

Whistleblowers versus evil

Brian Martin

Whistleblowers encounter some of the worst aspects of human behaviour. First, they see some problem, such as corruption, abuse or danger to the public. In nearly every case, this involves someone doing the wrong thing, causing damage to others. Whistleblowers don't turn away: they decide to say something about it.

Second, they observe that few others speak up. In most cases, there are lots of bystanders who know about the problem but are afraid or indifferent, and allow the problem to fester.

Third, they suffer reprisals. For doing the right thing, whistleblowers regularly experience ostracism, rumour-mongering, harassment, denunciations and dismissal. Often the perpetrators are bosses or colleagues, people who should be just as concerned about the problem.

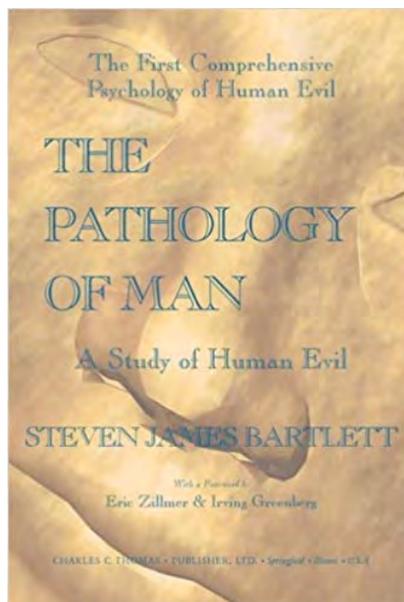
Fourth, they have frustrating engagements with official channels, such as senior management, grievance committees, courts and regulatory bodies. These bodies have the responsibility to address problems but, all too often, they do not side with the whistleblower and have weak-kneed responses to systemic problems.

All this is enough to cause whistleblowers to become deeply disillusioned with their fellow humans and human-created systems. For many, it causes a personal crisis, with faith in people's honesty and fairness smashed and nothing to replace it. Some whistleblowers continue to seek justice, hoping to find a white knight who will vanquish the wrongdoers. But what if there are no white knights? What if human behaviour is irredeemable? What if the bad guys are going to continue to get away with their evil deeds? What if there is something dark about humans generally?

Human evil

Steven James Bartlett is a philosopher and psychologist who has studied deep-seated problems in the human species, problems so bad that they can be called evil. This sounds heavy, and it is. Here I will look at his book *The Pathology of Man: A Study of Human*

Evil, published in 2005. "Man" in the title refers to the human species. Bartlett is concerned about problems in our species so fundamental and so damaging that they can be called a pathology, or in other words a disease.



Step back for a moment from thinking about the people you know or the political events you read about, and imagine you are a being from another planet looking down on earth and all the life forms inhabiting it. You would observe everything from microorganisms to plants and insects to mammals. Every species does what it can to survive.

You couldn't help noticing one mammal in particular, humans. This species has made an enormous impact on the environment and on other species. It cultivates other species for food, sometimes causing other animals great pain. It spreads its waste products across the globe, causing massive species extinctions. Members of this species sometimes turn on each other, hurting or killing them in what is called torture and murder. Some of them control vast resources (called wealth) and leave others with little or nothing, allowing them to die. Some of them produce and sell toxic products (like cigarettes) known to cause death. Sometimes members of this species fight on a grand scale, in what is called war. Sometimes they join in killing large numbers of defenceless members of their own species, in what is called genocide.

An ecologist, looking at the interplay between species, might say that humans are noxious, like a weed that can't be controlled. Humans are concerned about the damaging effects of plants like lantana or animals like the cane toad, but these species are only beginners at causing damage compared to humans.

Bartlett gives the label "evil" to voluntary human thinking and behaviour that seriously harms happiness, health and life itself. But you don't have to use the word evil: you can just refer to violence, cruelty, exploitation and destruction. Just read history books, or watch the news, and you'll find plenty of evidence.

So what is going on to cause humans to be so harmful to each other and to the environment in which they live? Bartlett has a radical view. He says that the capacity for evil is part of the makeup of humans and that most evil deeds are carried out by people who are psychologically normal.

The Pathology of Man is a lengthy work of immense scholarship — it is not bedtime reading. Bartlett examines a vast range of writing relevant to human evil, for example the views of psychiatrists Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and others less well known. He looks at the available evidence about people involved in genocide, with special attention to the Holocaust. The Nazi killers were not a deviation from the norm: most of them, when tested, were psychologically normal. The same applies to war: most soldiers are psychologically normal, yet they are willing to kill other humans.



It is worse than just killing. Many humans get a thrill out of watching other humans hurt, torture and kill each other. Think of the popularity of boxing and war movies, and the excitement people feel in wartime. Killing can itself be a source of emotional gratification.

Canvassing a vast body of evidence, Bartlett concludes that normal humans have the capacity to participate in evil deeds. The implication is that what is normal is pathological — it is like a disease. The implication is that the human species, not just a few aberrant individuals, is pathological.

Bartlett examines the research on obedience. It shows that most normal humans will obey authorities and cause extreme pain to someone else. In fact, so normal is obedience to authority that it is those who disobey who are unusual. This is where Bartlett's analysis is relevant to whistleblowers.



Think of organisations where it is routine to cause harm to other humans or the environment. Some obvious candidates are tobacco companies and military dictatorships, but there are many others. Take your pick: holding refugees in detention camps, sending animals on long voyages in terrible conditions, selling pharmaceutical drugs known to be deadly, or implementing policies that leave people destitute.

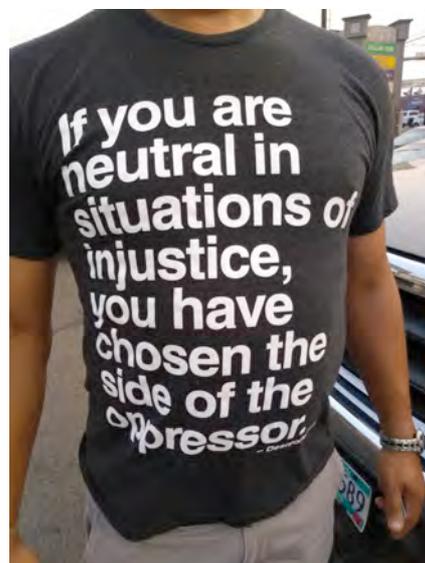
Most workers participate without any scruples; indeed, they may engage with the job enthusiastically, even though they know that others may be harmed. It is usual for such workers to justify their actions, for example by saying “We’re satisfying market demands,” “We’re defending the country” or “We’re following orders.” Bartlett says that such thought patterns that rationalise cruelty are themselves pathological. In other words, ways of thinking that enable evil are themselves part of the problem.

Whistleblowers are abnormal

Whistleblowers are exceptions. Rather than joining in damaging activities or watching as they continue unhindered, they speak out. They try to do something about the problems. They are the abnormal ones.

Bartlett writes that human stupidity is one of the contributing factors to evil deeds. He discusses stupidity as a shortcoming of cognitive capacities but is most concerned with shortcomings in *moral intelligence*. Someone can be very smart, with a high IQ, like most of the leading Nazis under Hitler, and yet be deficient in moral capacities. This is apparent in the ease with which intelligent people can become involved in bullying, racism and hatred of enemies, and obey orders to participate in activities devastating to other humans and the environment.

People who intentionally blow the whistle in the public interest are exceptions. They have a conscience and are willing to act on it.

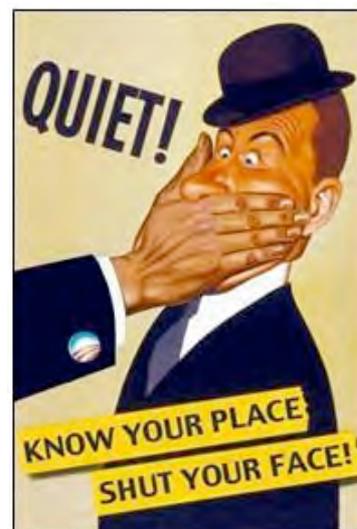


Bartlett is quite pessimistic about the human species. In fact, he sees hope as part of the problem, because always looking at the bright side of human nature means that the dark side is continually under-examined and underestimated. He doesn't provide any solutions, only wishing that others — mainly those with high levels of moral development — will recognise the capacity for evil residing in humans who are psychologically normal.

Implications

For whistleblowers, there are a few implications. One is that it is important to learn about human psychology, in particular the capacity of most humans to hurt others and protect themselves at the expense of others. When whistleblowers are subject to reprisals, this reflects a culture of obedience to and

fear of authority, as well as a tendency to stigmatise outsiders. When whistleblowers are treated as traitors, this is a manifestation of human hatred, and hatred is an emotion based on wanting to destroy the hated object.



Bartlett points to the importance of moral development, of enabling individuals to think beyond their immediate self-interest and to develop a capacity to reason for themselves about the legitimacy of rules and institutions. Whistleblowing often involves a rethinking of what is fair and beneficial. What distinguishes public interest disclosures from personal grievances is a concern for others, especially those who are less fortunate.

For me, Bartlett's analysis points to the value of social movements against oppression, exploitation and repression. Labour movements have challenged exploitation in workplaces, feminist movements have challenged systems of male domination and environmental movements have challenged destruction of nature. Some aspects of these and other social movements reflect a high moral sense in action, especially when participation in movements brings no immediate personal benefit.

Many whistleblowers thus have affinities, in their moral concerns, with movements for equality, justice, human rights and environmental sustainability. Bartlett would remind both whistleblowers and activists to remain aware of the dark side of humans.

Brian Martin is editor of *The Whistle*.