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LAUDATION

on the occasion of the award of the Dagmar and Václav Havel Foundation VIZE 97  
Prize

to PHILIP G. ZIMBARDO

Prague Crossroads  
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Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

A long time ago, approximately 2500 years ago, Theophrastus formulated the question: "How is it that we, the Greeks, differ so much one from another, even though the whole of Greece lies under the same sky and all of us have been brought up in a similar way?" And in his ethical sketches called *Characters* he tried to describe and analyze streaks and behaviour of persons with a certain prevalent personality type. It is interesting that he took into consideration types that are largely negative or rather funny – the hypocrite, the flatterer, the mean man, the boastful man, the grumbler, the pessimist, the malcontent and similar. Although the descriptions of the types are often rather superficial, they do not lack a certain wittiness and topicality even today. Does this mean that strictly speaking we do not change and that we understand well the ancient description of the personality types even after millennia?

2000 years later Christian Thomasius, German lawyer and philosopher, published a book *New Discovery of Solid Science, much Useful for Society in Discovering the Secrets of the Hearts of Other People from Everyday Conversation, even against their Will*: The title seems a bit too long for our fast-moving times. Perhaps people living at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century had more time both for reading and contemplation ...

Theophrastos studied negative characteristics of people – and it has become a certain tradition in psychology. He assumed that the personality of people is steady over time. Many later literary essays were based on his tradition. The way of thinking Thomasius employed is very close to the technique that we currently know as "evaluation scale". But even in his tradition and reflections I perceive certain negativism – "disclose the hearts of others against their will".

For centuries the discussion on the subject of structure and dynamics of personality concentrated on one of the basic questions of psychology, but also ethics and often also upbringing: Is our human nature steady or changeable? Is it determined by external or internal forces? Are we driven to activity by circumstances of the world around us or is the change driven by internal forces such as motifs, needs or interests?

This discussion was stirred up considerably about 40 years ago, when the dispute between the representatives and advocates of the theory of personality types (dispositionists) and situationists sharpened. The first group assumes that our behaviour is determined by our qualities, temperament,

the nature or structure of our motivation. The other group believes that circumstances, in which we find ourselves largely independent of our will or intentions, are essential. Both movement-derived consequences for theoretical thinking as well as for the upbringing of children, general educational techniques, psychotherapy, treatment of criminals, minority rights, communal policy and a whole range of other political areas.

Today's VIZE 97 laureate, professor Philip G. Zimbardo, became significantly involved in this discussion. Now I will try to outline several encounters with his thoughts, which we have experienced in psychology in the Czech Republic in recent decades. We did not have an opportunity to meet him in person, but that does not diminish Mr. Zimbardo's influence on the thinking of a number of Czech psychologists.

### **First Encounter**

In 1971 Mr. Zimbardo directed a remarkable experiment, which is more and more often quoted and is perhaps the most frequently sought-after experiment on the Internet even after 35 years. The aim was to track down how the experience of a loss of freedom on the one hand and promotion to the role of a superior warden is reflected in the behaviour of young and perfectly mentally healthy students. In the background there was yet another question: Could the practice of custodial establishment aggravate the condition and future behaviour of imprisoned persons? Should this be the case, then the whole system needs a thorough review.

The actual experiment was conducted as follows: Volunteers from the ranks of students – perfectly healthy and showing no symptoms of psychopathology – participated in a financially and technically well prepared research. Some of them were unexpectedly arrested and placed in a mock prison, which was built in the cellar of the Psychological Institute of Stanford University. The whole procedure was conducted in compliance with the police and court routine. The other group of students was placed in the role of wardens, who were to observe and supervise the maintenance of order in the prison and watch dangerous prisoners. Both a medical doctor and the prison governor, who was our laureate, were present. The experiment was planned to last 14 days, however it was necessary to interrupt it after several days. In a simplified way: the prisoners were breaking down and the wardens were becoming more and more brutal and gradually were beginning to abuse their power.

The marked change of their situation had a grave and unexpected impact on the monitored group of persons. Their behaviour changed in accordance with the role assigned to them. It is a finding, from which a general conclusion can be drawn that under social pressure many people (or maybe all people?) change and can even commit acts that are contrary both to common standards and one's own conscience. The research, which is described in the translation of Mr. Zimbardo's studies published on the occasion of this event under the name of *Power and Evil*, stimulated violent debate. The debate concerned both the very methodology, and general ethical issues. For instance, Hans Eysenck used the expression "Zimbardo's hell" in one of his textbooks. In many other textbooks the whole experiment is described and in other anthologies reprinted as one of the main psychological impetuses for general reflection on the changeability of human actions inspired by changes of social roles, temptation and loss of personal liability.

Soon a broad extrapolation appeared: How is it possible that a number of apparently healthy persons were willing to torture and kill thousands of prisoners in concentration camps? How much violence against civilians surfaced in the Vietnam War or in other conflicts? Where have the young men gone who were at our borders and at the Berlin Wall and who shot passerby or those fleeing

the country? How many persons abused their power during investigations or pursuit of thousands of persons under the former regime? And can we be sure that even today no mistakes in the routine investigations of ordinary persons or asylum seekers occur?

The well-documented publication by C. R. Browning called *Ordinary People*, originally published in 1992, describes the activity of a German police battalion, whose task was to liquidate the Polish Jewish population in one district of Galicia. Members of the battalion were mostly elderly men, small craftsmen or tradesmen from around Hamburg, fathers of families, higher age groups not obligated for military service. They willingly and repeatedly murdered identified victims by a shot at the nape of the neck at point-blank range – often even several times a day. In the background of their action is the apparent obedience of an authority responsible for establishing the targets and methods used. An individual is only a small cog in a large machinery. The Nazi criminals, policemen in totalitarian regimes, members of various gangs and soldiers, who carried out inhuman orders, used this argument for their defence. After all, the recent events that occurred during the CzechTek techno party raise similar questions – on both sides.

Mr. Zimbardo's experiment was conclusive and unique. Many other studies appeared that studied the influence of the social situation and obedience on human actions. Among such studies ranks above all the research conducted by Stanley Milgram, Zimbardo's contemporary, who already at the beginning of 1960s pointed out the risks of obedience. In a suggestive research he proved that upon the instruction of an authoritative experimenter a regular experimental person was willing to punish with an electric shock another person, who had made mistakes in learning in the adjacent room. The punishments gradually increased from weak impulses to stronger, painful and health threatening shocks. The experimental person simulated pain though in fact he did not receive any electrical impulses. He was defending himself verbally, asking for the experiment to be interrupted, was moaning – and fell completely silent at one moment. The other experimental person – mostly a regular student continued to increase the shock intensity when instructed to do so ... The total of 68% of persons completed the experiment and only few opposed the instructions during the original experiment. In most cases the fictitious experimental persons resisted verbally, refused to continue the experiment, developed physiological symptoms of stress or exhaustion, but nevertheless the orders were obeyed.

Specialists – mostly psychiatrists – thought that the experiment would not be viable and that only a clear-cut sadist would fulfil its conditions. They were wrong. The experiment was repeated many times in different countries, with different persons (men – women, different age groups, different races etc.) and the results were basically analogous. There is, however, some chance still: if a person appears and refuses to cooperate, many more people will follow him. If the experiment is conducted outside a laboratory, in a common informal environment with a less authoritative leader, the number of persons, who refuse obedience, is quite considerable. Consequently, is there something completely wrong in the elemental human outfit, as Milgram believed, or is it a complex coincidence of social situations with the characteristics of an individual?

And yet another experiment: The narrow focus of our efforts may considerably reduce our unselfish actions. Selected theology students were sent to another building, where, as part of a supposed training in rhetoric, they were to present a short speech on the topic "a good Samaritan". Another group of students were assigned a common topic related to their studies. If they were instructed that they were pressed for time and must hurry to an indicated building, then in most cases they did not notice a man afflicted by some kind of stroke and requiring assistance crouching down on the staircase leading into the building. The man was overlooked by the very students, who, in a few minutes time, were to elaborate with great dedication on the story of a good Samaritan. Those who

were not in a hurry mostly tried to help the affected in some way. And again extrapolation: how many people in the street fail to notice a person in need of help. How many of them fail to stop their car in case of a traffic accident – after all, I am in a hurry! Frequently also collective irresponsibility wins out. The more people happen to be around, the longer it takes for some of them to help. People often look to one another or pretend not to see anything. However, when one or two persons are present, they try to act much sooner. Many similar findings are documented in professional literature.

One example from childhood: Children are passing from one room to another and in the corridor, where nobody else is present, they pass by a table displaying tempting chocolate candies. They are allowed to take only one, but many of them cannot resist the temptation and grab several of them. However, if a conspicuously large mirror is placed above the table, then they do not dare to cheat. And again: if one of the children fails to obey the instruction even in front of the mirror, then the bad example will make an impression on the others.

We may quote many similar experiments. However, Mr. Zimbardo's experiment is apparently the most convincing. An encounter with it was very stimulating even in the Czech Republic. It was typical however that first lectures were presented at the Katjetovov seminar at the Mathematical and Physical Faculty instead of psychological departments.

### **Second Encounter**

We encountered Mr. Zimbardo for the second time again in connection with the Stanford experiment. The author did not stay behind the walls of the laboratory, but entered the field of real social problems and repeatedly demonstrated his civic responsibility. He appeared in the Senate, local institutions and defended the necessity for a change in prison regime. He often met with lack of understanding, but he did not give up. We learned about this aspect of his activity only sketchily and oftentimes only by hearsay.

In regard to one recent case we finally have the author's direct testimony. It also has been published in the anthology *Power and Evil*. He defended a sergeant, who maltreated prisoners in the army prison in Abu Ghraib. He testified in favour of the sergeant. The actions of the defendant corresponded with the knowledge obtained in the Stanford experiment. He was a young man, knew how to play with small children, but the conditions of his service were unimaginably demanding. A whole set of circumstances resulted in his failure and serious maltreatment of prisoners. The court did not accept Zimbardo's defence. It did not take into account the number of grave circumstances that affected the accused and that he could have only hardly resisted.

At first sight it might appear that the situation perspective on the determination of human actions leads to a sceptical view on human altruism, a citizen's virtues and suggests undue predisposition of humans to incline toward the position of evil forces. There are however also hopeful findings. Even in the context of the above indicated experiment people can be found, who do not succumb to temptation. They resist the orders in the name of ethics, rules of pro-social behaviour, altruism or humane ideals. They may be motivated by religion, civic responsibility or the experience of positive inter-human relations or personal accountability to one's own conscience.

What can we base our hope and reassurance on? Again only several examples. An extensive monograph by Mr. and Mrs. Oliner, who with the support of the Israeli government systematically and with a lapse of time studied people, who helped persecuted Jews during the war even at the risk of their own lives in many instances. The study was conducted in a number of European countries.

Individual fates and stories were carefully documented and analyzed. Even under hard and risky conditions people could be found, who managed to stick to their altruistic and philanthropic principles. Mostly they were individuals – men and women – who came from functional families, in which a certain order reigned, certain rules of conduct applied and by and large a member of the family was active in philanthropic efforts. Their motivation to help was quite obvious – “it is our elemental duty to help the suffering”. No reward was expected and their deeds were not spoken about. The research often had difficulty going through and analysing their deeds – “after all, what they did was self-evident”. There was no special liking for the Jewish population behind their actions. They helped all those in danger and some of them also the Nazis, who were in danger after the war. Now they were the ones in need. What is noticeable and gives some hope: Later many of their children were engaged in humanitarian activities, often in developing countries and again without any claim for glory.

Another perspective is offered by a recent multi-generation research. Two and often even three generations of direct descendants in a family are studied. The transfer of behaviour patterns is often repeated from generation to generation, though the young generation is often convinced that they are quite different from their fathers or mothers. Unfortunately, mostly negative forms of behaviour, predominantly manifestations of aggression, have been monitored. Hopefully the transfer of positive behaviour will also be studied in the near future. A new research of upbringing, namely unintentional upbringing, which often has significant impact on the style of living, is coming into view. Positive patterns may be followed and may rectify a number of various mistakes. This may well be evidenced by volunteer workers of different children's organizations, who can guide and direct the children in a sensible direction.

Further evidence can be provided by information about the formation of a child personality at a very young age. In the first year of life, basic social relations are established between the person, who takes care of them – mostly the mother – and the child. It is an ancient mechanism known from evolutionary psychology and ethology. A firm relationship between the mother and the child is usually described as a strong bond. It is the source of the basic life security of a young child and at the same time a hope for its future positive development.

### **Third Encounter**

This is concentrated on one of the neglected questions of the day-to-day life of an individual. It is the outlook for the future. A typical feature of humans is looking ahead and the time perspective of our aspirations and future efforts. We all have our goals, intentions or plans and we endeavour to achieve them. The current psychological thinking deals namely with the past. In case history important moments characterizing a person are sought, in the narration of one's life story moments appear that have guided the path through one's life, in autobiographies serious positive and negative experiences are identified. Using numerous methods the status presens is analyzed – what am I like, what is my identity, abilities, typical features, social relations and a range of other moments. However, only rarely do we analyse our intentions and goals, both short-term plans and long-term or life-long plans. From literature we know that people who have clear plans and targets ahead of them, are able to formulate better their intentions and ensuing activities, to prioritise and think things out to details of everyday life; they are usually more healthy, more satisfied and resistant to trouble. Even at old age an outlook on the future is important, though with a shorter time horizon... Even ageing people are usually more satisfied, live and accept their troubles and problems better than others. They are even more balanced when it comes to the final point in one's life than individuals living from day to day and having no perspective. Today's laureate has also entered this field. Together with Boyd he created a well thought-over and psychometrically verified

tool for monitoring individual differences in our personal time perspectives. The outcome of his research is that the differences are conditioned by situation and are relatively stable over time. They are manifested in our actual actions, whether it is the orientation of routine activities, their intensity, purposeful activities, looking for new experience, development of social relations, accepting risks, or also abandoning certain positions and contemplation on troubles and conflicts.

The five significant factors that resulted from the extensive comparative research that monitored different population groups are as follows: orientation on the future, present strategies, present feelings of certain hopelessness in relation to the future, past positive experience and past negative experience. The time perspective is an important variable affecting our behaviour, significant choices and decision-making, social relations, contingent temptations, but also our big hopes and challenges. If an individual does not move on the time scale from the past into the future, he may easily give up and focus only on the present moment of his life, which is typical of the consumer way of thinking. Setting one's life targets itself is definitely not enough. It is necessary to think about means to be used for their achievement, about obstacles that may occur and about their prevention. The future undoubtedly has many levels of freedom and may develop in a manner completely different from our expectations. This should not be an excuse for giving up one's intentional outlook for life ahead. Perhaps it is the so much repeated phrases about happy future under communism and at the same time the repeated failure to achieve various five-year and other plans that brings out certain scepticism in the contemplation about the future.

#### **Fourth Encounter**

It is apparent from the style of Zimbardo's thinking that he could not have left unnoticed and without systematic thinking on the issue of contemporary terrorism, especially after 11 September 2001. He was interested in the problem of an early and suitable warning against terrorist acts. How can we be alerted in a timely and convincing manner against the risks – often even at the cost of possible false alarms. Many government organizations are afraid of them because false alarms are usually connected with economic losses and a number of other difficulties. They are, however, negligible when compared to the consequences of unnoticed signals and the occurrence of situations, for which we are unprepared. The reactions of American official authorities or the reasoning of many pseudo-professionals were confusing and often increased the distrust of the government. Fear, non-specific worries and feelings of helplessness then deepen.

Zimbardo used the term “pre-traumatic stress syndrome” that strongly injures mental health of the whole population. Unless reliable information on the extent of possible new attacks is available as well as on the possibilities of reasonable and adequate behaviour, uncertainty will grow. Time alone can hardly heal traumatic anxiety. Zimbardo's conclusions and analysis of seemingly practical advice of how to proceed can be found in the anthology *Power and Evil*. This should be the mandatory literature to be studied also by relevant responsible institutions.

A certain analogy can be found between terrorist attacks and natural disasters that are not caused directly by humans. Our experience with two extensive floods as well as the experience of international solidarity with the Tsunami victims are of two kinds. On the one hand there is a certain helplessness in regard to the sequence of practical actions to be taken and on the other hand there is manifestation of great human solidarity with the victims. Helplessness was markedly evident. How to react to warning signals and, later on, how to solve the situation of evacuated people. Mostly the first things to be dealt with are food and shelter, but we cannot think of a reasonable mental programme for the victims. We often forget about children, who may be traumatized more than adults. Inspiration for real activity with children is lacking.

On the other hand the surging wave of solidarity with the Tsunami victims was the sign of great civic responsibility. Funds were amassed in different accounts and often surpassed official state interventions. People did not handle the question of what to do and how to dispose of the received funds. That was left to the professionals. The feedback on the procedure, on what was managed successfully, what could have been done immediately and what is a long-term problem is often lacking.

From Zimbardo's deliberations on imminent terrorist attacks we may imply that unsuitable level of information for the public may be dangerous in the future and may subdue positive civic involvement. We are grateful also for this warning.

### **Fifth Encounter**

There is another Zimbardo inducement that I consider essential for all of psychology. When he was appointed president of the American Psychological Society in 2002, he turned the attention of psychologists in a new direction. To step out of laboratories and university walls and systematically present to the public conclusive scientific knowledge. To concentrate on extrapolation of our knowledge to schools, education, healthcare, care for the handicapped, to local and state politics and to different organizational measures. He thought this seemingly trivial thought through to organizational details while utilizing the latest means of communication and information. It was the issue of application of scientific knowledge in everyday life of the general public, on which he based his presidential speech at the annual congress of the American Psychological Society. Today we can read also this speech in the published texts.

### **Sixth Encounter**

Today's sixth – and finally also our personal encounter with Mr. Philip Zimbardo is held hic et nunc in this renovated space and renovated auditorium. The prize that is awarded today is only a small appreciation of the merits that our laureate today introduced to the present-day psychology. It is proof that science does not remain enclosed in its own problems but feels great responsibility for curing human problems. I strongly believe that our encounter today will not be the last and that also in the future, the importance of which has already been mentioned, we may look forward to a seventh and further encounters. We are looking forward to Mr. Zimbardo's deliberations on how to look afresh at the problem of mental disorders, how to encourage shy people to live full lives and how to serve the general public.

I am quite confident that the new encounters will also be inspiring and that experimental psychology will develop in the future and, in the long run, help to overcome many problems that are coming at us from all sides. Let's not succumb to pessimism and the predominance of evil forces, but instead let's adopt the concept of learned hope and believe that the message of the laureate today of the prize of Dagmar and Václav Havel's foundation, VIZE 97, will be passed down to us and to our successors in the future.