

THE FINGER TURNS

Part III: There is no out there.

F I R S T

There Is No Out There

The system is out there.

The politicians are out there. The magistrates. The corrections officers. The intake forms that ask what and never why. The \$32 billion and the 60% recidivism and the child at the kitchen table. Out there. In the system. Happening to people who are not us, in places we do not go, processed by institutions we observe from a distance and critique from the outside.

Except.

If you experience something — if it exists anywhere in your world — then on some level, it is your experience. It is not out there. There is no out there. There is only the world, and you are in it, and what happens in it happens in the world you inhabit.

The suffering in the cell is not in a separate world from the one you woke up in this morning. It is in this world. The same one. Continuous with the street you drove down, the coffee you made, the device you're reading this on.

The low hum of wrongness you feel — the sense that something is broken, that the news is too much to fully read, that people are not quite well — that is not you

detecting something outside yourself. That is the texture of the world you actually live in. It lands in your body. It shapes what you expect from strangers. It determines how you set your face on public transport.

The dysfunction of the system is not something happening to someone else somewhere else. It is a property of your experience. Right now. While you read this sentence.

Which means the critique in Parts I and II — of the system, of the courts, of the institutions that ask what and never why — is also a description of the world you are part of. Not observing. Part of. In. With.

Which means the finger, which has been pointing outward for two parts, is now going to do something uncomfortable.

S E C O N D

You Have Broken the Law Today

Not metaphorically.

Speeding. Even by four kilometres. Even on an empty road at 6am. Illegal.

That beer you had before you drove home and told yourself you were fine. The joint at a party at some point in your life. The software you use that you didn't pay for. The thing you downloaded. The tax deduction that was a stretch. The form you signed without reading. The thing you took from work — the pen, the paper, the hour you billed that wasn't quite an hour.

The noise complaint your neighbours haven't made yet. The thing you said that constituted defamation by strict legal definition. The time you were somewhere you weren't supposed to be. The time you drove on something other than the road, in a place other than where it was permitted. Touch someone? It's technically assault or at least could be.

Every single person reading this document has broken the law. Recently. Probably today.

The difference between you and the person in the dock is not virtue. It is not character. It is not the kind of person you are at your core.

It is whether anyone was watching. Whether the circumstances that day pushed a minor illegality into a major one. Whether you had the social capital to be given a warning rather than a charge. Whether the police officer who pulled you over made a decision — and police officers make decisions, constantly, about who gets processed and who gets sent home — in your favour.

The criminal is not a different species from the law-abiding citizen. They are the same species, in different circumstances, watched by different eyes.

Psychologist Philip Zimbardo spent a career documenting what he called the Lucifer Effect — the situational production of harmful behaviour in ordinary people. The Stanford Prison Experiment. Abu Ghraib. Ordinary men. Ordinary women. Specific circumstances. Specific situational pressures. Outcomes that the people themselves, before the situation, would have told you were impossible for them.

Zimbardo, P. (2007). The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil. Random House.

Zimbardo's conclusion was not that people are secretly evil. It was that the situation is more powerful than the character — far more powerful than we want to believe, because believing otherwise makes us feel safe. It makes us feel like we are not the person who would do that.

We are the person who would do that. Under the right — or wrong — circumstances. All of us.

T H I R D

The Homeless Person You Passed

You have passed a homeless person.

More than once. Probably this week. Possibly today.

And in the fraction of a second that the decision happened — to stop, to give something, to make eye contact, to acknowledge the existence of another human being in difficulty — you made a calculation. You kept walking. Or you looked at your phone. Or you felt the pull to do something and felt the other pull, the stronger one, that said not now, not me, I don't have cash, it's complicated, I don't want to make it weird.

And you kept walking.

This is not an accusation. It is a description of something nearly universal. Psychologists John Darley and Daniel Batson ran an experiment in 1973 that has become one of the most cited studies in social psychology. Seminary students — people who had dedicated their lives to a theology of compassion — were asked to walk across a campus to deliver a sermon. Some were told about the Good Samaritan parable specifically. Some were told they were running late. On the path, a confederate slumped in visible distress.

The only variable that predicted whether they stopped to help was whether they were in a hurry.

Not their theology. Not their compassion scores. Not whether they had just read about the Good Samaritan. Whether they were running late.

Darley & Batson, From Jerusalem to Jericho (1973), Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

We do not behave according to our values. We behave according to our circumstances. Then we construct a story about our values to explain it.

The homeless person on the street has a story. They always have a story. You don't know it. The court doesn't know it. The intake form doesn't ask for it.

You passed them. The system processes them. Neither of you knows their name.

F O U R T H

The Lock on the Door

You have a lock on your door.

Most people do. A good one. \$200 or more, because the cheap ones feel insufficient and something about a better lock makes you feel safer even though a determined person will get through either of them and most people who enter your home uninvited do not come through the door anyway.

The lock is not just a security device. It is a philosophical position. It says: what is inside here is mine, and I am willing to pay to signal that, and I would rather pay than share, and the boundary between mine and not-mine is worth maintaining physically, financially, symbolically.

This is not wrong. It is a reasonable response to the world as it is structured.

But consider what you are locking in and what you are locking out. You are locking out the person who might be hungry. The person who might be cold. The person who, in a different arrangement of the world, might be someone you would help freely because you knew them, because they were part of your 150, because they were Dunbar-close rather than stranger-far.

Anthropologist David Graeber observed that for most of human history, the obligation to share with someone in need within your community was not a moral aspiration. It was a social expectation enforced by proximity and mutual dependence. You shared because not sharing had consequences within a network of relationships you could not exit.

The lock on the door is the architecture of a world in which those networks no longer exist. In which the stranger is not a future ally but a potential threat. In which generosity has become optional rather than structural.

And the petty thief who breaks through your lock — do you know their story? Do you know whether the person who took your thing needed it, or was performing a need that was actually about something else entirely, or was making the only move available in a game they never chose to play?

***You locked your door. They broke through it.
The law distinguishes between you clearly. The
root cause analysis is considerably less tidy.***

F I F T H

The Mac on the Desk

The device you are reading this on.

Or the one it was written on. Or both.

The supply chain for consumer electronics runs through conditions that, if they occurred in an Australian workplace, would result in prosecution. Working hours that exceed legal limits. Living arrangements that constitute employer control of employees' bodies. Wages that do not permit the kind of life the person making the device will never own.

This is not disputed. It is documented. It has been documented for years, in investigations commissioned by the companies themselves, in journalism, in academic research, in the reports of NGOs whose entire function is to document it.

You know this.

You bought the device anyway. You are using it now. You did not blink.

Neither did I.

This is not a moral lecture. There is no clean alternative. The entire consumer electronics supply chain has the same structure. Opting out means opting out of the modern economy in a way that is not practically available to most people and would not, in any case, change the conditions for the people making the devices.

But here is what it means for the argument.

We have spent two and a half papers critiquing a system that processes people without understanding their circumstances, that applies generic judgement to specific human situations, that condemns without knowing the causal chain.

And we do this. Every day. Cheerfully. Without blinking. Because the thing is useful and the alternative is inconvenient and the people affected are far away and the connection between our choice and their condition requires a chain of causation we would rather not follow to its end.

We are not critics of the system. We are the system. Consuming its products. Funding its incentives. Looking away from its costs because looking is uncomfortable and the phone is useful.

SIXTH

The Lie You Told

Not a big one, probably.

Just the one where you said you were nearly there when you hadn't left yet. The performance review where you emphasised the good and omitted the complicated. The time you said you were fine when you weren't, and knew it, and the other person knew it, and you both agreed to pretend. The expense that was partially personal filed as entirely business. The reason you gave for not coming that was easier than the real reason.

Dan Ariely spent years studying dishonesty and found something that should have surprised no one but did: almost everyone cheats. A little. Regularly. Within a range that preserves their self-image as an honest person. Not because they are

secretly dishonest but because the self-concept is flexible and the rationalisation is fast and the circumstances made it the easier path.

Ariely, D. (2012). The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty. HarperCollins.

The fraudster who goes to prison cheated more, or was caught, or lacked the social positioning to make their cheating look like something else. They are not a different kind of person. They are a further point on a continuum that includes everyone.

When we stand in judgment of someone for doing a thing we do — in smaller ways, in ways the law doesn't catch, in ways our social context protects — we are not judging a different species.

We are judging a mirror we would rather not look at directly.

S O T H E N

What The Finger Is Actually Pointing At

Not you specifically.

Not guilt. Not self-flagellation. Not the performance of shame that makes us feel like we've addressed something without actually changing anything.

The finger is pointing at the gap.

The gap between what we say we believe and how we live. Between the values we hold and the choices we make when circumstances push in the other direction. Between the framework we can articulate for why the system fails people and the moment we pass the person the system has failed without stopping.

Everyone has this gap. It is not a flaw of character. It is a feature of being a human being in a complex world with limited time and cognitive bandwidth and competing demands and a door that costs \$200 to lock and a device that costs conditions-we-don't-examine to manufacture.

The gap is not the problem.

Refusing to look at it is the problem.

Because the system we have spent two and a half papers critiquing is not an alien imposition. It is the aggregate of the gaps. Every time someone processed a person without asking why. Every time the easier thing was done instead of the right thing. Every time the report was commissioned and shelved because implementation was inconvenient. Every time someone kept walking.

The system is us. Scaled. Institutionalised. Running automatically.

You cannot build a system that asks why, knows the person, and responds to the actual need — from outside the question. You have to start by asking it of yourself.

What is your causal chain? What circumstances produced the choices you're not proud of? What would have had to be different?

Not to excuse. To understand. Because the same curiosity applied inward is the only thing that makes it genuine when applied outward.

The root cause analysis has to include the analyst.

The finger was always pointing outward.

At the system. At the politicians. At the magistrates. At the corrections officers. At the intake forms that ask what and never why.

Turn it around.

It is pointing at everyone who knows.

Including the person reading this sentence.

Now what.