

July 2013

Review of "The Lucifer Effect. Understanding How Good People Turn Evil"

Maximiliano E. Korstanje
University of Palermo, Argentina

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.pacificu.edu/eip>

Recommended Citation

Korstanje, Maximiliano E. (2013) "Review of "The Lucifer Effect. Understanding How Good People Turn Evil"," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 14: Iss. 2, Article 15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1482>

Book Review | *The Lucifer Effect.* *Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*

Maximiliano E. Korstanje

Published online: 27 July 2013

© Maximiliano E. Korstanje 2013

The Lucifer Effect. Understanding How Good People Turn Evil; Phillip Zimbardo. New York: Random House, 2007, 576 pp., \$18.00 pbk., ISBN 978-140006411-3

In 1971 the American psychologist Phillip Zimbardo conducted an innovative experiment; known as the Stanford Prison experiment, which received a lot of criticism. Seventy-five students took part in a polemic study that emulated the life of a prison. Some scholars exerted considerable criticism on the structure of the test. The role of observer, in this vein, was not neutral. Others launched to invalidate his ecological dynamics, since for them many of the environmental conditions were arbitrarily imposed on the players involved. Quite aside from this, what would be interesting to discuss is to what an extent Zimbardo's findings are applicable today when the government is seriously questioned by the violation to rights committed by US army forces on Muslim prisoners post-Iraq invasion. The Lucifer effect not only accumulates years of investigation and experience in Zimbardo's career, but also gives an insight on the relation between adjusted behaviour and rules.

To enhance our egos, most of us are prone to think "we are special." The thesis of this impressive book is that our lives are circumscribed to a self-perception of our behaviour respecting to rules, policies, laws and pressures of all nature that limits our being in this world. Nonetheless, behavior changes when the self is adapted to new rules and authorities. This poses an interesting question that concerned many philosophers over years: what is evil?

In perspective, a classical definition explains that evil consists in intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize, or destroy innocent others. From his viewpoint, however, evil represents an incrementalist thing, which all we are able to do depending on the social context. Since our human nature is being changed constantly, evil-

doers are not necessarily supernatural entities or monsters; they are humans who only want to be accepted by others. The most polemical side of Zimbardo's thesis points out that a good man may become an evil-doer at a later date if some environmental variables are facilitated. The dispositional theory may be of help for readers of understanding (not judging) the evolutionary nature of evil.

Following this argument, enriched by some empirical cases, this book explores the nature of evil throughout the polemical Stanford Prison experiment, as well as denouncing the human right violations in Abu Ghraib prison. The author offers substantial evidence that people seem to be influenced by powerful situational forces where the self is faced with a new setting. Somehow, people and rules are in an ongoing state of negotiation. Our psychological nature of perception reveals that the significance of other acts are examined following dispositional than situational "qualities," while we are prone to justify our behaviour limiting our acts to situational contexts.

Zimbardo presents the example of inquisition as the most vivid paradox that explains how evil evolves. While Church and states devoted considerable efforts, time and money to fight the evil, their methods were so evil that generated a large-scale suffering as never before. The tactics of torture not only represented the ultimate innovation of human sadism, but also they do not achieve their primary goal, this means the extermination of witches from Europe. To shed light on this point, Zimbardo develops a theory of power, which is based on the role played by ideology in mediating between self and its institutions.

Power, to some extent, would be enrooted in much deeper systems whose values are carefully selected and socialized. The process of indoctrination, with the use of disciplinary instruments, appeals to resistance and vice-versa. The legitimacy of elites rests on in their abilities to design the values, rules and laws; the rest of citizens should obey. It is surprising to see that the direction of the majority is widely accepted by almost all members, by fear or doubt. To put this in another way, power lies on the persons (elite) who design the legal framework of institutions, while resistance emerges only when the rule is applied. Under some conditions, the world of morality goes against the rules. Zimbardo adds, philosophy has witnessed how torture and human rights violations are easier to be digested if the other-body is dehumanized. The archetype of the enemy, as another who wants to destroy us as a community, not only can be encouraged by unscrupulous politics, but also paves the way for the advent of evil. The stereotyped concepts of the others are often accompanied with a public fear which legitimates policies and practices that otherwise would be rejected. Even a state, which supposedly is oriented to ensure the collective well being, may fall under the paradox of evil. The following paragraph seems to be self-explanatory:

The most extreme instance of this hostile imagination at work is of course when it leads to genocide, the plan of one people to eliminate from existence all those who are conceptualized as their enemy. We are aware of some of the ways in which Hitler's propaganda machine transformed Jewish neighbours, co-workers, even friends into despised enemies of state who deserved the "final solution." (p. 11).

And of course, genocides and rapes are not only blamed on Hitler's regime; the 20th century faced serious ethical dilemmas respecting to the rights of intervening states that were suspected of ethnic-cleansing, genocide and other atrocities. This point suggests that moral disasters are condemned to be repeated, if people do not learn the lessons. But do we have a lesson from this?

Zimbardo responds that ordinary men can be directed to commit evil acts if morality can be disabled. Like compassionate behavior, cruelty selects some moral values while ignoring others. Any physical abuse, perpetrated against prisoners (plotting a parallel between Stanford Experiment in US soil and Abu Ghraib in Iraq) denotes not only the degree of impunity (understood as the avoidance to punishment) but also the vulnerability of prisoners, some of them subject to an ideological discourse. One might speculate that the conformity of the self-respecting to laws would explain why evil surfaces. It is important not to lose sight that good men placed in bad atmospheres can adapt their values to do what the rest do. If torture, crime and other human rights violations are allowed accordingly to a previous process of dehumanization, along with mechanisms often employed to reduce the inner dissonance, it is only question of time until he adapts his environmental values.

A good person may be an evil-doer when chooses the "tyranny of conformity", or the blind obedience to unmoral orders. Of course, although anonymity offers some shelter for self-doubting personalities, this does not represents a pretext. It is interesting to see how in some contexts, guards may encourage acts of sadism alluding to order-abiding behavior. In this token, Zimbardo brilliantly goes on to acknowledge that "*my earlier research highlighted the power of masking one's identity to unleash aggressive acts against other people in situations that gave permission to violate the usual taboos against interpersonal violence*" (p. 25).

The expectations of social roles are shaped by sets of rules and the ways they are fixed. Guard vs. prisoner orientations seems to be determined by the disciplinary mechanism of power, which adjusts the boundaries of morality. First of all, to justify acts of humiliation on inmates, guards stated they presented serious problems or exhibited themselves as trouble-makers. What is more than important to discuss in Zimbardo's book is that detour of one feeds the violence and its pertinent justifications in others. The dialectic relationship

between dominators and dominated is based on the discourse of violence. Unlike Abu Ghraib's prison, the Stanford experiment did not allow real weapons. The sentiment of subordination was centered on a mindful disposition of agents to occupy their roles. Guards behaved as real guards, while prisoners were real prisoners. In doing so, guards prioritized to ensure the sense of security of their institutions, though their acts violated the human condition of life. At the Stanford experiment, order was indeed maintained until everything went out of control. This research demonstrated two things: first and foremost, emulations may enable real reactions, and second, psychological fear serves as a disciplinary temporal tactic, which sooner or later leads towards social disobedience. The paradox of the Lucifer effects, the metaphor Zimbardo uses, lies in the fact that disobedience corresponds with reason and effects of law and order. Guards recur to violent tactics upon inmates because they want to keep the order and prisoners fall into the dichotomy to accept and defy this authority. They passively accept their role as prisoners, until the revolts. This means to Zimbardo's preliminary words in the preface, evil attracts but repels at the same time. This valuable book reminds us that the potential of perversion is rooted in human nature, when conformity and obedience upends the subject's individuality. Surely, the process of dehumanization makes things easier for those who are committing a crime (this is exactly what Zimbardo called moral disengagement). To set an example, if a guard rejects an order to violate the condition of any prisoner, that guard must not only be degraded but also transformed into a prisoner. This seems to be what Lucifer's downfall emulates.

To cut the long story short, the moral order is symbolic. If the personhood is excluded from the circle of humankind, morality should not be applied on to protect the integrity of the victim. Putting aside some groups from the sphere of humanity, dehumanizers gain impunity to do what they want. Whenever people stand objectified as things or goods, what they suffer are not considered crimes in the strict sense of the word. The passivity of some actors or evil of inaction explains why the agent opts not to take a course of action, when its ontological safety is at risk. A good worker in a certain organization may do terrible things, without any will to do it. This type of alienated-mind, well described by Arendt, allows evil to flourish.

On a closer look, Zimbardo argues convincingly that situations and institutions matter simply because people are not passive objects. They select the convenient behavior according to the climate in which they stand, optimizing the benefits to minimize the costs. This is the logic that remains behind any massacre or genocide. The following excerpt reflects the explicit argument of the project:

People usually select their settings they will enter or avoid and can change the setting by their presence and their actions, influence others in that social sphere, and

transform environment in myriad ways. More often than not, we are active agents capable of influencing the course of events that our live take and also of shaping our destinies. Moreover, human behaviour and human societies are greatly affected by fundamental biological mechanisms as well as cultural values and practices (p 320).

To be honest, this profound investigation contrasts with the classical idea that people exert full control of their acts (sometimes undermining the situational factors), as well as providing a fertile ground for expanding the philosophical understanding of evil. This is a masterful work; it is highly recommended to specialists in criminality, legal justice and imprisonment-related theories. The dynamics of how the notions of evil-perpetrators work and run in parallel with heroic deeds is the main credit of *Zimbardo*. The “banality of evil” can be equated with ordinary acts of heroism. The meanings of acts are framed by the cultural conjuncture. Following the rhetoric of *Zimbardo*, heroic status connotes social attributions, which confer honor for one person for his acts, but not for their effects. Per the system of values in certain groups, a suicidal terrorist can be named as hero whereas in other circumstance, the same behavior is morally condemned as an act of cowardice. Definitions of heroism are socially negotiated, with respect to aspects associated with culture and time. Additionally, our psyche encompasses neither good nor evil. Both behaviors, undoubtedly, surface only if a situation leads to play a role, which moves individuals to act in a special way, from inaction to action. At the same time, under these matrixes one may help or harm others, depending upon the institutional goals. Undoubtedly, *The Lucifer effects* displays a solid argument, which after decades of investigation, stimulates a new debate in ethical philosophy; in other words, a daunting and inspiring work that will transcend the passing of years.