victims of mistreatment and injustice.
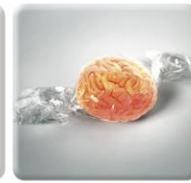
Hitler and the Nazis famously portrayed Germans as victims of "nefarious" Jews.

There are two advantages when perpetrators see themselves as victims. People tend to view those who have suffered in a positive light. For a perpetrator who wants to avoid blame, presenting himself as a victim is a clever strategy.

In this context, victimisation is often seen as an acceptable explanation for one's own misdeeds. By claiming to be a victim, one is off the hook. The victim role seems to be the focus of communication strategies in the Middle East.

Mutual escalation

Violence is often the result of mutual provocation. Studies show that most homicides involve escalating insults from both sides until one person kills the other.

In half of the cases of domestic violence, both parties were violent. Baumeister says: "The idea that people just start beating up their spouses out of the blue and for no apparent reason doesn't fit with what is known about human nature." He stresses that people only become violent when they believe they have been attacked. Many misinterpret harmless remarks as threats. But the fact that they perceive such threats refutes the idea that people indiscriminately erupt in violence for no reason.

Understanding the reasons for a person's actions does not exonerate them!

1. Evil as a means to an end

The book describes four types of evil, focusing on **instrumental evil.** This is the infliction of harm as a means to an end. People who do instrumental evil fare relatively well compared to other perpetrators of violence.

However, research shows that instrumental violence rarely works in the long run and often has negative consequences. Examples include bank robberies, which yield little and are usually solved, or the use of torture by governments because the victims fabricate what they think the torturers want to hear. Fictitious crimes are admitted and bystanders are denounced. Like the blood purges of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Domestic violence can also fall under this category when men try to consolidate their position in the relationship.

Which happens more often in constellations where women are superior to their men because they earn more money or are better educated.

2. Idealism: The most harmful cause of evil

This is the most disturbing and tragic cause, because perpetrators are driven by the belief that they are doing something good. They commit violence not for selfish reasons, but to improve society for others.

In a twisted way, idealism uses people's moral intuitions against them. If you harm someone to steal their money, you might feel guilty even if you needed the money. But if you harm someone because you think they are an obstacle on the way to paradise, then any sense of guilt is suppressed.

This helps explain how ordinary people became murderous in the regimes of the twentieth century. They believed themselves to be moral. And the more evil deeds they committed, the more moral they thought they were.

Idealists often see their victims as evil in order to maintain their own image of goodness and suppress feelings of guilt. Groups are more violent than individuals in this regard.

Groups tend to reserve their strongest hostility not for enemies but for apostates in order to maintain group solidarity. The book lists one massacre after another, including the Crusades, the French Revolution, and the communist and fascist regimes of the twentieth century.

Idealistic evil tends to have unforeseen consequences, side effects and repercussions that weaken or overturn the very ideals that the perpetrators hoped to promote.

3. Threatened egoism

The third cause of evil is threatened egoism. It is shown that people who are sensitive to perceived threats are more likely to commit acts of violence. These individuals are hypersensitive to attacks on their self-image and react with anger when they feel they are not respected. Studies show that violent people often perceive hostility and aggression from others even when it is not objectively present.

Housewives are particularly affected by violence? Not true. Apparently, husbands of non-working housewives rarely feel threatened. Women who earn more are more threatened by violence. Men with high qualifications but poor careers engage in six times more violence than the average.

Moreover, the book refutes the assumption that low self-esteem is a cause of violence. In fact, perpetrators of violence are usually people with high but unstable self-esteem. Narcissistic people are particularly prone to violence when they feel their positive self-assessment is threatened. Those who are least prone to hostility have high and stable self-esteem.

4. Sadistic Evil

The fourth cause of evil is sadism, this comes as close to "pure evil" as any of the causes. Sadism is the sincere pleasure in inflicting harm.

Baumeister explains that "sadistic pleasure" is genuine, unusual, acquired only gradually and responsible for only a minority of evil". Studies on BDSM show that there are far more masochists than sadists. In fact, a common problem is that a person wants to play the role of masochist but has difficulty finding someone to play the dominant role. This is a gap in the market that dominatrices in sex work fill - apparently at premium prices.

Where evil begins

The assumption that poverty encourages crime is wrong. Most poor people do not commit crimes and there are many rich criminals. For any plausible source of crime, the vast majority of people exposed to that source are law-abiding. Most people who play violent video games do not commit violence. Most people who have been abused do not abuse.

Violent acts are often due to a lack of inner discipline. To prevent violence, the reasons that encourage it must be eliminated. Lack of clarity in rules can lead to people doing the wrong thing. Recurrent damage to property by climate activists under the eyes of the police and the reluctance of the police to intervene in banned anti-Semitic demonstrations are examples.

Violence in media and games has no influence on most people - but a small number of highly aggressive people are influenced by it.

How evil spreads: Escalation

"An eye for an eye"? Most people would prefer to inflict greater damage than they themselves have suffered. If someone injures a person's eye, the person would prefer their attacker to lose two eyes.

This often leads to mutual escalation. Another important factor in the spread of evil is escaping punishment.

We tend to believe that engaging in murder or torture would have immediate and severe consequences, not only for the victims but also for ourselves. In short, perpetrators are often surprised at how easily they get away with a repulsive act and subsequently realise that their previous restraint was exaggerated.

At every step of the Nazi holocaust, Hitler and his comrades-in-arms paused to gauge the world's reaction. They were often stunned and heartened by the absence of an international outcry over their actions. From the silence of the world, they concluded that everyone tacitly approved of what they were doing.

Social pressure

People enforce unpopular norms to show that they are adhering to them out of genuine conviction and not because of social pressure. Some groups may be more vulnerable to unpopular norms because individuals are afraid of being seen as not sincere enough.

People publicly insist on strict adherence to the party line while secretly questioning it. People in such situations often do everything they can to avoid appearing to question the movement's repressive measures.

A group can commit acts of violence that reflect a hatred that is stronger than that which the members actually feel. This is because each of them tries to convince the others that they really support the cause.

Dealing with feelings of guilt

Guilt is the pain that comes from hurting other people. Guilt plays a role in violence prevention because it prevents people from committing harmful acts. People often rationalise their evil acts to convince themselves that they are good. The mental gymnastics that people engage in to justify their evil acts are often grotesque.

Perpetrators desperately want to believe their rationalisations and it is enough if there is a superficial plausibility.

There is a story from the Rwandan genocide.

The children of the fallen and the deported were killed. The rationalisation: Orphans were thus saved from a difficult life.

In groups, such rationalisations have a particular effect, as people reassure each other that their actions would be appropriate to the cause. This makes them immune to criticism from outside.

Everyday evil

The main point of the book is that most people who do evil think they are good. The aim of this book is to understand the psychology of violent criminals so that we can reduce the likelihood of becoming one ourselves.

When we learn about evil, we discover that many acts of violence are caused by motives that seem quite normal.

This should encourage us all to be careful whenever we have seemingly reasonable justifications to coerce or hurt other people.

For me, two insights were particularly moving. On the one hand, to realise how strongly the environmental conditions, i.e. the contexts, can produce malicious actions and that this happens much more intensively in the context of groups in a self-reinforcing way.

And to be confirmed once again how, in part incredibly naive and in part fundamentally idealistic, German politics in particular has for many years seemed to like to believe in the good in people, but continues to neglect the timely enforcement of applicable norms.

Driving children off toboggan hills and pensioners off park benches during the lockdown worked amazingly well. Clan crime, Görlitzer Park in Berlin, idealistic activists, anti-Semitic crimes, etc. seemed more of a nuisance.

Data protection seems to take precedence over the protection of society. Current election trends will hopefully be interpreted correctly by centrist politicians. Motivating more self-control is probably the best strategy against evil.

Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to order.

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The author
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