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Deliver Us from Evil - Police Tactical Psychology Bulletin

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The Tactical Psychology Bulletin

Mental Tools for Police Success

By

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Deliver Us from “Evil”

There is no *hero* or *protector* without a menace from which to protect or save others. Therefore, it is essential to understanding our *adversaries* better so that we may better appreciate our service to our citizens

In the 1980s, late psychologists *Carl Rogers* and *Rollo May* (who were friends and colleagues), discussed the “problem of evil” in a written exchange in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. I am drawing from their exchange here to provide some insight for officers in our conceptualization of “evil” that we all confront regularly in our work. I am interested in confronting “evil” in this bulletin because I think that it is an integral aspect of our work and experience as public protectors. An essential concept that often is avoided because of the religious theological baggage that seems inseparable from the term. I would like to join Rollo May and another psychologist Carl Goldberg in conceptualizing the word in a way that is useful for us without delving into theological dogmatics.

Law Enforcement is essentially a battle of good versus evil, thematically speaking. What is important in Rollo May’s and Carl Roger’s exchange is how we understand good and evil in terms of human nature within the framework of psychology. May clarifies that he refers to the *daimonic* in his correction of Rogers claiming it is a reference to the *demonic*. May says, “The daimonic is the urge in every being to affirm itself, perpetuate and increase itself...[the reverse side] of the same affirmation is what empowers our creativity.” In other words, the human psyche is powerful and is the driving force in society in technology, art,

language, and other aspects of culture. But a paradox is inherent in the *daimonic* because the way it is channeled brings about different results; good or bad. Rogers’ position is that people are essentially good and the bad that they do or become are merely impacts and injuries from life-experiences. There is no disagreement that abuse, trauma, and impoverished environments affect people negatively in their minds, bodies, and souls. The issue at hand is, “can people ‘be’ evil or is it a matter of bad learning?”

Carl Goldberg has developed the construct of the malevolent personality which coincides a lot with Lonnie Athen’s work on the development of violent criminals. Goldberg’s information comes from clinical practice while Athens’ is grounded in his research conducted in penal institutions. In each case, the malefic or malevolent (*synonym: evil*) person has been cultivated as such through life experience and “becomes” it through thinking, acting and believing in opposition to “good.” It is supported by the work of both of these scholars that the “becoming” of a violent person is intercausal or a constellation of experiences suffered and enacted by the person in his or her world among other people. May points out that the malevolent person is not the *fault* of a culture alone, but it is the *criminal culture* that is constituted by criminal minds collectively. The impact of poor parenting plays a role in the formation of the juvenile delinquent, but the rascal takes action against his or her world that cultivates his or her own criminal-self-identity.

We come full circle through this discussion about self-identity as a police officer and its relationship to the “evil” person. When an officer uses force against another human being, that force is not only

legally and morally justified by the circumstances, but must be psychologically meaningful to the officer.

Police officers initially pursue their careers in law enforcement to do meaningful work. There are things that can de-motivate officers and some become disillusioned. Nonetheless, people are meaning-making beings and we want our worlds to make sense. Therefore, when an officer admonishes, makes arrests or uses force against another person, it *must* be for a reason and intended toward some productive outcome. If things were this black and white, many psychosocial challenges in the officers' personal and professional lives would likely diminish significantly. But human undertakings are often very complex and paradoxical in the way that they unfold because of the way meanings are made through definitions and explanations we give to them. The initial learning models in educational psychology and the medical model of psychiatry serve as examples.

Most people have heard of the "nature vs. nurture" debate about human development. Are we largely determined genetically or are we a product of our environmental stimuli? This is the main theme of the Eddie Murphy film *Trading Places*. Carl Rogers' position on evil follows the learning psychology tradition of believing people are "by nature" good and become bad through psychosocially damaging experiences and learning bad lessons. They misunderstand the world and are in-turn misunderstood by it too. This places the blame on social milieu or culture at the expense of honoring the agency and choice of the individual.

The problem that May points out to Rogers is that cultures do constitute the individuals within by imposing conformity. On the other hand, people are the source of culture so that it is a social construction. It is intercausal with human beings at the origins and source of either way you look at it.

Psychiatrist Thomas Szasz is a well-known critique of the medicalization of problems. He points out that everything from shyness to gambling are

"mental illnesses" which are now days dealt treated mostly with psychotropic drugs. Psychotropic drugs are big business and the mental health community is highly influenced by "Big Pharma" corporations that are richly rewarded for their drug sales; in terms of billions. Medicalization disempowers people in their problems and also blames biochemistry for every misbehavior or disruption in social functioning. The implications for the law are severe because the "insanity defense" is also a fairly big business for attorneys and expert witnesses. That is not to say that people don't have "real" problems, but that they are not necessarily medical in nature.

Tragedy strikes the officer who uses deadly force against the "mentally ill" or "mentally deranged." The medical model classifies these people as "victims," but police officers shoot "bad guys." Who says their sick? Modern society doesn't say people are "evil" anymore. We look at pedophilia as "sick in the head" rather than "evil." At least mainstream society does. Or the chronic criminal is simply a product of poverty, impoverished education, or a broken home. But this appeal to the learning model strips the criminal's own power to change away from him or her.

My point, taken from May, is that people have the capacity to do "evil" and become "evil." There is always a neighbor or relative that will tell the story of the kindness or good nature of the violent criminal. Unfortunately, any number of kindnesses cannot erase the murder, rape or malevolence done by "bad guys." Malevolent people cultivate themselves and are therefore shaped by the worlds in which they live. They also constitute the criminal culture by their very participation.

Athens found that people who commit acts of violence and rage do not "lose their minds" or fall into "crimes of passion." Rather, they say things like, "if I ever catch her with another guy, I'll put a bullet in her." Additionally, they do lesser acts of violence or cruelties which are often brushed with such sentiments as "...has a bad temper" or

“everyone has his or her limits.” As cops, we’ve all heard the discounts, excuses and qualifiers given by and for the self-proclaimed “bad asses” that we deal with regularly.

We become what we practice. By practice, I mean that which we think about, talk about, and perform is “who” we are and also the cultivating processes of “who we are *becoming*. So it has it has also been shown by researchers about violent criminals. Athens found that some criminals actually become the “insane” among criminals. These are those few that become so malefic that even other violent criminals consider them “evil.” These are the malefic types that, when shot and killed by an officer, are likely to be the easier shoots for the officer to accept.

I hope in this bulletin to begin a conversation about “evil” or malevolence among police. Hitler is *the* exemplar of evil but we still can show acts of kindness and charity to children, women, and others. However, it was his capacity for cruelty and indifference to people he found objectionable that makes him our embodiment of evil still today. The capacity for “evil” is what May wrote about and we all of *some* capacity to do wrong. However, the police officer must deal with the situation-at-hand and deal with people according to the state-of-affairs’ requirements to protect life and property from destruction. Confronting “evil” is an immediate experience.

“Evil” is the destructive side of the *daimonic* aspect of humanity. The creative, expansive, and adventurous is the growth producing side of it. Often times, confrontations with “evil” build our resilience and capacity to deal with it. But when we use misplaced definitions like, “mental illness,” or “disadvantaged,” or “emotionally driven beyond one’s limits” as a means to explain away responsibility and agency, we rob even those suspects of their agency and power of choice. By doing so, we take from them their responsibility and with it their power to change; Excuses enable “evil.”

As police officers, we can think about, talk about, and practice to our betterment. Being a good officer is beyond tactical and procedural competence. It is a way of *Being* or living. It is in the way that we relate with others and in the sacrifices we make for them; citizens, family, and friends. However, in the face of “evil,” we must strike with resolve. While accidents and errors may occur on occasion, we must accept “evil” as the only reason why police learn, practice and use force in the first place. Our instincts that alert us to “something hinky” is not perfect but should not be ignored, according to Gavin De Becker. “Evil” is primarily deceptive and destructive. It exists in a continuum of depth and severity.

Therefore, whether it is an isolated evil act or “evil personified” in a career violent actor, we are charged with the duty to intervene. But we have to be ready to act and live with our actions through understanding that there are things we can control, not control, and only influence. Most of the time, things lie somewhere only within our influence.

Send comments/question to:

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