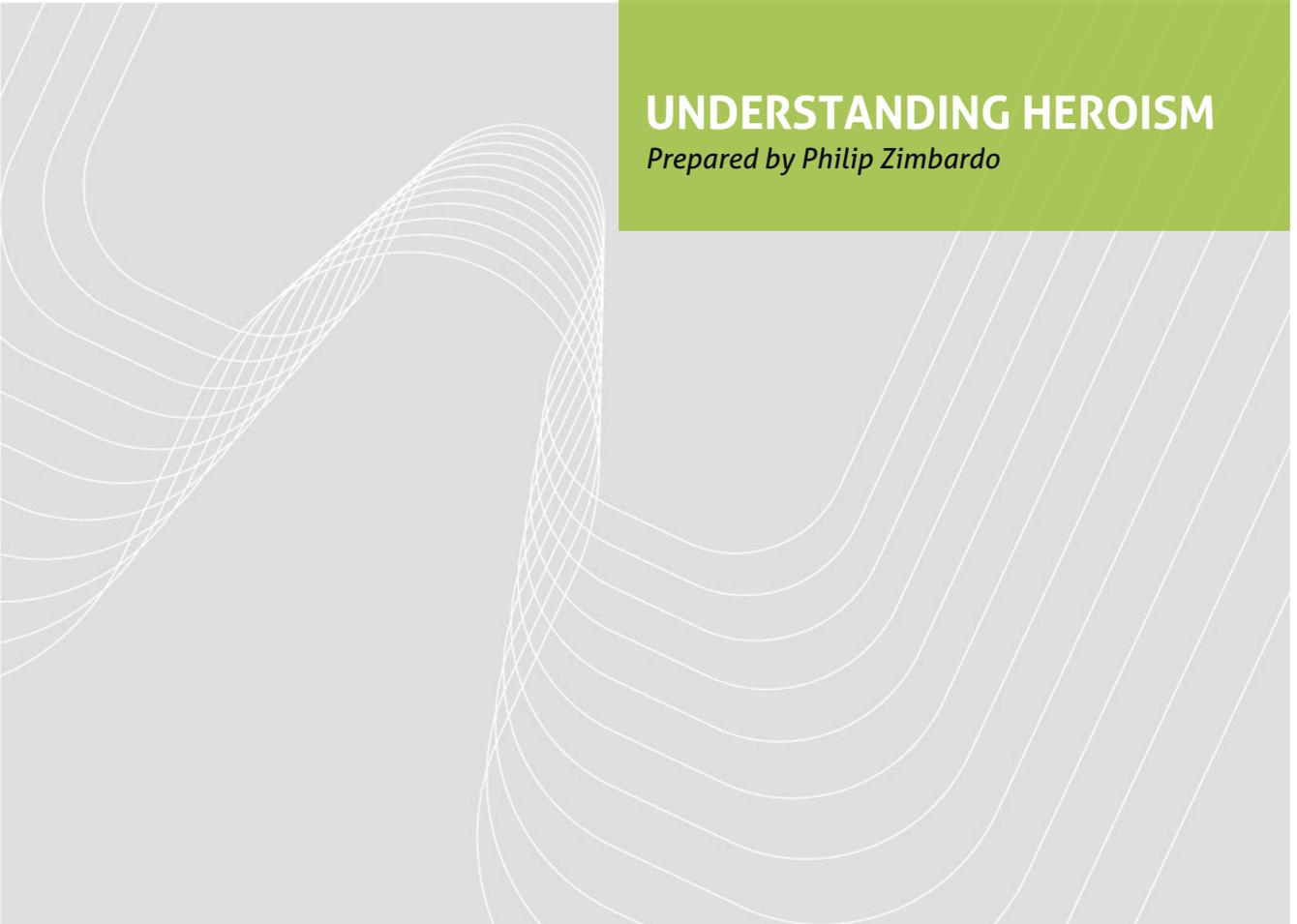




Heroic
Imagination
project



UNDERSTANDING HEROISM

Prepared by Philip Zimbardo

Understanding Heroism

"True heroism is remarkably sober, very undramatic. It is not the urge to surpass all others at whatever cost, but the urge to serve others at whatever cost."

- Arthur Ashe

What is a "hero" exactly?

Heroes are people who transform compassion (a personal virtue) into heroic action (a civic virtue). In doing so, they put their best selves forward in service to humanity. The Heroic Imagination Project defines a hero as an individual or a network of people that take action on behalf of others in need, or in defense of integrity or a moral cause.

Heroic action is:

1. Engaged in voluntarily;
2. Conducted in service to one or more people or the community as a whole;
3. Involving a risk to physical comfort, social stature, or quality of life; and
4. Initiated without the expectation of material gain.

This is the definition of hero is what we use at HIP as the basis of our organization and as the litmus test for our research. We acknowledge that there are many interpretations of the word hero and the term heroic action as well as many varieties of heroism. We are also aware that many people can be on a heroic journey doing daily acts of goodness in preparation for enacting major heroic deeds when the opportunity arises.

Social Attributes

The very concept of heroism has been open to debate and controversy for centuries, given that it is culturally and historically contextualized. It also has been confused with related, possibly contributing factors such as altruism, compassion, and empathy, and identified with popular celebrities, role models, and media-created "fantastic heroes" of the comic book genre. Heroism and heroic status are always social attributions. Someone or some group other than the actor confers that honor on the person and the deed. There must be social consensus about the significance and meaningful consequence of an act for it to be deemed heroic, and for its agent to be called a hero.

Why do we need heroes?

"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

- Sir Edmund Burke

"We must learn that passively to accept an unjust system is to cooperate with that system, and thereby to become a participant in its evil."

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

Heroic action is the antidote to evil, and it starts with heroic imagination. At its core, it is the personal and social creation of a "bright line" of morality on a given issue that is defended, upheld and promoted despite a host of pressures to do otherwise. Perhaps those who earn the hero designation have developed a keener sense of "moral clarity," as philosopher Susan Neiman

might assert. Some have described the fundamental contribution of heroes as "saving the soul of a nation."

What is evil?

A behavioral definition of evil:

On an individual level: the intentional exercise and abuse of power to psychologically harm, physically hurt, or mortally destroy someone else's life. It can also function to ruin someone's reputation, social status/ position, or career.

On a systemic level: the intentional exercise and abuse of power by organizations to psychologically harm, physically hurt, and/ or commit crimes against humanity. Institutions at systemic levels engage in immoral, fraudulent, illegal, and even genocidal actions under the cover of legal loopholes and plausible deniability for any personal accountability. Further, in both public and private administrative sectors "technical rationality" and legality have replaced ethical and moral concerns and analyses of individual responsibility. This new form of evil has been termed "administrative evil."

The most common form of evil is inaction. It's knowing you can do a necessary good deed and choosing not to.

Everyday Heroism is the Antidote to Evil

Often we imagine heroism as risking or sacrificing one's life, but there are many less dramatic acts of heroism that occur everyday in the world around us. Everyday heroism is a term we use to describe acts of heroism, however small, that are taken on a regular basis.

Do Heroes Stand Above the Rest?

The historical view of the hero suggests that there is something innately special about heroes. Historian Hughes-Hallett writes, "There are men, wrote Aristotle, so godlike, so exceptional, that they naturally, by right of their extraordinary gifts, transcend all moral judgment or constitutional control: 'There is no law which embraces men of that caliber: they are themselves law.'" One definition of heroism arises from this Aristotelian conception, "It is the expression of a superb spirit. It is associated with courage and integrity and a disdain for the cramping compromises by means of which the un-heroic majority manage their lives – attributes that are widely considered noble... [Heroes are] capable of something momentous– the defeat of an enemy, the salvation of a race, the preservation of a political system, the completion of a voyage – which no one else could have accomplished."

Traditional Emphasis on Physical Risk

Most well known examples of heroism have emphasized acts of courage that involved bravery, gallantry, and risk of serious physical injury or death; military heroes, and those who give their lives in service professions - police and fire fighters - have long been accorded special recognition in most cultures. Their acts of heroism typically involve bravery and gallantry, which combine to become courage. Their deeds involve sacrificing life and limb in the service to their country or fellows that is above and beyond the traditional standard in their profession. Currently accepted conceptions of heroism emphasize primarily its physical risk without adequately addressing other components of heroic acts, such as nobility of purpose and non-violent acts of personal sacrifice, including those individuals who challenge institutionalized injustice, deception, and fraud.

Cultural Context

Definitions of heroism are always culture-bound and time-bound. To this day, puppeteers enact the legend of Alexander the Great before children in remote villages of Turkey. In those towns where his command posts were set up and his soldiers intermarried with villagers, Alexander is a great hero, but in towns that were just conquered on his relentless quest to rule the world, Alexander is portrayed as a great villain, more than a thousand years after his death. In recent times, in San Francisco the October 12 Columbus Day parade had been time of celebrating the heroic voyage of this great explorer. It was an honor for the citizen chosen to portray Christopher Columbus. Not so any more for some people, given the recently-discovered abuse and exploitation of his arrival on the indigenous populations. To become part of any culture's history, acts of heroism must be recorded and preserved by those who are literate and who have the power to record history or to pass it on in a persistent oral tradition. Impoverished, illiterate peoples that have been colonized retain few widely acknowledged heroes because there are few available records of their acts.

Hero Taxonomy

There are many heroic types and expressions of heroic behavior. Heroic types include whistle blowers, martyrs, military, civilian, disability, political, religious, science and technology, environmental, educational, artistic and cultural, as well as good samaritans.

For a more in-depth look at hero types, read Chapter 16 of *The Lucifer Effect* [link to Chapter 16 of *The Lucifer Effect* under "ResourceLibrary"]

Within these types of heroes are "reactive" and "proactive" heroes. Reactive heroes are people that act in the moment, usually spontaneously. Afterwards, a reactive hero will often say something like "I didn't have time to think, I just did it." A good example of a reactive hero is Wesley Autrey, who, in 2007, saved the life of a student who had fallen on the subway tracks in New York City. A proactive hero is someone that makes continual efforts over time to expose the operation of fraud, deception, or corruption. Such heroes are more effective when they form networks with others who share their values, thereby lessening the criticism (by defenders of the evil system) that they are fanatics or misguided. Erin Brockovich is such a hero in her legal confrontation with an energy company (PG&E) whose processes were polluting local water supplies, which caused death-dealing diseases to many families living near the plant. Life-long heroes are also proactive heroes in their challenge of an entire system of injustice, such as Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s confrontation with racism in the United States. Another example of proactive heroes are the many Christians who made the decision to risk their lives and that of their families to save Jews from Nazi concentration camps, and likely death. Irena Sendler was one such Polish hero, who organized a network of 20 others to successfully rescue 2,500 Jewish children from the Warsaw ghetto, where hunger and disease were rampant while they awaited deportation to concentration camps.

Hostile vs. Heroic Imagination

"Every reasonable man (and woman) is a potential scoundrel and a potential good citizen. What a man is depends upon his character; what a man does, and what we think of what he does, depends upon his circumstances."

- George Bernard Shaw

The Hostile Imagination

Dr. Zimbardo coined the term "heroic imagination" because it was the opposite of the "hostile imagination", a term used by Sam Keen, in *Faces of the Enemy*, where he talks about the ways in which certain situations have the power to trigger, or activate, hatred of other people, creating a psychology of enmity. Hostile imagination includes thinking of other people as objects, as unworthy, as less than human- in short, dehumanizing others. This in turn leads to thinking about and treating those people differently than you would your own kind or kin. The end product of this hostile imagination is creating the conditions of wanting to destroy the "other", so it's not just that you have a negative perspective, you really want to destroy them and you engage in or support antisocial behavior. Here we see the bad attitude leading to destructive behavior. Another aspect of the hostile imagination is sharing the negative attitude without taking the hostile action, instead being indifferent to the hostile actions taken against the selected victims by others. This kind of indifference allows tacit approval of the hostility and thereby encourages it.

The Heroic Imagination

The very situations that inflame the hostile imagination in some can inspire in the heroic imagination in others. "Heroic imagination" is really a mindset- a set of attitudes about helping others, caring for others, being willing to sacrifice or take risks on behalf of others. Those that engage their heroic imagination are making themselves aware of opportunities where they can help others in need, and then being willing to take the appropriate action regardless of the personal risk involved. When the heroic imagination motivates pro-social behavior it becomes heroic action. This kind of behavior is labeled heroic.

The Banality of Evil

The concept of the "banality of evil" emerged from Hannah Arendt's observations at the trial of Adolph Eichmann, indicted for crimes against humanity in orchestrating the genocide of European Jews at Auschwitz Concentration Camp. In "Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil," Arendt formulates the idea that such individuals should not be viewed as exceptions, as monsters, or as perverted sadists. She argues that such dispositional attributes, typically applied to perpetrators of evil deeds, serves to set them apart from the rest of the human community. Instead, Eichmann and others like him, Arendt says, should be exposed in their very ordinariness. Arendt's now classic conclusion:

*"The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied ... that this new type of criminal, who is in actual fact **hostis generis humani**, commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or feel that he is doing wrong."*

And then came her punch line, describing Eichmann's dignified march to the gallows:

"It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us – the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil."

Arendt was saying in essence that such perpetrators of evil were “normal” before and again after being embedded in evil-generating situations, such as being in charge of the mass murder of millions of Jews in Auschwitz. That situationist account in no way minimizes the accountability and guilt of the perpetrators; it simply indicts both the evil-generating situation and the person who was seduced or corrupted by it.

The Banality of Heroism and Virtue

We may now entertain the notion that most people who become perpetrators of evil deeds are directly comparable to those who become perpetrators of heroic deeds, alike in being just ordinary, average people. The banality of evil matches the banality of heroism. Neither attribute is the direct consequence of dispositional tendencies; there are no special inner attributes either of pathology or of goodness residing within the human psyche or the human genome. Both conditions emerge in particular situations at particular times when situational forces play a compelling role in moving particular individuals across a decisional line from inaction to action. There is a decisive decisional moment when a person is caught up in a vortex of forces that emanate from a behavioral context. Those forces combine to increase the probability of one’s acting to harm others or acting to help others. Their decision may not be consciously planned or mindfully taken. Rather strong situational forces most often impulsively drive the person to action. Among the situational evil-action vectors are:

Group, team pressures and group identity; the diffusion of responsibility for the action; a temporal focus on the immediate moment without consciousness of consequences stemming from the act in the future; dehumanization of the other; de-individuation (anonymity) of self; negative role models; social norms approving of the action; moral disengagement via semantic distortions of the real nature of the evil action, actor, and consequences; among others identified by a large body of research.

Zimbardo argues that the very situations that inflame the “hostile imagination” in some people, inducing them to cross the line between good and evil and become perpetrators, instill the “heroic imagination” in others, inducing them to act heroically to challenge human evil or do service to others in natural disasters. In both cases, a unique opportunity provides a call to action for evil or for good. (Social philosopher Sam Keen coined the term “hostile imagination” to describe the psychology of enmity that is fueled by national propaganda against “enemies.” In his classic work, *Faces of the Enemy*, Keen reveals how the images depicting arbitrary national enemies serve to inflame citizens to hate them and soldiers to kill them.)

The banality of heroism means that we are all “*Heroes-in-Waiting*.” It is a choice that we may all be called upon to make at some point in time. We believe that by making heroism an egalitarian attribute of human nature rather than a rare feature of the elect few, we can better foster heroic acts in every community. Everyone has the capability of becoming a hero in one degree or another. Sometimes we might not realize it. We are all heroes to someone when we make vital sacrifices on their behalf that enhances their quality of life. This concept acknowledges that many of us will never be “big time heroes” because we will not be given the opportunity to challenge big time evil or give aid in natural disasters, yet there is much of the social habits of heroism that can be practiced on a daily basis by each of us-- as everyday heroes.