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Albert Bandura

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Selective Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency

ALBERT BANDURA
Stanford University, USA

ABSTRACT *Moral agency has dual aspects manifested in both the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely and the proactive power to behave humanely. Moral agency is embedded in a broader socio-cognitive self-theory encompassing affective self-regulatory mechanisms rooted in personal standards linked to self-sanctions. Moral functioning is thus governed by self-reactive selfhood rather than by dispassionate abstract reasoning. The self-regulatory mechanisms governing moral conduct do not come into play unless they are activated and there are many psychosocial mechanisms by which moral self-sanctions are selectively disengaged from inhumane conduct. The moral disengagement may centre on the cognitive restructuring of inhumane conduct into a benign or worthy one by moral justification, sanitising language and exonerative social comparison; disavowal of personal agency in the harm one causes by diffusion or displacement of responsibility; disregarding or minimising the injurious effects of one's actions; and attribution of blame to, and dehumanisation of, those who are victimised. Social cognitive theory adopts an interactionist perspective to morality in which moral actions are the products of the reciprocal interplay of personal and social influences. Given the many mechanisms for disengaging moral control at both the individual and collective level, civilised life requires, in addition to humane personal standards, safeguards built into social systems that uphold compassionate behaviour and renounce cruelty.*

This article addresses the important but neglected issue of selective moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency. In a recent book entitled, *Everybody Does It*, Thomas Gabor (1994) documents the pervasiveness of moral disengagement by people of all statuses in all walks of life. Psychological theories of morality have traditionally focused heavily on the formal character of moral reasoning to the neglect of moral conduct. People suffer from the wrongs done to them regardless of how perpetrators justify their inhumane actions. The regulation of humane conduct involves much more than moral reasoning. A complete theory of moral agency must link moral knowledge and reasoning to moral conduct. This requires an agentic theory of morality rather than one confined mainly to cognitions about morality. In the social cognitive theory of the moral self (Bandura, 1986,

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1991), moral reasoning is linked to moral action through affective self-regulatory mechanisms by which moral agency is exercised. The moral self is thus embedded in a broader socio-cognitive self theory encompassing self-organising, proactive, self-reflective and self-regulative mechanisms (Bandura, 2001). These self-referent processes provide the motivational as well as the cognitive regulators of moral conduct.

In the development of a moral self, individuals adopt standards of right and wrong that serve as guides and deterrents for conduct. In this self-regulatory process, people monitor their conduct and the conditions under which it occurs, judge it in relation to their moral standards and perceived circumstances, and regulate their actions by the consequences they apply to themselves. They do things that give them satisfaction and a sense of self-worth. They refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards because such conduct will bring self-condemnation. The constraint of negative self-sanctions for conduct that violates one's moral standards and the support of positive self-sanctions for conduct faithful to personal moral standards operate anticipatorily. In the face of situational inducements to behave in inhumane ways, people can choose to behave otherwise by exerting self-influence. Self-sanctions keep conduct in line with internal standards. It is through the ongoing exercise of evaluative self-influence that moral conduct is motivated and regulated. Morality is thus rooted in a self-reactive selfhood, rather than in dispassionate abstract reasoning.

The self-regulation of morality is not entirely an intrapsychic matter as rationalist theories might lead one to believe. People do not operate as autonomous moral agents, impervious to the social realities in which they are enmeshed. Social cognitive theory adopts an interactionsist perspective to morality. Moral actions are the product of the reciprocal interplay of cognitive, affective and social influences.

Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

Moral standards do not function as fixed internal regulators of conduct. Self-regulatory mechanisms do not operate unless they are activated. There are many psychosocial manoeuvres by which moral self-sanctions can be disengaged from inhumane conduct. Selective activation and disengagement of self-sanctions permits different types of conduct by people with the same moral standards.

Figure 1 shows the points in the process of moral control at which moral self-censure can be disengaged from reprehensible conduct. The disengagement may centre on redefining harmful conduct as honourable by moral justification, exonerating social comparison and sanitising language. It may focus on agency of action so that perpetrators can minimise their role in causing harm by diffusion and displacement of responsibility. It may involve minimising or distorting the harm that flows from detrimental actions; and the disengagement may include dehumanising and blaming the victims of the maltreatment.

The sections that follow analyse how each of these types of moral disengagement function in the perpetration of inhumanities.

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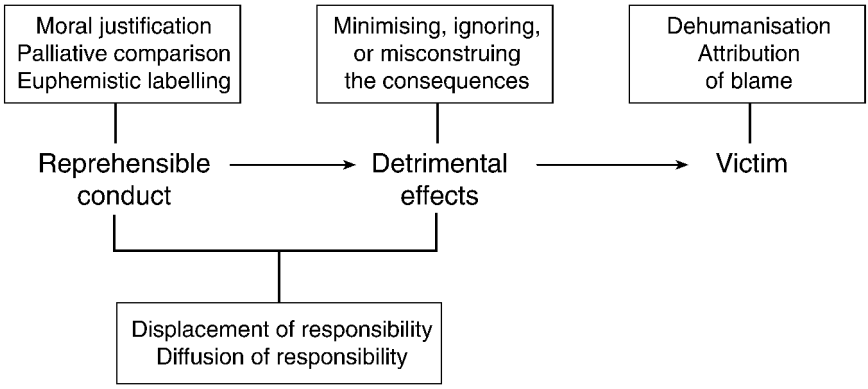

FIG. 1. Mechanism through which moral self-sanctions are selectively activated and disengaged from detrimental behaviour at different points in the self-regulatory process (Bandura, 1986).

Moral Justification

One set of disengagement practices operates on the reconstruction of the behaviour itself. People do not usually engage in harmful conduct until they have justified, to themselves, the morality of their actions. In this process of moral justification, pernicious conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy or moral purposes. People then can act on a moral imperative and preserve their view of themselves as moral agents while inflicting harm on others.

Rapid radical shifts in destructive behaviour through moral justification are most strikingly revealed in military pursuits. The conversion of socialised people into dedicated fighters is achieved not by altering their personality structures, aggressive drives or moral standards. Rather, it is accomplished by cognitively redefining the morality of killing so that it can be done free from self-censure. Through moral justification of violent means, people see themselves as fighting ruthless oppressors, protecting their cherished values, preserving world peace, saving humanity from subjugation or honouring their country's commitments. Moral justifications sanctify the violent means. Voltaire put it well when he said, "Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities."

Over the centuries, much destructive conduct has been perpetrated by ordinary, decent people in the name of righteous ideologies, religious principles and nationalistic imperatives (Rapoport & Alexander, 1982; Kramer, 1990; Reich, 1990). Adversaries sanctify their militant actions, but condemn those of their antagonists as barbarity masquerading under a mask of outrageous moral reasoning. Each side feels morally superior to the other.

The politicisation of religion has a long-blooded history. In holy terror, perpetrators twist theology so they see themselves as doing God's will. Pope Urban launched the Crusades with the following impassioned moral proclamation: "I address those present, I proclaim it, to those absent. Christ commands it. For all

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those going thither, there will be remission of sins if they come to the end of this fettered life." He then dehumanises and beastialises the Muslim enemies: "What a disgrace if a race so despicable, degenerate, and enslaved by demons, should overcome a people endowed with faith in Almighty God and resplendent in the name of Christ! Let those who once fought against brothers and relatives now rightfully fight against the barbarians under the guidance of the Lord."

Islamic extremists mount their jihad, construed as self-defence against tyrannical, decadent infidels who despoil and seek to enslave the Muslim world. Bin Laden enobled his global terrorism as serving a holy imperative. "We will continue this course because it is part of our religion and because Allah, praise and glory be to him, ordered us to carry out jihad so that the word of Allah may remain exalted to the heights." Through the jihad they are carrying out Allah's will as a "religious duty". The prime agency for the holy terror is displaced to Allah. Bin Laden beastialises the American enemy as "lowly people" perpetrating acts that "the most ravenous of animals would not descend to". Terrorism is sanitised as "The winds of faith have come" to eradicate the "debauched" oppressors. His followers see themselves as holy warriors who gain a blessed eternal life through their martyrdom.

Rabin's assassin was similarly acting on a divine mandate using the rabbinical pursuer's decree as moral justification. Those who give over their people and land to the enemy must be killed. As he explained the killing to prevent transfer of land to Palestinian control: "Maybe physically, I acted alone but what pulled the trigger was not only my finger but the finger of this whole nation which, for 2,000 years, yearned for this land and dreamed of it." Paul Hill, the Presbyterian minister, also justified the killing of a doctor and his elderly assistant outside the abortion clinic as carrying out God's will: "God's law positively requires us to defend helpless people. God has used people, who are willing to die for their cause to save human life. I'm willing to do that."

Euphemistic Labelling

Language shapes thought patterns on which actions are based. Activities can take on different appearances depending on what they are called. Euphemistic language is used widely to make harmful conduct respectable and to reduce personal responsibility for it (Lutz, 1987). Euphemising is an injurious weapon. People behave much more cruelly when assaultive actions are given a sanitised label than when they are called aggression (Diener *et al.*, 1975).

In an insightful analysis of the language of non-responsibility, Gambino (1973) identified the different varieties of euphemisms. One form relies on *sanitising language*. Through the power of sanitised language, even killing a human being loses much of its repugnancy. Soldiers "waste" people rather than kill them. Bombing missions are described as "servicing the target", in the likeness of a public utility. The attacks become "clean, surgical strikes", arousing imagery of curative activities. The civilians the bombs kill are linguistically converted to "collateral damage".

In an effort to sanitise State executions, a United States senator proclaimed that, "Capital punishment is our society's recognition of the sanctity of human life."

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This memorable verbal sanitisation won him the uncoveted, their-place award in the national Doublespeak competition.

Sanitising euphemisms are also used extensively in unpleasant activities that people perform from time to time. In the language of some government agencies, people are not fired, they are given a "career alternative enhancement" as though they were receiving a promotion. Being disfellowshipped is getting oneself fired by the Baptists. In the Watergate hearings, lies became "a different version of the facts". An "involuntary conversion of a 727" is a plain old airplane crash. The television industry produces and markets some of the most brutal forms of human cruelty under the sanitised labels of "action and adventure" programming. The nuclear power industry has created its own specialised set of euphemisms for the injurious effects of nuclear mishaps. An explosion becomes an "energetic disassembly", and a reactor accident is a "normal aberration".

The *agentless passive voice* serves as another exonerative tool. It creates the appearance that reprehensible acts are the work of nameless forces, rather then people (Bolinger, 1982). It is as though people are moved mechanically but are not really the agents of their own acts. Even inanimate objects are sometimes turned into agents. Here is a driver explaining to police how he managed to demolish a telephone pole, "The telephone pole was approaching. I was attempting to swerve out of its way, when it struck my front end."

The specialised jargon of a legitimate enterprise is also misused to lend respectability to an illegitimate one. In the vocabulary of the law breakers in Nixon's administration, criminal conspiracy became a "game plan", and the conspirators were "team players", like the best of sportsmen. They elevated word corruption to new heights in the service of criminal conduct.

Advantageous Comparison

How behaviour is viewed is coloured by what it is compared against. By exploiting the contrast principle reprehensible acts can be made righteous. Terrorists see their behaviour as acts of selfless martyrdom by comparing them with widespread cruelties inflicted on the people with whom they identify (Bandura, 1990). The more flagrant the contrasting inhumanities, the more likely it is that one's own destructive conduct will appear benevolent. For example, the massive destruction in Vietnam was minimised by portraying the American military intervention as saving the populace from Communist enslavement. Expedient historical comparison also serves self-exonerating purposes. Apologists for the lawlessness of political figures they support point to transgressions by rival administrations as vindications. Adapters of violent means are quick to point out that democracies, such as those of France and the United States, were achieved through violence against oppressive rule.

Exonerating comparison relies heavily on moral justification by utilitarian standards. The task of making violence morally acceptable from a utilitarian perspective is facilitated by two sets of judgements. First, non-violent options are

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judged to be ineffective to achieve desired changes. This removes them from consideration. Secondly, utilitarian analyses affirm that one's injurious actions will prevent more human suffering than they cause.

The utilitarian calculus is quite slippery in specific applications, however. The future contains many uncertainties and human judgement is subject to a lot of biases. As a result, calculations of long-term human costs and benefits are often suspect. There is much subjectivity in estimating the gravity of potential threats.

Cognitive restructuring of harmful conduct through moral justifications, sanitising language and exonerating comparisons is the most effective set of psychological mechanisms for disengaging moral control. Investing harmful conduct with high moral purpose not only eliminates self-censure so destructive acts can be performed without personal distress and moral questions. Sanctification engages self-approval in the service of destructive exploits. What was once morally condemnable becomes a source of self-valuation. Functionaries work hard to become proficient at them and take pride in their destructive accomplishments.

Displacement of Responsibility

Moral control operates most strongly when people acknowledge that they are contributors to harmful outcomes. The second set of disengagement practises operates by obscuring or minimising the agentive role in the harm one causes. People will behave in ways they normally repudiate if a legitimate authority accepts responsibility for the effects of their conduct (Milgram, 1974; Diener, 1977). Under displaced responsibility, they view their actions as stemming from the dictates of authorities rather than being personally responsible for them. Because they are not the actual agent of their actions, they are spared self-condemning reactions.

Self-exemption from gross inhumanities by displacement of responsibility is revealed most gruesomely in socially sanctioned mass executions. Nazi prison commandants and their staffs divested themselves of personal responsibility for their unprecedented inhumanities (Andrus, 1969). They claimed they were simply carrying out orders. Self-exonerating obedience to horrific orders is similarly evident in military atrocities, such as the My Lai massacre (Kelman, 1973).

In psychological studies of disengagement of moral control by displacement of responsibility, authorities explicitly authorise injurious actions and hold themselves responsible for the harm caused by their followers. For example, Milgram (1974) induced people to escalate their level of punitiveness by commanding them to do so and telling them that he took full responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The greater the legitimisation and closeness of authority issuing injurious commands, the higher the obedient aggression.

The sanctioning of pernicious conduct in everyday life differs in two important ways from Milgram's authorising system. Responsibility is rarely assumed that openly. Only obtuse authorities would leave themselves accusable of authorising destructive acts. They usually invite and support harmful conduct in insidious ways by surreptitious sanctioning systems for personal and social reasons. Sanctioning by indirection shields them from social condemnation should things go awry. It also

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enables them to protect against loss of self-respect for authorising human cruelty that leaves blood on their hands.

Authorities act in ways that keep themselves intentionally uninformed. As a Secretary of State instructed a presidential adviser in the Iran affair, "Just tell me what I need to know". Authorities do not go looking for evidence of wrongdoing. Obvious questions that would reveal incriminating information remain unasked, so that officials do not find out what they do not want to know. Implicit agreements and insulating social arrangements are created that leave the higher echelons unblamable.

When harmful practices are publicised, they are officially dismissed as only isolated incidents arising from misunderstanding of what had been authorised. Efforts are made to limit any blame to subordinates, who are portrayed as misguided or overzealous. Investigators who go looking for evident incriminating records of authorisation display naiveté about the insidious ways that pernicious practices are sanctioned and carried out. One finds arrangements of non-responsibility rather than incriminating traces of smoking guns.

There is another basic difference in the authorising system from the one created by Milgram. Perpetration of inhumanities requires obedient functionaries. They do not cast off all responsibility for their behaviour as if they were mindless extensions of others. If they disowned all responsibility, they would be quite unreliable, performing their duties only when commanded to do so. It requires a strong sense of responsibility to be a good functionary. One must, therefore, distinguish between two levels of responsibility: a strong sense of duty to one's superiors, and accountability for the effects of one's actions. The best functionaries are those who honour their obligations to authorities but feel no personal responsibility for the harm they cause.

Goldhagen (1996) builds a strong case that many of the perpetrators in the German genocide infantry were more than willing executioners. Cultural hatreds create low thresholds for the disengagement of moral self-sanctions. Inhumanities toward human beings cast in disliked categories become not only permissible but righteous.

Diffusion of Responsibility

The exercise of moral control is also weakened when personal agency is obscured by diffusing responsibility for detrimental behaviour. Kelman (1973) documents the different ways in which personal agency gets obscured by social diffusion of responsibility. Responsibility can be diffused by division of labour. Subdivided tasks seem harmless in themselves. People shift their attention from the meaning of what they are doing to the details of their specific job.

Group decision-making is another common practice that enables otherwise considerate people to behave inhumanely. Where everyone is responsible no one really feels responsible. Collective action, which provides anonymity, is still another expedient for weakening moral control. Any harm done by a group can always be attributed largely to the behaviour of others. People act more cruelly under group

responsibility than when they hold themselves personally accountable for their actions (Bandura *et al.*, 1975; Zimbardo, 1995).

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Disregard or Distortion of Consequences

To be able to perpetrate inhumanities requires more than absolving personal responsibility. Other ways of weakening moral control operate by minimising, disregarding or distorting the effects of one's action. When people pursue activities that harm others, they avoid facing the harm they cause or minimise it. If minimisation does not work, the evidence of harm can be discredited. As long as the harmful results of one's conduct are ignored, minimised, distorted or disbelieved there is little reason for self-censure to be activated.

It is easier to harm others when their suffering is not visible and when destructive actions are physically and temporally remote from their injurious effects. Our death technologies have become highly lethal and depersonalised. We are now in the era of faceless electronic warfare, in which mass destruction is delivered remotely with deadly accuracy by computer and laser-controlled systems.

When people can see and hear the suffering they cause, vicariously aroused distress and self-censure serve as self-restrainers (Bandura, 1992). In studies of obedient aggression, people are less compliant to the injurious commands of authorities as the victims' pain becomes more evident and personalised (Milgram, 1974). Even a high sense of personal responsibility for the effects of one's actions is a weak restrainer of injurious conduct when aggressors do not see the harm they inflict on their victims (Tilker, 1970).

A Pulitzer Prize was awarded for a powerful photograph that captured the anguished cries of a little girl whose clothes were burned off by the napalm bombing of her village in Vietnam. This single humanisation of inflicted destruction probably did more to turn the American public against the war than the countless reports filed by journalists. The military now bans cameras and journalists from battlefield areas to block disturbing images of death and destruction that can erode public support for resolving international disputes by military means.

Most organisations involve hierarchical chains of command in which superiors formulate plans and intermediaries transmit them to functionaries who then carry them out. The further removed individuals are from the destructive end results, the weaker is the restraining power of injurious effects. Disengagement of moral control is easiest for the intermediaries in a hierarchical system—they neither bear responsibility for the decisions nor do they carry them out and face the harm being inflicted (Kilham & Mann, 1974).

Dehumanisation

The final set of disengagement practices operates on the recipients of detrimental acts. The strength of moral self-censure depends on how the perpetrators regard the people they mistreat. To perceive another as human activates empathetic reactions through perceived similarity (Bandura, 1992). The joys and suffering of those with

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whom one identifies are more vicariously arousing than are those of strangers or those divested of human qualities. It is difficult to mistreat humanised people without risking personal distress and self-condemnation.

Self-censure for cruel conduct can be disengaged or blunted by stripping people of human qualities. Once dehumanised, they are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes and concerns but as sub-human objects. They are portrayed as mindless "savages", "gooks" and other despicable wretches (Ivie, 1980; Keen, 1986). If dispossessing one's foes of humanness does not weaken self-censure, it can be eliminated by attributing demonic or bestial qualities to them. They become "satanic fiends", "degenerates" and other bestial creatures. It is easier to brutalise people when they are viewed as low animal forms, as when Greek torturers referred to their victims as "worms" (Gibson & Haritos-Fatouros, 1986). During wartime, nations cast their enemies in the most dehumanised, demonic and bestial images to make it easier to kill them.

In studies of the perniciousness of dehumanisation, people who are given punitive power treat dehumanised individuals more ruthlessly than those who have been invested with human qualities (Bandura *et al.*, 1975). Combining diffused responsibility with dehumanisation greatly escalates the level of punitiveness. The combined effect of personalising responsibility and humanising others together has powerful self-restraining effect.

The process of dehumanisation is an essential ingredient in the perpetration of inhumanities. Primo Levi (1989) asked a Nazi camp commandant why they went to extreme lengths to degrade their victims, whom they were going to kill anyway. The commandant chillingly explained that it was not a matter of purposeless cruelty. The victims had to be degraded to subhuman objects so that those who operated the gas chambers would be less burdened by distress.

Many conditions of contemporary life are conducive to impersonalisation and dehumanisation (Bernard *et al.*, 1965). Bureaucratisation, automation, urbanisation and high mobility lead people to relate to each other in anonymous, impersonal ways. In addition, social practises that divide people into ingroup and outgroup members produce human estrangement that fosters dehumanisation. Strangers can be more easily depersonalised than can acquaintances.

The findings from research on moral disengagement are in accord with the historical chronicle of human atrocities. It requires conducive social conditions rather than monstrous people to produce atrocious deeds. Given appropriate social conditions, decent, ordinary people can do extraordinarily cruel things.

Power of Humanisation

Psychological research tends to emphasise how easy it is to bring out the worst in people through dehumanisation and other self-exonerating means. The sensational negative findings receive the greatest attention. For example, Milgram's (1974) research on obedient aggression is cited widely as evidence that good people can be talked into performing cruel deeds. What is rarely noted is the equally striking evidence that most people refuse to behave cruelly, even with strong authoritarian

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commands, toward humanised others (Bandura *et al.*, 1975), and when they have to inflict pain directly rather than remotely (Milgram, 1974).

The emphasis on obedient aggression is understandable considering the prevalence of people's inhumanities to one another; but the power of humanisation to counteract cruel conduct also has important social implications. The affirmation of common humanity can bring out the best in others.

Attribution of Blame

Blaming one's adversaries or circumstances is another expedient that serves self-exonerating purposes. People view themselves as faultless victims driven to injurious conduct by forcible provocation. Violent conduct becomes a justifiable defensive reaction to belligerent provocations. Victims get blamed for bringing suffering on themselves. Self-exoneration is also achievable by viewing one's harmful conduct as forced by compelling circumstances rather than as a personal decision. By fixing the blame on others or on compelling circumstances one's own injurious actions are excusable but one can even feel self-righteous in the process.

Justified abuse can have more devastating human consequences than acknowledged cruelty. Mistreatment that is not clothed in righteousness makes the perpetrator rather than the victim blameworthy; but when victims are convincingly blamed for their plight, they may eventually come to believe the degrading characterisations of themselves (Hallie, 1971). Exonerated inhumanity is, thus, more likely to instill self-contempt in victims than inhumanity that does not attempt to justify itself. Seeing victims suffer maltreatment for which they are held partially responsible leads observers to derogate them (Lerner & Miller, 1978). The devaluation and indignation aroused by ascribed culpability provides further moral justification for even greater maltreatment.

Transformative Power of Progressive Moral Disengagement

Disengagement practises will not instantly transform considerate people into cruel ones. Rather, the change is achieved by progressive disengagement of self-censure. Initially, individuals perform mildly harmful acts they can tolerate with some discomfort. After their self-reproof has been diminished through repeated enactments, the level of ruthlessness increases, until eventually acts originally regarded as abhorrent can be performed with little anguish or self-censure. Inhumane practices become thoughtlessly routinised. The continuing interplay between moral thought, affect, action and its social reception is personally transformative. People may not even recognise the changes they have undergone as a moral self.

The transformative power of progressive moral disengagement is illustrated by a prison guard, who assisted in the execution of convicts by gassing. Putting people to death requires subdivision of the task to get someone to do it. The guard's role was limited to strapping the legs to the death chair. This spared him the image of executioner, "I never pulled the trigger. I wasn't the executioner", he explained.

Executioners require heavy use of euphemisms as well. The guard received $35

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extra for each execution. In a linguistic rechristening of deathly gassing as benevolent caring he remarked "That was a lot of money for baby-sitting". He described the changes he had undergone over the course of 126 executions as follows: "It never bothered me when I was down at their legs strapping them in. But after I'd get home, I'd think about it. But then it would go away. And then, at last, it was just another job."

Under certain conditions, the exercise of institutional power changes the powerholders in ways that are conducive to dehumanisation. This typically occurs when authorities have coercive power over others and adequate safeguards for constraining the behaviour of powerholders are lacking. Powerholders come to devalue those over whom they wield control and have little desire to associate with them (Kipnis, 1974). In a simulated prison experiment (Haney *et al.*, 1973), even college students who had been chosen randomly to serve as either inmates or guards given unilateral power began to treat their charges in degrading, tyrannical ways as guards.

Sprinzak (1986, 1990) has shown that terrorists, whether on the political left or right, evolve gradually rather than set out to become radicals. The process of radicalisation involves a gradual disengagement of moral self-sanctions from violent conduct. It begins with prosocial efforts to change particular social policies and opposition to officials who are intent on keeping things as they are. Embittering failures to accomplish social change and hostile confrontations with authorities and police lead to growing disillusionment and alienation from the whole system. Escalative battles culminate in terrorists' efforts to destroy the system and its dehumanised rulers.

Dual Nature of Moral Agency

The exercise of moral agency has dual aspects—*inhibitive* and *proactive* (Bandura, 1999). The inhibitive form, is manifested in the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely. The proactive form of morality is expressed in the power to behave humanely. In this higher-order morality, people do good things as well as refrain from doing bad things. Rorty's (1993) analysis of the moral self in terms of a social-practice morality is another example of a theory that highlights proactive morality rooted in social obligation rather than just the morality of inhibition.

The My Lai massacre graphically illustrates the dual aspects of moral agency (Zganjar, 1998). An American platoon, led by Lt Calley, massacred 500 Vietnamese women, children and elderly men. Insightful analyses have documented how moral self-sanctions were disengaged from the brutal conduct (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989).

A ceremony, 30 years in coming, was recently held at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial honouring extraordinary heroism of prosocial morality. The moral courage that was honoured, testifies to proactive morality through the remarkable power of humanisation. Thompson, a young helicopter pilot, swooped down over the village of My Lai on a search and destroy mission as the massacre was occurring. He spotted an injured girl, marked the spot with a smoke signal, and radioed for help.

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Much to his horror, he saw a soldier flip her over and spray her with a round of fire. Upon seeing the human carnage in an irrigation ditch and soldiers firing into the bodies he realised that he was in the midst of a massacre.

He was moved to moral action by the sight of a terrified woman with a baby in her arms and a frightened child clinging to her leg. He explained his sense of common humanity, "These people were looking at me for help and there is no way I could turn my back on them".

He told a platoon officer to help him remove the remaining villagers. The officer replied, "The only help they'll get, is a hand grenade". Thompson moved his helicopter in the line of fire and commanded his gunner to fire on his approaching countrymen if they tried to harm the family. He radioed the accompanying gunships for help and together they airlifted the remaining dozen villagers to safety. He flew back to the irrigation ditch where they found and rescued a 2-year-old boy still clinging to his dead mother. Thompson described his empathetic human linkage: "I had a son at home about the same age".

Social psychology emphasises the power of the situation over the individual. In the case of proactive moral courage, the individual triumphs as a moral agent over compelling situational forces. Such moral heroism is most strikingly documented in Holocaust rescuers who risked their lives under grave risks to save persecuted Jews from the death camps (Oliner & Oliner, 1988; Stein, 1988). The rescuers had no prior acquaintance with them and had nothing material or social to gain by doing so. Humanisation can rouse empathic sentiments and a strong sense of social obligation linked to evaluative self-sanctions that motivate humane actions on others' behalf at sacrifice of one's self-interest or even at one's own peril (Bandura, 1986). The rescuers viewed their behaviour as a human duty, rather than as extraordinary acts of heroism.

Conjoint Operation of Disengagement Mechanisms

The analysis thus far specified how the various mechanisms of moral disengagement operate individually to disengage moral self-sanctions. In the transactions of everyday life they operate together to promote inhumanities. This is well illustrated in an American weapons dealer named Terpil (Thomas, 1982). He supplied despots with weapons, assassination equipment and the latest in terrorist technology. This case is especially informative because it reveals that those who trade in human destruction do not do it by themselves. They depend heavily on the collective moral disengagement of reputable people managing respectable enterprises.

Terpil became a weapons merchant after he fell from grace at the Central Intelligence Agency. He masked his death operations in the euphemisms of a legitimate business fulfilling "consumer needs", under the sanitised name, "Intercontinental Technology".

To spare himself any self-censure for contributing to human atrocities, he avoided knowledge of the purposes to which his weapons would be put. "I don't ever want to know that", he said. When asked whether he was ever haunted by any

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thoughts about the suffering his deathly wares might cause, he explained that a weapons dealer cannot afford to think about human consequences, "If I really thought about the consequences all the time I certainly wouldn't have been in this business. You have to blank it off."

Probes for any signs of self-reproach, only brought self-exonerative comparisons. When asked if he felt any qualms about supplying torture equipment to Idi Amin, Terpil replied with justification by advantageous comparison. As he put it, "I'm sure that the people from Dow Chemical didn't think of the consequences of selling napalm. If they did, they wouldn't be working at the factory. I doubt very much if they'd feel any more responsible for the ultimate use than I did for my equipment."

When pressed about the atrocities committed at Amin's torture chambers, Terpil repeated his depersonalised view, "I do not get wrapped up emotionally with the country. I regard myself basically as neutral, and commercial." To give legitimacy to his "private practice", he claimed that he aided British and American covert operations abroad as well.

What began as a psychological analysis of the operator of a death industry ended in an international network of supporting legitimate enterprises run by upright folks. The merchandising of terrorism is not accomplished by a few unsavory individuals. It requires a worldwide network of reputable, high-level members of society who contribute to the deathly enterprise by fractionating the operation and diffusion of responsibility. One group manufactures the tools of destruction. Others amass the arsenals for legitimate sale. Others operate storage centres for them. Others procure export and import licences to move the deathly wares among different countries. Others obtain spurious end-user certificates that get the weaponry to embargoed nations through circuitous routes. Still others ship the lethal wares. And banks do a brisk business in laundered money.

The cogs in this worldwide network include weapons manufacturers, former government officials with political ties, ex-diplomatic, military and intelligence officers who provide valuable skills and contacts, weapons merchants and shippers operating legitimate businesses and bankers. By fractionating the enterprise, the contributors see themselves as decent, legitimate practitioners of their trade rather than as parties to a deathly operation.

Even producers of the television program *60 Minutes* contributed to Frank Terpil's coffers (San Francisco Chronicle, 1983). Terpil skipped bail to a foreign sanctuary after he was caught selling assassination equipment to an undercover FBI agent. He was tried in absentia. The District Attorney confronted the lead reporter of the programme about a payment of $12,000 to an intermediary for an interview with the fugitive, Terpil. The reporter pleaded innocence through various disengagement manoeuvres.

Edmund Burke's aphorism that, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing" needs a companion adage under our technologically specialised realities: "The triumph of evil requires a lot of good people, doing a bit of it, in a morally disengaged way, with indifference to the human suffering they collectively cause."

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Disengagement in Everyday Life

Moral disengagement mechanisms have been examined most extensively in military, and political violence. Such mechanisms do heavy duty in everyday situations in which decent people perform activities that bring them profits and other benefits at injurious costs to others. Self-exonerations are used to neutralise self-censure and to preserve self-esteem. Some industries cause harmful effects on a large scale. They resort to public-spirited vindications.

The products of the tobacco industry kill about 450,000 Americans annually (McGinnis & Foege, 1993). The aggressive marketing of cigarettes worldwide will produce a global epidemic of lung cancer killing millions. For years the tobacco industry disputed the view that nicotine is addictive and that smoking is a major contributor to lung cancer.

The vast supporting cast contributing to the promotion of this deadly product include talented chemists discovering ammonia as a means to increase the nicotine "kick" by speeding the body's absorption of nicotine (Meier, 1998a); inventive biotech researchers genetically engineering a tobacco seed that doubles the addictive nicotine content of tobacco plants (Meier, 1998b); creative advertisers targeting young age groups with merchandising and advertising schemes depicting smoking as a sign of youthful hipness, modernity, freedom and women's liberation (Lynch & Bonnie, 1994; Dedman, 1998); ingenious officials in a subsidiary of a major tobacco company engaging in an elaborate international cigarette smuggling operation to evade excise taxes (Drew, 1998); popular movie actors agreeing to smoke in their movies for a hefty fee; legislators with bountiful tobacco campaign contributions exempting nicotine from drug legislation even though it is the most addictive substance and passing preemption laws that block states from regulating tobacco products and their advertising (Public Citizen Health Research Group, 1993; Lynch & Bonnie, 1994); United States trade representatives threatening sanctions against countries that erect barriers against the importation of US cigarettes, and even a President firing his cabinet member presiding over the Department of Health, Education and Welfare for refusing to back off on the regulation of tobacco products. As indicated in the above examples and other analyses of industry-wide collective moral disengagement (Bandura, 1973; Bandura *et al.*, 2000), injurious corporate practices require a large network of otherwise considerate people performing jobs drawing on their expertise and social influence in the service of a detrimental enterprise.

Moral disengagement is an active player in daily life. Institutionalised discrimination of devalued subgroups in societies takes a heavy toll on its victims. It requires social justification, attributions of blame, dehumanisation, impersonalised agencies to carry out the discriminatory practices and inattention to the injurious effects they cause. Ideologies of male domination, dehumanisation, ascription of blame and distortion of injurious consequences play a heavy role in sexual abuse of women (Burt, 1980; Bandura, 1986; Sanday, 1997). We are currently extending our research to the role of moral disengagement in criminal pursuits, use of military force, capital punishment, child abuse and support of inequities that impoverish and demoralise the less advantaged members of affluent societies.

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Impact of Moral Disengagement on Developmental Life Courses

Advances in the measurement of moral disengagement hold the promise of advancing understanding of how the disengagement aspect of morality develops and influences the courses lives take. Longitudinal analyses reveal that moral disengagement is already operating even in the early years of life (Bandura *et al.*, 1996). It contributes to social discordance in ways that are likely to lead down dissocial paths. High moral disengagers experience low guilt over injurious conduct. They are less prosocial. They are quick to resort to aggression and transgressive conduct. Gender differences in moral disengagement do not exist in the earlier years, but before long boys become more facile moral disengagers than do girls.

Moral development has typically been studied in terms of abstract principles of morality and measured under decontextualised and depersonalised circumstances. Adolescents who differ widely in delinquent conduct do not differ in abstract moral values (Elliott & Rinehart, 1995). Almost everyone is virtuous at the abstract level. It is in the ease of moral disengagement under the conditionals of life where the differences lie. Facile moral disengagers display higher levels of violence than those who bring moral self-reactions to bear on their conduct. This is true regardless of age, sex, race, ethnicity, socio-economic level and religious affiliation. Moral engagement against destructive means can be enhanced in children by peer modelling and espousal of peaceable solutions to human conflicts (McAlister *et al.*, 1999).

Reciprocal Interplay of Personal and Social Sanctions

Moral agency is socially situated and exercised in particularised ways depending on the life conditions under which people transact their affairs. Social cognitive theory, therefore, adopts an interactionist perspective to morality. Moral actions are the products of the reciprocal interplay of personal and social influences. Conflicts arise between self sanctions and social sanctions when individuals are punished socially for courses of action they regard as right and just. Principled dissenters and non-conformists often find themselves in this predicament. Some sacrifice their welfare for their convictions. People also commonly experience conflicts in which they are socially pressured to engage in conduct that violates their moral standards. Responses to such moral dilemmas are determined by the relative strength of self sanctions and social sanctions and the conditional application of moral standards.

Socio-structural theories and psychological theories are often regarded as rival conceptions of human behaviour or as representing different levels of causation. Human behaviour cannot be understood fully solely in terms of social structural factors or psychological factors. Social cognitive theory rejects a dualism between social structure and personal agency (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Socio-structural influences affect action via self-regulatory mechanisms operating through a set of sub-functions. Neither situational imperatives (Milgram, 1974) nor vile dispositions (Gillespie, 1971) provide a wholly adequate explanation of human malevolence.

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In social cognitive theory, both socio-structural and personal determinants operate interdependently within a unified causal structure in the perpetration of inhumanities.

Some of the moral disengagement practices, such as diffusion and displacement of responsibility, are built into the organisational and authority structures of societal systems. The ideological orientations of societies shape the form of moral justifications, sanction detrimental practices and influence who gets cast into devalued groups. These socio-structural practices create conditions conducive to moral disengagement, but people are producers as well as products of social systems. They have the agentic capabilities to change the nature of their social systems.

Concluding Remarks

The massive threats to human welfare stem mainly from deliberate acts of principle, rather than from unrestrained acts of impulse. As C. P. Snow insightfully observed, "More hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience, than in the name of rebellion." Principled resort to destructiveness is of greatest social concern but, ironically, it is the most ignored in psychological analyses of people's inhumanities toward each other.

Given many psychological devices for disengaging moral control, societies cannot rely entirely on individuals, however righteous their moral standards, to provide safeguards against human cruelty. Civilised life requires, in addition to humane personal codes, social systems that uphold compassionate behaviour and renounce cruelty.

Monolithic political systems, that exercise tight control over communication systems can more easily promote moral disengagement, than pluralistic systems that represent diverse perspectives, interests and concerns. Political diversity, and tolerance of dissent allow challenges to suspect moral appeals. Healthy scepticism toward moral pretensions puts a further check on the misuse of morality for inhumane purposes. To function humanely, societies must establish effective social safeguards against the misuse of institutional power for exploitive and destructive purposes. It should be made difficult for people to remove humanity from their conduct.

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Correspondence: Professor Albert Bandura, Department of Psychology, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-2130, USA; Fax: + 1 650 725 5699; E-mail: bandura@psych.stanford.edu

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