

## THE MARDI GRAS EFFECT

Humans everywhere maintain some system or other of fairness, rules, punishment, law, and reward. When wrong is done, punishment must be inflicted to make it right. Humans believe in just deserts, which relies on the idea that the world has a kind of moral equilibrium that must be maintained through reward and restitution. The values of our consensus reality are internalized as necessary for that equilibrium. This internalization creates the Freudian superego – better known as a conscience -- which is generally pleased when we comply with society's ethics and unhappy when we don't. The reward centers of our brain, the nucleus accumbens and the caudate nucleus, fire up to thank us for playing fair.

But our sense of justice derives from local custom, politics, prejudice, and tradition, all of which undergird our ethics. These laws are sometimes ridiculous. In Connorsville, Wisconsin, a man is legally prohibited from shooting a gun while his female partner is having an orgasm. In California, it is a misdemeanor to shoot at any kind of game from a moving vehicle, unless the target is a whale. In New York City, it is actually illegal to shake a dust mop out a window. 1 “Justice is at best a very distant ideal toward which different tribes aspire, moving by various, circuitous, and culturally determined routes,” as one writer puts it.<sup>2</sup> The history of violence in the world is the history of incompatible concepts of justice clashing against one another. Each side believes in its own version of the just world hypothesis, which posits that people get what they deserve. But what they deserve isn't altogether clear. Though little evidence of this just world exists, our moral organ requires this idealized notion in order to help us make

sense of things, avoid chaos, and maintain control. The trouble is that believing people get what they deserve, and deserve what they get, often leads to blaming the victims of tragedies and exonerating those whom the courtroom favors. The illusion of justice is sometimes enough.

It is the arbitrary nature of customs and laws that keep lawyers rich, penitentiaries full, and ethics columnists busy at newspapers. We need help untangling the knots of personal interpretation. Mostly, these quandaries don't have to do with major violations – very few of us are contemplating murder, grand larceny, or the torture of innocents – but instead center on minor moral infractions. We sweat the small stuff because it's the hardest. We torment ourselves over small-scale rules because those are the ones that city hall can monkey around with and tell us it's fair because they said so. "The rules of equity or justice depend entirely on the particular state and condition in which men are placed, and owe their origin and existence to that utility,"<sup>3</sup> Hume explains.

Which brings us to another jumping-off point. Do we obey laws that are patently unfair in hopes of remaining good citizens, or follow the dictates of conscience outside the walls of local opprobrium? As the Milgram experiment famously proved, obedience can be ghastly. Begun at Yale University in 1961, three months after the start of the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, Stanley Milgram's experiment was devised to answer the question: "Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders; are we right in calling them accomplices?" His findings stunned the world. A full 65 percent of the participants in the Milgram experiment were willing to inflict a maximum electrical shock of 450 volts to innocent people, despite their screams, simply because they were told to do so by an authority figure.<sup>4</sup>

Then the infamous Stanford prison experiment went even further. In 1971, psychologist Philip Zimbardo designed an experiment to demonstrate how situational authority and power could make good people do evil things. Two dozen men were recruited to participate in what they were told would be a two-week prison simulation. Predominantly white and middle class, these men had been deemed psychologically stable before the experiment began. A mock jail was built in the basement of Stanford's Jordan Hall. Zimbardo would play the superintendent. The men playing guards were provided with a weapon – a wooden baton -- and a uniform. They were given mirrored sunglasses to prevent eye contact. Participants who'd chosen to play the part of prisoners were "arrested" at their homes and charged with armed robbery. The local Palo Alto police department assisted Zimbardo with the arrests and conducted full booking procedures on the prisoners, which included fingerprints and mug shots. Then the captives were transported to the mock prison where they were strip-searched and given their new identity: serial numbers. Prisoners were forced to wear ill-fitting smocks and stocking caps. Guards called prisoners by their assigned numbers, which were sewn on their uniforms. A chain around their ankles reminded them of their roles as prisoners. During a prearrest orientation, the guards were told that they could not physically harm the prisoners but they could use intimidation and fear to make prisoners feel powerlessness.

The experiment quickly grew out of hand, as Zimbardo recounts in his book, *The Lucifer Effect*. Almost immediately, the guards' protocol began to break down. After prisoners rebelled on the second day, the guards grew increasingly cruel. (A full one-third of them were described later as exhibiting genuine sadistic tendencies.) There were

physical assaults by guards; some prisoners were forced to go nude, *a la* Abu Graib, and to simulate homosexual sex. Guards shot prisoners with fire extinguishers and allowed sanitary conditions to decline. Some prisoners were prevented from relieving themselves while others could not empty their sanitation buckets. Zimbardo concluded the experiment early – angering most of the guards -- when a student of his, Christina Maslach (whom he later married), objected to the appalling conditions of the prison. It's not surprising that a woman put a screeching halt to this testosterone-fest. Of the fifty outside persons who had seen the prison, Maslach was the only one who questioned its morality, Zimbardo later admitted. After only six days instead of the planned two weeks, the Stanford Prison Experiment was shut down.

How does something like this happen? Can a riding crop and pair of mirrored sunglasses really turn a good person bad? The answer is yes -- and no. We know that we have a tendency to overestimate our own character strength while underestimating the power of situations. This has something to do with forgetting that our personal identities are socially situated. "We are *where* we live, eat, work, and make love," Zimbardo has written.<sup>5</sup> Although you probably think of yourself as having a consistent personality across time and space, that's simply untrue. You are not the same person at home as you are at the office; trundling through Macy's or making love; drinking with friends or lost and alone in a foreign city. Moving from one situation to another, one role to the next, we adjust our definition of right and wrong. Please read the previous sentence twice. In a book called *Snakes in Suits*, Paul Babiak and Robert Hare remind us that "many traits that may be desirable in a corporate context, such as ruthlessness, lack of social conscience, and single-minded devotion to success, would be considered psychopathic

outside of it.”<sup>6</sup> We make these mercurial character adjustments with surprising ease. Our values and behavior can be altered by anything from plastic surgery to changing our name, from joining a new religion to taking an online alias, joining a gang, or moving to a different neighborhood.

That’s how malleable, and how surgically alterable, moral identity can be. Americans, in particular, like to think of ourselves as rugged individualists with characters hewn from Wyoming granite, but we’re actually more like Play-Doh. The discovery of mirror neurons alone is enough to bust forever the myth of a constant, unwavering self. We play different roles throughout our lives. Our roles have different parameters. We adjust the definitions of right and wrong, ascribing different characters to different situations. Just look at Tony Soprano. When Tony says it’s “just business” – making some enemy “sleep with the fishes” – we almost believe him. Tony tells us it’s nothing personal, really, as he throws the body into the river. Sitting at home in front of the TV set, does anyone really hate Tony Soprano? Of course not! He suffers inside his mobster role (those therapy scenes are killers sometimes), and besides, Carmela, his long-suffering wife, is such a sweetheart. Murder becomes good television.

This is because we compartmentalize. Compartmentalization is what allows us to play different roles and act like different people in different circumstances. There are four ways that we can disengage morally from destructive or evil things we do, four methods of compartmentalization. We can 1) reframe our behavior as virtuous; 2) distance ourselves from the harm we inflict by minimizing personal responsibility; 3) change the way we think about the harm itself; or 4) blame the victims or deem them unworthy of humane treatment. <sup>7</sup> Most of us have employed all these evasion tactics at

one time or other. In situations where the cognitive controls that usually guide socially acceptable behavior are blocked, suspended, or distorted, conscience seems to fizzle out. Anonymity is especially enticing and dangerous; any setting that hides people's identities, including virtual reality, tends to reduce our sense of personal responsibility, care, and decorum. Just try putting on a mask. If you've never hidden your face in public, you're missing a chance to know your demons. Remember the moment in *Lord of the Flies* when Jack covers himself with war paint and screams with delight at his own reflection?

He looked in astonishment, no longer at himself but at an awesome stranger. He spilt the water and leapt to his feet, laughing excitedly. Beside the pool his sinewy body held up a mask that drew their eyes and appalled them. He began to dance and his laughter became a bloodthirsty snarling. He capered toward Bill, and the mask was a thing on its own, behind which Jack hid, liberated from shame and self-consciousness. 8

Changing appearance can open doors to our contradictory nature. The mask can sometimes make the man. Zimbardo describes how our Dionysian impulses of lust and uninhibited release are pitted against Apollonian traits of constraint, reason, and social conformity. "Dionysus was the god of drunkenness, the god of insanity, the god of sexual frenzy and battle lust," he wrote after The Stanford Prison Experiment. "Dionysus's dominion includes all states of being that entail loss of self-awareness and rationality, the suspension of linear time, and the abandonment of the self to those urges in human nature that overthrow codes of behavior and public responsibility."<sup>9</sup>

If you've ever been to Mardi Gras, you've seen this decadent force at play. Anything goes on Bourbon Street on a hot afternoon in February. I once saw a pair of half-naked leather queens rolling around on the sidewalk, spanking each other with enormous glee in the broad New Orleans daylight, drunken and drugged to the teeth,

while a cop on horseback just sat there, smiling and joking with a group of bible belt tourists, powdered ladies in candy-colored pantsuits supporting their drunken, cheering husbands. The contradictions within this scene were tragic, brilliant, and perverse. Such a gaggle of white bread-church folk would be unlikely to condone a homosexual marriage if their eternal lives depended on it. But on Bourbon Street on a hot afternoon, with three beers under their belts before lunch, who the hell cared? Smack that bottom! Lick that boot! Stick that where the sun don't shine! These conservative tourists had ditched their own scruples along with their bags at the Super 8.

Situational power takes hold of us in new situations in which we have no recall of previous guidelines for behavior. When we're taken out of our familiar context, when the reward structures are different and expectations are violated, our personalities cannot function according to results from past experiences. Deprived of ethical reference points, we're unable to predict what matters and what doesn't. In situations where we do have a role to play, with rigid boundaries circumscribing what is appropriate, expected, and reinforced in a given setting, the values that guide us in normal mode can hold sway. Even so, compartmentalization allows us to sort conflicting aspects of our behavior into different mental "role baskets" that do not spill into one another. This is how a "good husband can . . . be a guiltless adulterer; a saintly priest can then be a lifelong pederast; a kindly farmer can then be a heartless slave master," Zimbardo notes.<sup>10</sup> We use roles to absolve ourselves of guilt. Overestimating our reasoning powers, and underestimating the force of situations, we're frequently surprised by our own extreme contradictions. We oversimplify our own complexity and construct imaginary, seemingly impermeable boundaries between good and evil, us and them, the damned and the saved, the straight

and the not straight. But this illusion of opposites sets us up for a fall. Believing ourselves immune to situational forces, we let down our guard and fall prey to unexpected ulterior impulses.

It's wise to bear this closely in mind. It's helpful to be aware that our personalities have movable parts, and that some situations are simply more powerful than our inconstant "self" can manage. Sophie has to make a choice, sometimes; we're frequently outgunned by life. I know a woman who, while hiding from Nazi soldiers in a Polish basement, was forced to choose between sacrificing herself, and fifteen others, or smothering her own baby daughter. She was trapped, the SS were in the house, the weeks-old infant was crying, and this group of terrified Jews was moments away from being discovered. She put a pillow over her baby's face. This brave woman survived the war, and lived to see her other three children grow up, marry, and give her a beautiful crop of grandchildren. Was she wrong to sacrifice one life for fifteen? Was she evil for doing what she did? Or was this woman a hero? Did the dog-eat-dog reality of war change what good meant – or could mean? What sacrifice could be more agonizing than a mother's for her child? Was she noble or was she a murderer? Or was she, as I would describe her, both? For the Inuits, and some other cultures, infanticide is morally permissible. They justify the killing of children on the grounds of limited resources. To allow these children to live would infringe on their own ethic of care.