



The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil

Philip G. Zimbardo

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Renowned social psychologist and creator of the "Stanford Prison Experiment," Philip Zimbardo explores the mechanisms that make good people do bad things, how moral people can be seduced into acting immorally, and what this says about the line separating good from evil.

The Lucifer Effect explains how—and the myriad reasons why—we are all susceptible to the lure of “the dark side.” Drawing on examples from history as well as his own trailblazing research, Zimbardo details how situational forces and group dynamics can work in concert to make monsters out of decent men and women.

Here, for the first time and in detail, Zimbardo tells the full story of the Stanford Prison Experiment, the landmark study in which a group of college-student volunteers was randomly divided into “guards” and “inmates” and then placed in a mock prison environment. Within a week, the study was abandoned, as ordinary college students were transformed into either brutal, sadistic guards or emotionally broken prisoners.

By illuminating the psychological causes behind such disturbing metamorphoses, Zimbardo enables us to better understand a variety of harrowing phenomena, from corporate malfeasance to organized genocide to how once upstanding American soldiers came to abuse and torture Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib. He replaces the long-held notion of the “bad apple” with that of the “bad barrel”—the idea that the social setting and the system contaminate the individual, rather than the other way around.

The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil Details

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David says

Well, I need to state my prejudices upfront. I'm kind of a secret fan of Doctor Zimbardo. See, I guess at some point he put together some kind of massive 26-episode series of half-hour lectures on how the mind works for public TV. They would come on at some ungodly hour of the morning so that I used to catch them while scarfing down my nutritious Lucky Charms and locally squozen OJ before leaving for work. Doctor Z would introduce each episode with a kind of geekish seriousness of purpose that one totally had to respect. Plus he would always be wearing some seriously appalling fashion atrocity - most commonly a truly regrettable sports jacket or shirt. But some episodes he'd get those down only to spoil the effect with some kind of hypnotically iridescent tie whose width was at least a decade off the prevailing norm.

But the programs were not actually an insult to the intelligence, for the most part - the material was decently organized, lucidly presented, with a minimum of pomposity. If I'm not mistaken, in recent months Doctor Z has resurfaced on my public TV dial with a **fresh, updated, completely revamped** version of the lectures. One imagines lots of snazzy functional mRI s**t.

But of course that's not Doctor Z's only claim to fame. It's a safe bet the first few sentences of his obituary will define him in terms of the (infamous) "Stanford Prison study". In the early 1960s Stanley Milgram had shocked the scientific community with his series of "obedience experiments" that showed how an apparently strongly hardwired obedience to authority could lead people to commit barbaric acts of cruelty (<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>). A decade later Zimbardo eliminated any possible doubt when a simulated "prison experiment" he was conducting on the Stanford campus had to be discontinued early for ethical reasons because the behavior of the participating students had degenerated into "Lord of the Flies" savagery within a period of only 4 days.

The first 200 pages of this book are given over to a description of the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). The middle third covers lessons learned from SPE and summarizes other experimental work related to the problem of people behaving badly. The final 200 pages discusses events at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, as well as other excesses of the Bush administration in terms of what has been learned about human behavior from the SPE and similar experiments.

To me, it's this final part of the book that is the most interesting. The initial material is readable enough, but seems way over-extended. I suspect that very few people (or the kind of people reading this book) are unaware of the SPE, so summarizing the main findings in 20-30 pages should have been possible, instead of the 200-page account which helps inflate "The Lucifer Effect" to a bloated 550 pages.

That said, I remain a fan of Doctor Zimbardo. Even if the book is a little too long, he is always clear. And though what he has to say can be depressing, it's clearly not wrong. Understanding our own weaknesses and the factors that can allow cruelty and evil to flourish seems more important than ever these days. This is a good book.

Sitaphul says

um, so i decided to stop reading this book because it's not suprising to me (in the LEAST!) that a bunch of college educated, middle-class white kids would act all brutish and prison-guardesque if they didn't have to be responsible for any of their actions, and stuff. hello, blackwater? hello, um, the u.s. army? hello, fox news network? screw situational ethics when white boys have the whole world as their prison den!

also, i stopped reading this book because zimbardo (google his picture! eerie!) almost ran my sister over in his SUV back in her stanford days.

Kq says

This book should be called "The Stanford Prison Experiment and Other Things Regarding How Good People Turn Evil". The first 200 or so pages are about The Stanford Prison Experiment (1971 study involving the psychological effects of prisoners and prison guards). If you took Psychology 101 or 102 in college you more than likely read about it. Anyway, once I reached page 113 I was really wishing for a new topic, but no, it kept going and going--repeating the same subject matter and psychological findings of the Stanford study. Once I saw the light and new subject was finally presented (maybe around page 236) I was pretty burnt out and at that point, I didn't care anymore. I read the rest of the 300 or so pages, however I can't recall anything that I read and I don't care. Pros: Cool title, interesting topic, interesting experiment. Cons: 480 pages too long, not enough about Lucifer.

Katie says

I was excited to read this, since I have a psychology background and had heard that it was a good look at the Stanford Prison Experiment, which I studied in college. I wasn't too impressed with this book though. It is at least 100 pages too long and bogged down by excessive detail, making it read like a numbing textbook. The breakdown is as follows: 200 pages on Zimbardo's Prison Experiment, 100 pages of analysis of the experiment, 75 pages on Abu Ghraib, 75 pages about the Bush administration's culpability, 50 pages on factors for improvement, 25 pages on heroism, and 50 pages of footnotes. The author did not attempt to eliminate his personal biases (even embracing them, calling himself a "bleeding heart liberal" at one point), which really bothered me, since the book was presented as an unbiased view of social behavior as it relates to situational forces. The subject WAS very interesting, but I'd recommend it to a limited audience - those who are schooled in social psychology and/or prison societies, who are comfortable diving into scientific literature, and who won't mind the liberal spin that Zimbardo includes.

Sara Sherra says

A while ago, i found the book title really interesting and decided at once to add the book to my "to-read" list. I was, unfortunately, very disappointed with it, as it turned out to be not quite what i expected. I thought the book was about "Understanding How Good People Turn Evil", when it was just simply "Examples of How Good People Turn Evil". Dr. Zimbardo was excessively thorough regarding the Stanford Prison Experiment and the Abu Ghraib incident, only to the point that proves that ordinary "good" people can "turn bad" when

faced with certain situations, but not *why* or *how it can be avoided*, as the title of the book claims! I just thought a successful psychologist as himself would actually deliver what he promised.

Yasmine Abdelhai says

unnecessary elaboration in regards to the abu graham prison incidents and the stanford prison experiment. The book doesn't not prove a theory or give an understanding of the process of becoming evil. that being said chapter 15, and 16 went briefly over the psychological/ behavioural factors that makes people turn bad and then also briefly how should we deal with evil people when we are faced with situation where they try to dehumanize us etc. but then in the chapter after that he goes and gives examples of people who stood in the face of evil and they were some how punished by the society latter on! :D

i was right all along Human beings are not so human after all
we are doomed ! :D

Eden Prosper says

Philip Zimbardo's *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* was a stimulating read. A lot of psychology books tend to be a bit dry or scientifically wordy, becoming tedious and stodgy. It's refreshing to be able to retain knowledge that can later be reflected on.

The Lucifer Effect delves into the psychology of roles we assume when forced into power struggles. It's a facet of research that reveals the power of social situations and the social construction of reality.

Starting off with a short overview on crimes against humanity, the history of the degradation in Rwanda and Nanking, the horrors and abuse at Abu Ghraib Prison, and the atrocity of Nazi Germany.

The first half of the book is a written reenactment of his *Stanford Prison Experiment* organized in 1971 in which he selected a group of college students to assume the role of prisoners and another group to assume the role of guards, set up in a mock prison, they were to endure a set of prison rules for two weeks. The experiment proved interesting insight into the psychology of sadism, humiliation, and dehumanization, of prisoners surrendering their humanity and compassion to social power.

These chapters are, indeed, monotonous and are lagging in interest; however I found them to have a reasonably significant share in revealing the pattern of thought that we undergo when put in these situations.

His aspiration with this study was to differentiate between dispositional behaviors and situational, in which we overemphasize personality in explaining any behavior while concurrently underemphasizing situational influences. The imagined threat of being cast outside the "in-group" coupled with the threat of rejection. This hits home, living in a society that encourages individualism. Typically, roles are tied to specific situations; they are enacted when one is in that situation. Yet some roles are sinister, and can become who we are most of the time.

Most interesting are the chapters following the review of the *SPE* in which Zimbardo analyses the psychological transformation of the human mind under pressure.

The other half of the book breaks down the psychology of social dynamics in power, conformity, obedience, deindividuation, dehumanization, and the evil of inaction finishing with a very intense chapter on Abu Ghraib's abuses of power, interrogations and tortures which is wrapped up by putting our government's perverse, and conspiratorial system on trial as an influence for these war crimes and crimes against humanity and what can be done to prevent future abuses.

At last the book ends with a chapter on resisting situational influences and celebrating heroism which brings to our attention that, although heroes *seem* to be few and far between just as the "bad apples" *seem* to be, the banality of evil shares much with the banality of heroism. We are just as capable of doing good as we are of doing evil. Just as evil is unconsciously learned, so we can learn strategies of resistance towards evil deeds.

This was a liberating read for me as it raised my consciousness to underlying psychological evil in the human condition. As an ordinary person, I can be seduced into behaving in evil ways under the sway of powerful systematic and situational forces. Only by being made aware of my influential limitations, can I then make the ethical choice between the permeable line between good and evil as we are not slaves to the power of situational forces, and we can learn to resist and oppose them. Such knowledge can release us all from subjugation to the mighty grasp of conformity, compliance, persuasion, and other forms of social influence and coercion. After all, we are only human. Complex, yet very far from perfect.

I highly recommend this book if you're willing to learn more about how you subconsciously tick.

"Each of us is the end product of the complex development and specialization that have grown out of millions of years of evolution, growth, adaptation, and coping. Our species has reached its special place on Earth because of our remarkable capacity for learning, for language, for reasoning, for inventing, and for imagining new and better futures. Every human being has the potential to perfect the skills, talents, and attributes we need to go beyond surviving to thrive and enhance our human condition."

Ana says

A classic on the subject, Zimbardo tackles in this book the longest description and explanation of his Stanford Prison Experiment, along with two other main themes: the Abu Ghraib abuses and, in the last chapter, heroism and altruism. Now, of course I am a little biased (at the moment I am using his study as a building block for an essay on obedience and my Social Psychology paper was on Abu Ghraib), but I loved this book. I love the subject, I love the writing, I find the entire theme endlessly fascinating and also - don't tell anyone - I really like Zimbardo. I think he is a great psychologist who happened to conduct the right experiment at the right time, and his work on heroism and altruism could truly change the way we raise our children and the way our societies respond to human rights violations and other morally unjustifiable things.

For anyone interested in the "psychology of evil", situational vs dispositional factors, oppressive systems - or for anyone who comes with a historical interest from the side of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th and 21st Century - this is truly a book for you. I would argue, one of the best works on a branch of psychology, ever.

Thomas Edmund says

As a huge psych nerd I was really happy to stumble across this book in the local library. For those who don't know and/or have forgotten psyc101 Zimbardo is the professor behind the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment. The seminal experiment where (Spoiler alert I guess) where ordinary young men were put in a simulated prison situation (randomly assigned to prisoners and guards, mind) and the whole thing had to be shut down before the week ended due to inhumane abuse and practices.

The Lucifer Effect is the first time Zimbardo has opened up with a first hand account of the whole experiment which is equal parts intriguing and horrifying. The majority of the first part of the book (and the books as a whole) is devoted to the experiment, and while I found it enthralling I suspect anyone looking for more pop psychology would find the section very heavy given its a blow-by-blow analysis of the experiment. The most twisting thing about it is hearing how sucked into the role Zimbardo himself got and how far it all had to go before it stopped.

The central section covers broader literature on conformity, explaining how human beings can be heavily influenced to do evil by their situations, systems and roles. This section was really interesting and well presented, being quite short and sweet comparatively, reviewing studies such as what could be called the Prison study's sister experiment the Milgrim Shock experiments and Asch's original social conformity papers.

The penultimate section deals with Zimbardo's experience with the Abu Gharib prison. This section is by far the most horrifying and challenging to read, as Zimbardo describes and analyzes the military prison run in the heart of Iraq. I suspect many would find this section grueling and difficult to read but ultimately the lessons learned are important ones.

Finally Zimbardo concludes with advice on heroism and resisting systematic and situational pressure to do wrong. I found this section hit and miss. Providing advice for resisting situational pressure was invaluable, the sections theorizing on the make-up of heroes was a little idealistic and theoretical compared to the robustly conceptualized other sections.

In total Lucifer Effect is a scary but valuable read, at around 500 pages with heavy material it is not for the faint of heart, but I am really glad Dr Zimbardo shared his story and knowledge his insights and knowledge cannot be overvalued.

Temz says

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Bookdragon Sean says

Zimbardo fucked up, BIG TIME.

During the "Stanford Prison Experiment," an experiment he created, he was part of the actual testing and also became victim to the traps the other participants fell into.

The idea was to separate the participants into two groups, guards and prisoners with Zimbardo taking the role of prison overseer in a monitored environment. But things quickly went from weird to damn right unethical. Instead of simply playing the roles assigned to them, everybody involved actually became the roles. The guards became violent, the prisoners became unhinged and unstable and Zimbardo himself became rather tyrannical and uncaring. The experiment would have continued if his girlfriend, at the time, didn't break through to him and show him how messed up things were.

It almost erupted

"The most apparent thing that I noticed was how most of the people in this study derive their sense of identity and well-being from their immediate surroundings rather than from within themselves, and that's why they broke down—just couldn't stand the pressure—they had nothing within them to hold up against all of this."

Zimbardo is rather embarrassed at his own part, understandably. But he still used the findings of the experiment to theorise why it actually happened and considered how normal people can become violent and evil so quickly. It's all about situational factors and conformity. The men adapted to their roles all too quickly and the power given to the guards was theirs to exploit at their own will. The separation of men into two factions also helped to evoke as dangerous "us" and "them" attitude allowing for an unsympathetic approach to others.

The Lucifer Effect discusses the psychology of roles we take on when forced into power struggles. It's a strong piece of research, and Zimbardo theorises quite heavily. His assumptions on his own experiments are grounded, though he takes them much further afield and considers many violent prisons. As logical as some of his argument are, at this stage they are only arguments rather than findings. I much preferred the first section of the book, the part about his research, rather than his speculations on situations with separate cultural and social factors.

What *The Lucifer Effect* shows us though is the dangers of conformity and where it can lead us. Social conditioning plays a huge part in our cognitive makeup, a part we're not always aware of until it's too late. I really appreciated the author's honesty; it must have been hard to write a book about one's own shortcomings.

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The only down side, obviously this book is a bit wordy. There were times when I put the book down and didn't bother with it for days on end. I know that some people just skipped to the "good stuff," but I stuck it out, having read the whole thing. I'm glad that I did, because of the social implications and discoveries that

you get from these chapters of basic “setup” or “premise,” it really gives you a more in depth understanding of what happens later in the book.

Very interesting read although a bit tough at times.

Selene Matheson says

I had to read this for a psychology class in college.

George Hu says

Well, interesting title and interesting subject, but I highly doubt his hypothesis. This book was borne out of Philip Zimbardo's work with a U.S. army soldier, who was one of the prison guards at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. Zimbardo is also the one who ran the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment in the 1970s. Basically, his premise in this book is that circumstances shape the individual, and our actions can be molded by the circumstances that we are in. E.g., it was the duress and egregious circumstances suffered by the participants in the Stanford Prison Experiment and at Abu Ghraib that led them to commit such heinous acts. However, he leaves many questions unanswered. What is it within us that CAUSES us to respond to circumstances in that negative fashion, as opposed to the other way around? He attempts to explain evil with the circumstantial and phenomenological--utterly insufficient and unsophisticated at best. It's interesting, but naive. Forgettable really, even as a psychological resource. I heard him speak at the 2007 APA Convention in San Francisco--forgettable as well except for Hollywood-style theatrics to illustrate his point. As one who provides therapy to Iraq veterans myself, there is much more to the roots of human evil than, "My circumstances made me do it." Want a better resource? Read "The Problem of Pain" by C.S. Lewis. Much more worth your time.

K says

Be forewarned -- this is not a relaxing book on any level.

Having said that, it's pretty fantastic. How good people turn evil is a huge question, more ambitious than most authors would undertake and probably a set-up for disappointment as who can possibly answer that? And I admit, Zimbardo's answers are incomplete but still pretty impressive.

According to Zimbardo, when we try to explain good people committing evil deeds we tend to rely on what's called dispositional explanations -- it's about THEM, their personality, their character, the fact that they are one of those few "bad apples" that spoils the barrel. Zimbardo, a prominent social psychologist, strongly advocates replacing this thinking with a situational explanation -- the idea that the situation is a set-up for bringing out evil qualities in any normal person, or that we should blame the "bad barrel" for creating the "bad apples" rather than the other way around.

Zimbardo makes his case convincingly with a level of detail that feels overwhelming at times but is necessary in order to help the reader truly appreciate his position (his writing style also balances a scholarly

and academic tone with highly personal insights, which serve to make the book more engaging). He first explores his famous experiment, the Zimbardo prison experiment of 1971, where he randomly assigned college students to the roles of "prisoner" and "guard," staged the "prisoners'" arrests, and brought the prisoners to a mock prison he set up in a basement at Stanford University. Although the experiment was meant to last two weeks, it was disbanded after five days because everyone got way too carried away. The guards became completely absorbed in their roles and psychologically abused the prisoners; the prisoners, for their part, quickly displayed signs of learned helplessness and mostly broke rather than successfully resisting their guards. Note -- every participant in the experiment was prescreened for signs of preexisting psychopathology and all were found to be completely normal.

After describing this experiment in much detail, Zimbardo goes on to discuss the ethics of the experiment and to apply it to a variety of prisoner-guard situations. He then describes other social psychology experiments which further support his situational theory of normal people turning evil, culminating in a detailed discussion of the events at Abu Ghraib and making convincing arguments for the idea that the situation, and the system, carried more of the blame than did the individual guards (although of course he does not completely absolve them of personal responsibility).

Zimbardo's book is well-written, intelligent, and ultimately convincing. It did not address one question I had: what about people who you think are good who surprise you by doing evil things in an apparently normal context? Was I simply wrong about them, or is there a more complicated explanation? But with that said, this was as complete an answer as you're probably going to get to why the Nazis, the Abu Ghraib prison guards, and others can seem like normal people through and through and then turn around and engage in cruelty.

The book's style as well as its content make it a difficult read at times but it is ultimately very rewarding. Highly recommended.

Nick Imrie says

I read this book years and years ago, and at the time I thought it was amazing. The Stanford Prison experiment was especially striking; totally changed how I thought about human behaviour. But if anyone thinks the same then I'd encourage you to read the accounts that cast doubt on it.

The medium blog: [The Lifespan of a Lie](#)

And this Twitter thread: [Jay Van Bavel](#)

Letitia says

It is extremely difficult to rate this book because I have a thousand thoughts about it. So I am rating it a 4-star because I DO want people to read it. However if I were ranking Zimbardo as an author alone, I would give it 2 stars.

Despite Zimbardo's abysmal efforts as a writer, this is a fascinating book, which examines many known and unknown studies on "evil." To read this, I recommend skimming the whole section where Z describes the Stanford Prison Experiment. Maybe watch the videos online, instead. This section of the book is tedious, and

Z summarizes it all repeatedly anyway. When it really gets interesting is AFTER the description of SPE, when Z collects many other studies with a far better methodology that look at what makes morally good or neutral people decide to do cruel things.

This is the stuff that keeps social scientists awake at night, and I love it! Z draws on experiences with Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, Third Reich, and all of them are fascinating and horrifying examples of what seemingly good people will do to each other when an authority tells them to. I highly recommend this book for discussion groups, book clubs, etc. If you can muddle through Z's repetitive descriptions and truly awful methodology, this book brings up really fascinating questions about who we are as individuals, and whether who we are as a group is comprised of something totally different.

Rebecca says

Philip Zimbardo's *The Lucifer Effect* is a difficult read, not because its premise is particularly startling, but because its examination of the psychology of evil shows it to be disturbingly simple. By placing each act of breathtaking cruelty beside a description of its perpetrator--invariably an ordinary, psychologically normal person--Zimbardo makes clear that we are just animals socialized into one behavior, and easily socialized into another. And though he never outright asks it, every page of his book prompts the impossible question: What kind of monster are you?

Zimbardo spends nearly 500 pages supporting an argument that's convincing by page two: Situations entice people to commit heroic acts and unspeakable atrocities alike. With little provocation, formerly good people will discard their values entirely. Some of the examples were new to me, such as Pauline, a women's empowerment lecturer in Rwanda who ordered the genocidaires under her charge, "Before you kill the women, you need to rape them." Other examples are well known--millions of World War II-era Europeans turned on their Jewish neighbors, the horrifying Rape of Nanjing, and many more.

And while the author tries time and again to complicate his argument, to mitigate the bleakness of his premise, those attempts feel insufficient. He assures readers that--although social systems seize control of our ethics, elicit our worst selves, and punish those who refuse to comply--people can still be dissuaded from committing atrocities. We can learn to resist grotesque situational pressures by simply applying Zimbardo's handy maxims: "I respect just authority but rebel against unjust authority," "I want group acceptance, but value my independence," "I will assert my unique identity," etc.

But, in fact, Zimbardo's sociological studies and historical survey offer ample evidence that people who defy the demands of the societal machine are rare, and that they are mostly punished for their moral courage. American serviceman Hugh Thompson stopped the My Lai massacre by aiming machine guns at his superiors and ordered medical evacuations of wounded Vietnamese civilians--and as "punishment was required to fly the most dangerous helicopter missions again and again. He was shot down five times, breaking his backbone and suffering lasting psychological scars from his nightmare experience. It took thirty years before the military recognized his heroic deeds... Paradoxically, Lieutenant Calley (an orchestrator of the massacre) was treated as a hero."

Certainly people are to blame for the moral crimes they commit, and yet it seems somehow flippant to assume that all people can avoid the blameworthy road, that all people are capable of risking hardship or death to resist descending into evil--especially when submitting to situational demands is the psychologically normal (and perhaps healthy) thing to do. The stronger and sadder argument, the one that Zimbardo tries to

avoid making, is the one his own research supports: Most of us are available for total moral conquest by our bosses, parents, peers, and government, irredeemably adrift on currents much stronger than ourselves.

Nikki says

This is a horribly difficult book to read, not because Zimbardo's writing is bad or the subject is uninteresting, but because it exposes how easily people can be manipulated into a role — and I don't just mean the guards, but also the prisoners. It's important because it examines, in minute detail, the events of a now infamous experiment: the Stanford Prison Experiment. This was run, not by Stanley Milgram, as people often think, but by Philip Zimbardo, and even he became caught up in the act of it. It wasn't even a very convincing prison, and yet it quickly made both guards and prisoners act their roles. And not even them, but people outside it who should have seen through the illusion, like the chaplain.

Both this experiment and Stanley Milgram's experiments are kind of horrifying, because we don't want to think it's that easy. If you read *Behind the Shock Machine*, by Gina Perry (the title links to my review), she shows that it's not that easy — Milgram's experiments were honed to a fine point, and only the results which supported his conclusions most spectacularly were published. But still, the fact remains that you don't have to scratch far below the surface to find something unsavoury about the way humans seem to act.

As Dar Williams says in 'Buzzer': I get it now, I'm the face, I'm the cause of war; we don't have to blame white-coated men anymore.

This book, this experiment, isn't all there is to be said about human nature, of course. But it's an important account of something which revolutionised our understanding of human psychology, and shone a light on things we need to examine — even if they turn out not to hold as true as we fear. Kudos to Zimbardo for his unflinching discussion of everything that went on in the experiment, and every time he failed to safeguard the interests of the participants.

Originally posted [here](#).
