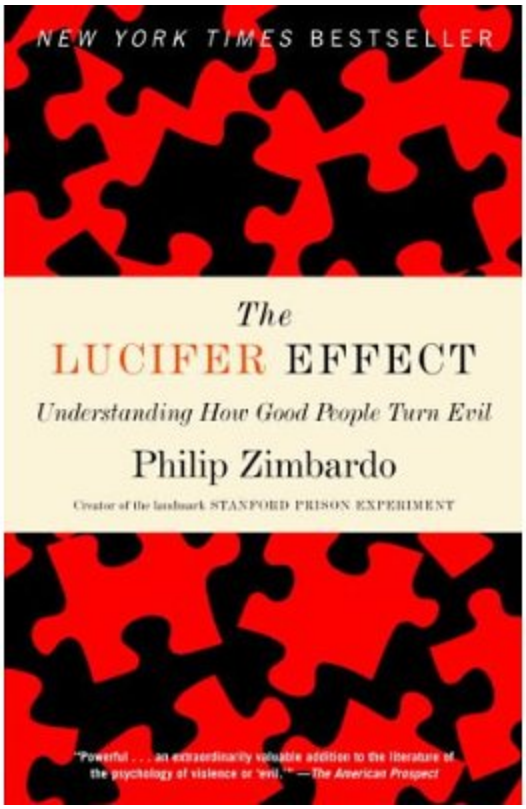


THE

**LUCIFER**

**EFFECT**

*Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*

Philip Zimbardo

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First Edition

# Book design by Mercedes Everett

Dedicated to the serene heroine of my life,

Christina Maslach Zimbardo

Preface

I wish I could say that writing this book was a labor of love; it was not that for a

single moment of the two years it took to complete. First of all, it was emotionally

painful to review all of the videotapes from the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE)

and to read over and over the typescripts prepared from them. Time had dimmed

my memory of the extent of creative evil in which many of the guards engaged,

the extent of the suffering of many of the prisoners, and the extent of my pas-

sivity in allowing the abuses to continue for as long as I did—an evil of inaction.

I had also forgotten that the first part of this book was actually begun thirty

years ago under contract from a different publisher. However, I quit shortly after

beginning to write because I was not ready to relive the experience while I was still

so close to it. I am glad that I did not hang in and force myself to continue writing

then because this is the right time. Now I am wiser and able to bring a more ma-

ture perspective to this complex task. Further, the parallels between the abuses at

Abu Ghraib and the events in the SPE have given our Stanford prison experience

added validity, which in turn sheds light on the psychological dynamics that con-

tributed to creating horrific abuses in that real prison.

A second emotionally draining obstacle to writing was becoming personally

and intensely involved in fully researching the Abu Ghraib abuses and tortures.

As an expert witness for one of the MP prison guards, I became more like an in-

vestigative reporter than a social psychologist. I worked at uncovering everything

I could about this young man, from intensive interviews with him and conversa-

tions and correspondence with his family members to checking on his back-

ground in corrections and in the military, as well as with other military personnel

who had served in that dungeon. I came to feel what it was like to walk in his boots

on the Tier 1A night shift from 4 P.M. to 4 A.M. every single night for forty nights

without a break.

As an expert witness testifying at his trial to the situational forces that con-

**X**

# Preface

tributed to the specific abuses he had perpetrated, I was given access to all of the

many hundreds of digitally documented images of depravity. That was an ugly

and unwelcomed task. In addition, I was provided with all of the then-available

reports from various military and civilian investigating committees. Because I

was told that I would not be allowed to bring detailed notes to the trial, I had to

memorize as many of their critical features and conclusions as I could. That cog-

nitive challenge added to the terrific emotional strain that arose after Sergeant

Ivan "Chip" Frederick was given a harsh sentence and I became an informal psy-

chological counselor for him and his wife, Martha. Over time, I became, for them,

"Uncle Phil."

I was doubly frustrated and angry, first by the military's unwillingness to ac-

cept any of the many mitigating circumstances I had detailed that had directly

contributed to his abusive behavior and should have reduced his harsh prison

sentence. The prosecutor and judge refused to consider any idea that situational

forces could influence individual behavior. Theirs was the standard individualism

conception that is shared by most people in our culture. It is the idea that the fault

was entirely "dispositional," the consequence of Sergeant Chip Frederick's freely

chosen rational decision to engage in evil. Added to my distress was the realiza-

tion that many of the "independent" investigative reports clearly laid the blame

for the abuses at the feet of senior officers and on their dysfunctional or "absentee

landlord" leadership. These reports, chaired by generals and former high-ranking

government officials, made evident that the military and civilian chain of com-

mand had built a "bad barrel" in which a bunch of good soldiers became trans-

formed into "bad apples."

Had I written this book shortly after the end of the Stanford Prison Experiment,

I would have been content to detail the ways in which situational forces are more

powerful than we think, or that we acknowledge, in shaping our behavior in

many contexts. However, I would have missed the big picture, the bigger power for

creating evil out of good—that of the System, the complex of powerful forces that

create the Situation. A large body of evidence in social psychology supports the

concept that situational power triumphs over individual power in given contexts.

I refer to that evidence in several chapters. However, most psychologists have

been insensitive to the deeper sources of power that inhere in the political, eco-

nomic, religious, historic, and cultural matrix that defines situations and gives

them legitimate or illegitimate existence. A full understanding of the dynamics of

human behavior requires that we recognize the extent and limits of personal

power, situational power, and systemic power.

Changing or preventing undesirable behavior of individuals or groups re-

quires an understanding of what strengths, virtues, and vulnerabilities they

bring into a given situation. Then, we need to recognize more fully the complex of

situational forces that are operative in given behavioral settings. Modifying them,

or learning to avoid them, can have a greater impact on reducing undesirable in-



dividual reactions than remedial actions directed only at changing the people in

the situation. That means adopting a public health approach in place of the stan-

dard medical model approach to curing individual ills and wrongs. However, un-

less we become sensitive to the real power of the System, which is invariably

hidden behind a veil of secrecy, and fully understand its own set of rules and regu-

lations, behavioral change will be transient and situational change illusory.

Throughout this book, I repeat the mantra that attempting to understand the

situational and systemic contributions to any individual's behavior does not ex-

cuse the person or absolve him or her from responsibility in engaging in immoral,

illegal, or evil deeds.

In reflecting on the reasons that I have spent much of my professional career

studying the psychology of evil—of violence, anonymity, aggression, vandalism,

torture, and terrorism—I must also consider the situational formative force act-

ing upon me. Growing up in poverty in the South Bronx, New York City, ghetto

shaped much of my outlook on life and my priorities. Urban ghetto life is all about

surviving by developing useful "street-smart" strategies. That means figuring out

who has power that can be used against you or to help you, whom to avoid, and

with whom you should ingratiate yourself. It means deciphering subtle situa-

tional cues for when to bet and when to fold, creating reciprocal obligations, and

determining what it takes to make the transition from follower to leader.

In those days, before heroin and cocaine hit the Bronx, ghetto life was about

people without possessions, about kids whose most precious resource in the ab-

sence of toys and technologies was other kids to play with. Some of these kids be-

came victims or perpetrators of violence; some kids I thought were good ended up

doing some really bad things. Sometimes it was apparent what the catalyst was.

For instance, consider Donny's father, who punished him for any perceived

wrongdoing by stripping him naked and making him kneel on rice kernels in the

bathtub. This "father as torturer" was at other times charming, especially around

the ladies who lived in the tenement. As a young teenager, Donny, broken by that

experience, ended up in prison. Another kid took out his frustrations by skinning

cats alive. As part of the gang initiation process we all had to steal, fight against

another kid, do some daring deeds, and intimidate girls and Jewish kids going to

synagogue. None of this was ever considered evil or even bad; it was merely obey-

ing the group leader and conforming to the norms of the gang.

For us kids systemic power resided in the big bad janitors who kicked you off

their stoops and the heartless landlords who could evict whole families by getting

the authorities to cart their belongings onto the street for failure to pay the rent. I

still feel for their public shame. But our worst enemy was the police, who would

swoop down on us as we played stickball in the streets (with a broomstick bat and

Spalding rubber ball). Without offering any reason, they would confiscate our

stickball bats and force us to stop playing in the street. Since there was not a play-

ground within a mile of where we lived, streets were all we had, and there was lit-

# Preface

tle danger posed to citizens by our pink rubber ball. I recall a time when we hid the

bats as the police approached, but the cops singled me out to spill the beans as to

their location. When I refused, one cop said he would arrest me and as he pushed

me into his squad car my head smashed against the door. After that, I never

trusted grown-ups in uniform until proven otherwise.

With such rearing, all in the absence of any parental oversight—because in

those days kids and parents never mixed on the streets—it is obvious where my

curiosity about human nature came from, especially its darker side. Thus, *The Lu-*

*cifer Effect* has been incubating in me for many years, from my ghetto sandbox

days through my formal training in psychological science, and has led me to ask

big questions and answer them with empirical evidence.

The structure of this book is somewhat unusual. It starts off with an opening

chapter that outlines the theme of the transformation of human character, of

good people and angels turning to do bad things, even evil, devilish things. It

raises the fundamental question of how well we really know ourselves, how con-

fident we can be in predicting what we would or would not do in situations we

have never before encountered. Could we, like God's favorite angel, Lucifer, ever

be led into the temptation to do the unthinkable to others?

The segment of chapters on the Stanford Prison Experiment unfolds in great

detail as our extended case study of the transformation of individual college stu-

dents as they play the randomly assigned roles of prisoner or guard in a mock

prison—that became all too real. The chapter-by-chapter chronology is presented

in a cinematic format, as a personal narrative told in the present tense with mini-

mal psychological interpretation. Only after that study concludes—it had to be

terminated prematurely—do we consider what we learned from it, describe and

explain the evidence gathered from it, and elaborate upon the psychological

processes that were involved in it.

One of the dominant conclusions of the Stanford Prison Experiment is that

the pervasive yet subtle power of a host of situational variables can dominate an

individual's will to resist. That conclusion is given greater depth in a series of

chapters detailing this phenomenon across a body of social science research. We

see how a range of research participants—other college student subjects and

average citizen volunteers alike—have come to conform, comply, obey, and be

readily seduced into doing things they could not imagine doing when they were

outside those situational force fields. A set of dynamic psychological processes is

outlined that can induce good people to do evil, among them deindividuation,

obedience to authority, passivity in the face of threats, self-justification, and ratio-

nalization. Dehumanization is one of the central processes in the transformation

of ordinary, normal people into indifferent or even wanton perpetrators of evil.

Dehumanization is like a cortical cataract that clouds one's thinking and fosters

the perception that other people are less than human. It makes some people come

to see those others as enemies deserving of torment, torture, and annihilation.

With this set of analytical tools at our disposal, we turn to reflect upon the causes of the horrendous abuses and torture of prisoners at Iraq's Abu Ghraib Prison by the U.S. Military Police guarding them. The allegation that these immoral deeds were the sadistic work of a few rogue soldiers, so-called bad apples, is challenged by examining the parallels that exist in the situational forces and psychological processes that operated in that prison with those in our Stanford prison. We examine in depth, the Place, the Person, and the Situation to draw conclusions about the causative forces involved in creating the abusive behaviors that are depicted in the revolting set of "trophy photos" taken by the soldiers in the process of tormenting their prisoners.

However, it is then time to go up the explanatory chain from person to situation to system. Relying on a half dozen of the investigative reports into these abuses and other evidence from a variety of human rights and legal sources, I adopt a prosecutorial stance to put the System on trial. Using the limits of our legal system, which demands that individuals and not situations or systems be

tried for wrongdoing, I bring charges against a quartet of senior military officers

and then extend the argument for command complicity to the civilian command

structure within the Bush administration. The reader, as juror, will decide if the

evidence supports the finding of guilty as charged for each of the accused.

This rather grim journey into the heart and mind of darkness is turned

around in the final chapter. It is time for some good news about human nature,

about what we as individuals can do to challenge situational and systemic power.

In all the research cited and in our real-world examples, there were always some

individuals who resisted, who did not yield to temptation. What delivered them

from evil was not some inherent magical goodness but rather, more likely, an un-

derstanding, however intuitive, of mental and social tactics of resistance. I out-

line a set of such strategies and tactics to help anyone be more able to resist

unwanted social influence. This advice is based on a combination of my own ex-

periences and the wisdom of my social psychological colleagues who are experts

in the domains of influence and persuasion. (It is supplemented and expanded

upon in a module available on the website for this book, www.lucifereffect.com).

Finally, when most give in and few rebel, the rebels can be considered heroes

for resisting the powerful forces toward compliance, conformity, and obedience.

We have come to think of our heroes as special, set apart from us ordinary mor-

tals by their daring deeds or lifelong sacrifices. Here we recognize that such special

individuals do exist, but that they are the exception among the ranks of heroes,

the few who make such sacrifices. They are a special breed who organize their

lives around a humanitarian cause, for example. By contrast, most others we rec-

ognize as heroes are heroes of the moment, of the situation, who act decisively

when the call to service is sounded. So, *The Lucifer Effect* journey ends on a positive

note by celebrating the ordinary hero who lives within each of us. In contrast to

the "banality of evil," which posits that ordinary people can be responsible for the

most despicable acts of cruelty and degradation of their fellows, I posit the "ba-

nality of heroism," which unfurls the banner of the heroic Everyman and Every-

woman who heed the call to service to humanity when their time comes to act.

When that bell rings, they will know that it rings for them. It sounds a call to up-

hold what is best in human nature that rises above the powerful pressures of

Situation and System as the profound assertion of human dignity opposing evil.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without a great deal of help at every stage

along the long journey from conception to its realization in this final form.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

It all began with the planning, execution, and analysis of the experiment we did

at Stanford University back in August 1971. The immediate impetus for this re-

search came out of an undergraduate class project on the psychology of impris-

onment, headed by David Jaffe, who later became the warden in our Stanford

Prison Experiment. In preparation for conducting this experiment, and to better

understand the mentality of prisoners and correctional staff, as well as to explore

what were the critical features in the psychological nature of any prison experi-

ence, I taught a summer school course at Stanford University covering these top-

ics. My co-instructor was Andrew Carlo Prescott, who had recently been paroled

from a series of long confinements in California prisons. Carlo came to serve as an

invaluable consultant and dynamic head of our 'Adult Authority Parole Board."

Two graduate students, William Curtis Banks and Craig Haney, were fully en-

gaged at every stage in the production of this unusual research project. Craig has

used this experience as a springboard into a most successful career in psychology

and law, becoming a leading advocate for prisoner rights and authoring a number

of articles and chapters with me on various topics related to the institution of

prisons. I thank them each for their contribution to that study and its intellectual

and practical aftermath. In addition, my appreciation goes to each of those col-

lege students who volunteered for an experience that, decades later, some of them

still cannot forget. As I also say in the text, I apologize to them again for any suf-

fering they endured during and following this research.

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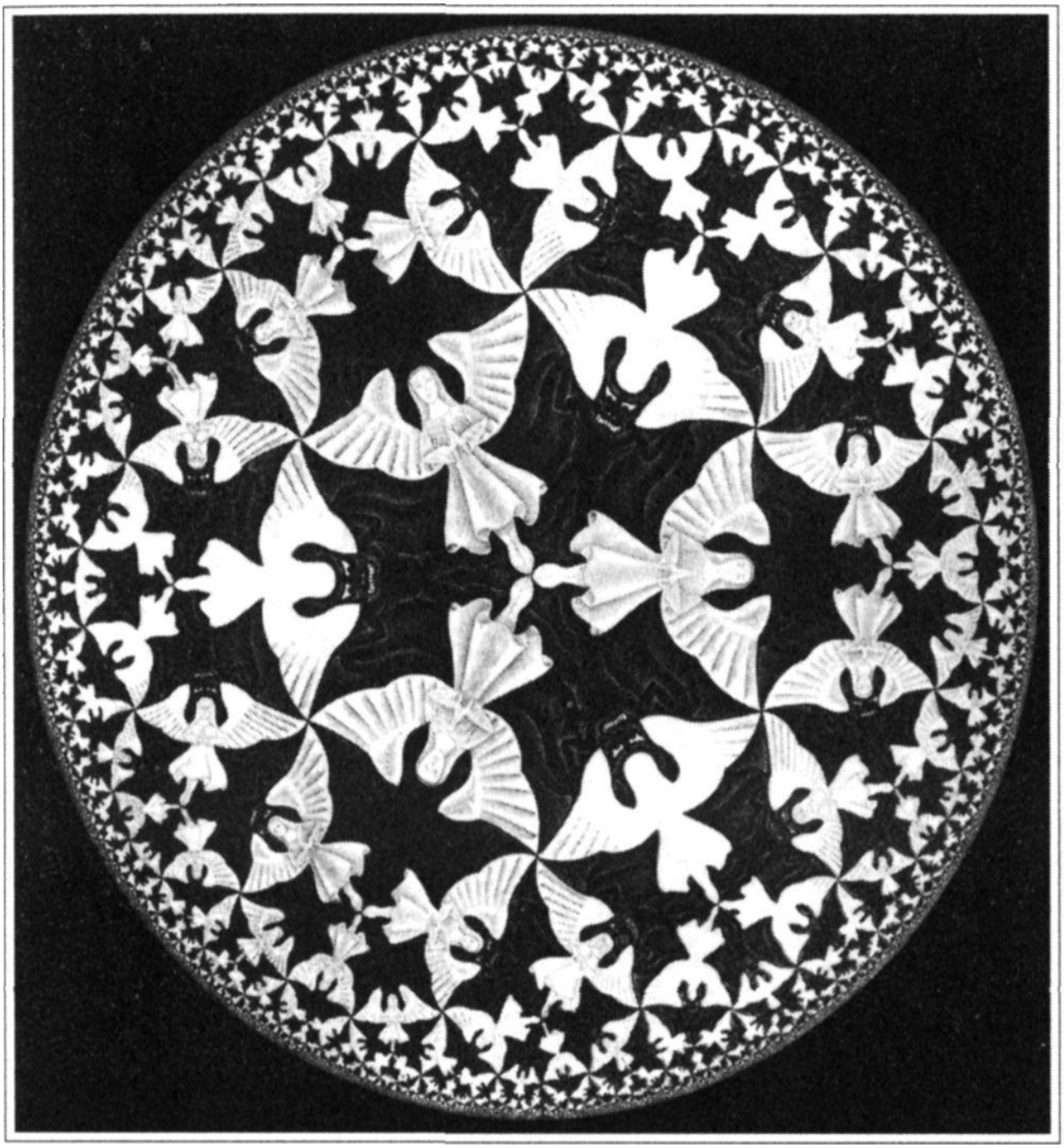

M. *C. Escher's "Circle Limit IV" © 2006 The M. C. Escher Company-Holland.*



CHAPTER ONE

The Psychology of Evil:

Situated Character Transformations

*The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of*

*hell, a hell of heaven.*

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Look at this remarkable image for a moment. Now close your eyes and conjure it

in your memory.

Does your mind's eye see the many white angels dancing about the dark

heavens? Or do you see the many black demons, horned devils inhabiting the

bright white space of Hell? In this illusion by the artist M. C. Escher, both perspec-

tives are equally possible. Once aware of the congruence between good and evil,

you cannot see only one and not the other. In what follows, 1 will not allow you to

drift back to the comfortable separation of Your Good and Faultless Side from

Their Evil and Wicked Side. "Am I capable of evil?" is the question that I want you

to consider over and over again as we journey together to alien environments.

Three psychological truths emerge from Escher's image. First, the world is

filled with both good and evil—was, is, will always be. Second, the barrier be-

tween good and evil is permeable and nebulous. And third, it is possible for angels

to become devils and, perhaps more difficult to conceive, for devils to become

angels.

Perhaps this image reminds you of the ultimate transformation of good into

evil, the metamorphosis of Lucifer into Satan. Lucifer, the "light bearer," was

God's favorite angel until he challenged God's authority and was cast into Hell

along with his band of fallen angels. "Better to reign in Hell than serve in

Heaven," boasts Satan, the "adversary of God" in Milton's *Paradise Lost.* In Hell,

Lucifer-Satan becomes a liar, an empty imposter who uses boasts, spears, trum-

pets, and banners, as some national leaders do today. At the Demonic Conference

in Hell of all the major demons, Satan is assured that he cannot regain Heaven in

any direct confrontation.1 However, Satan's statesman, Beelzebub, comes up with

the most evil of solutions in proposing to avenge themselves against God by cor-

rupting God's greatest creation, humankind. Though Satan succeeds in tempting

Adam and Eve to disobey God and be led into evil, God decrees that they will in



time be saved. However, for the rest of time, Satan will be allowed to slither

around that injunction, enlisting witches to tempt people to evil. Satan's interme-

diaries would thereafter become the target of zealous inquisitors who want to rid

the world of evil, but their horrific methods would breed a new form of systemic

evil the world had never before known.

Lucifer's sin is what thinkers in the Middle Ages called "cupiditas."* For

Dante, the sins that spring from that root are the most extreme "sins of the wolf,"

the spiritual condition of having an inner black hole so deep within oneself that

no amount of power or money can ever fill it. For those suffering the mortal

malady called cupiditas, whatever exists outside of one's self has worth only as it

can be exploited by, or taken into one's self. In Dante's Hell those guilty of that sin

are in the ninth circle, frozen in the Lake of Ice. Having cared for nothing but self

in life, they are encased in icy Self for eternity. By making people focus only on

oneself in this way, Satan and his followers turn their eyes away from the har-

mony of love that unites all living creatures.

The sins of the wolf cause a human being to turn away from grace and to

make self his only good—and also his prison. In the ninth circle of the Inferno,

the sinners, possessed of the spirit of the insatiable wolf, are frozen in a self-

imposed prison where prisoner and guard are fused in an egocentric reality.

In her scholarly search for the origins of Satan, the historian Elaine Pagels of-

fers a provocative thesis on the psychological significance of Satan as humanity's

mirror:

What fascinates us about Satan is the way he expresses qualities that go

beyond what we ordinarily recognize as human. Satan evokes more than

the greed, envy, lust, and anger we identify with our own worst impulses,

and more than what we call brutality, which imputes to human beings a

resemblance to animals ("brutes").... Evil, then, at its worst, seems to in-

volve the supernatural—what we recognize, with a shudder, as the dia-

bolic inverse of Martin Buber's characterization of God as "wholly other."2

We fear evil, but are fascinated by it. We create myths of evil conspiracies and

come to believe them enough to mobilize forces against them. We reject the

"Other" as different and dangerous because it's unknown, yet we are thrilled by

**Cupiditas,* in English, is cupidity, which means avarice, greed, the strong desire for wealth or

power over another. What *cupiditas* means is the desire to turn into oneself or take into oneself

everything that is "other" than self. For instance, lust and rape are forms of cupiditas, because

they entail using another person as a thing to gratify one's own desire; murder for profit is also

cupiditas. It is the opposite of the concept of *caritas,* which means envisioning oneself as part of

a ring of love in which each individual self has worth in itself but also as it relates to every other

self. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is a weak expression of caritas. The

Latin *"Caritas et amor, Deus ibi est"* is probably the best expression of the concept "wherever cari-

tas and love are, God is."

contemplating sexual excess and violations of moral codes by those who are not

our kind. Professor of religious studies David Frankfurter concludes his search for

Evil Incarnate by focusing on the social construction of this evil other.

[T]he construction of the *social* Other as cannibal-savage, demon, sorcerer, vampire, or an amalgam of them all, draws upon a consistent repertoire of symbols of inversion. The stories we tell about people out on the periphery play with their savagery, libertine customs, and monstrosity. At the same time, the combined horror and pleasure we derive from contemplating this Otherness—sentiments that influenced the brutality of colonists, missionaries, and armies entering the lands of those Others—certainly affect us at the level of individual fantasy, as well.3

## TRANSFORMATIONS: ANGELS, DEVILS, AND THE REST OF US MERE MORTALS

*The Lucifer Effect* is my attempt to understand the processes of transformation at

work when good or ordinary people do bad or evil things. We will deal with the

fundamental question "What makes people go wrong?" But instead of resorting

to a traditional religious dualism of good versus evil, of wholesome nature versus

corrupting nurture, we will look at real people engaged in life's daily tasks, en-

meshed in doing their jobs, surviving within an often turbulent crucible of

human nature. We will seek to understand the nature of their character transfor-

mations when they are faced with powerful situational forces.

Let's begin with a definition of evil. Mine is a simple, psychologically based

one: *Evil consists in intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehu-*

*manize, or destroy innocent others— or using one's authority and systemic power to en-*

*courage or permit others to do so on your behalf.* In short, it is "knowing better but

doing worse."4

What makes human behavior work? What determines human thought and

action? What makes some of us lead moral, righteous lives, while others seem to

slip easily into immorality and crime? Is what we think about human nature

based on the assumption that *inner determinants* guide us up the good paths or

down the bad ones? Do we give insufficient attention to the *outer determinants* of

our thoughts, feelings, and actions? To what extent are we creatures of the situa-

tion, of the moment, of the mob? And is there anything that anyone has ever done that you are absolutely certain you could never be compelled to do? Most of us hide behind egocentric biases that generate the illusion that we are special. These self-serving protective shields allow us to believe that each of us is above average on any test of self-integrity. Too often we look to the stars through the thick lens of personal invulnerability when we should also look down to the slippery slope beneath our feet. Such egocentric biases are more commonly found in societies that foster independent orientations, such as Euro-



American cultures, and less so in collectivist-oriented societies, such as in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.5

In the course of our voyage through good and evil, I will ask you to reflect upon three issues: How well do you really know yourself, your strengths and weaknesses? Does your self-knowledge come from reviewing your behavior in familiar situations or from being exposed to totally new settings where your old habits are challenged? In the same vein, how well do you really know the people

with whom you interact daily: your family, friends, co-workers, and lover? One

thesis of this book is that most of us know ourselves only from our limited experi-

ences in familiar situations that involve rules, laws, policies, and pressures that

constrain us. We go to school, to work, on vacation, to parties; we pay the bills and

the taxes, day in and year out. But what happens when we are exposed to totally

new and unfamiliar settings where our habits don't suffice? You start a new job,

go on your first computer-matched date, join a fraternity, get arrested, enlist in

the military, join a cult, or volunteer for an experiment. The old you might not

work as expected when the ground rules change.

Throughout our journey I would like you to continually ask the "Me also?"

question as we encounter various forms of evil. We will examine genocide in

Rwanda, the mass suicide and murder of Peoples Temple followers in the jungles

of Guyana, the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, the horrors of Nazi concentra-

tion camps, the torture by military and civilian police around the world, and the

sexual abuse of parishioners by Catholic priests, and search for lines of continuity

between the scandalous, fraudulent behavior of executives at Enron and World-

Com corporations. Finally, we will see how some common threads in all these

evils run through the recently uncovered abuses of civilian prisoners at Abu

Ghraib Prison in Iraq. One especially significant thread tying these atrocities to-

gether will come out of a body of research in experimental social psychology, par-

ticularly a study that has come to be known as the Stanford Prison Experiment.

Evil: Fixed and Within or Mutable and Without?

The idea that an unbridgeable chasm separates good people from bad people is a

source of comfort for at least two reasons. First, it creates a binary logic, in which

Evil is *essentialized.* Most of us perceive Evil as an entity, a quality that is inherent

in some people and not in others. Bad seeds ultimately produce bad fruits as their

destinies unfold. We define evil by pointing to the really bad tyrants in our era,

such as Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein, and other political

leaders who have orchestrated mass murders. We must also acknowledge the

more ordinary, lesser evils of drug dealers, rapists, sex-trade traffickers, perpetra-

tors of fraudulent scams on the elderly, and those whose bullying destroys the

well-being of our children.

Upholding a Good-Evil dichotomy also takes "good people" off the responsi-

bility hook. They are freed from even considering their possible role in creating,



sustaining, perpetuating, or conceding to the conditions that contribute to delin-

quency, crime, vandalism, teasing, bullying, rape, torture, terror, and violence.

"It's the way of the world, and there's not much that can be done to change it, cer-

tainly not by me."

An alternative conception treats evil in *incrementalist* terms, as something of

which we are all capable, depending on circumstances. People may at any time

possess a particular attribute (say intelligence, pride, honesty, or evil) to a greater

or lesser degree. Our nature can be changed, whether toward the good or the bad

side of human nature. The incrementalist view implies an acquisition of qualities

through experience or concentrated practice, or by means of an external inter-

vention, such as being offered a special opportunity. In short, we can learn to be-

come good or evil regardless of our genetic inheritance, personality, or family

legacy.6

Alternative Understandings: Dispositional, Situational, and Systemic

Running parallel to this pairing of essentialist and incremental conceptions is the

contrast between *dispositional* and *situational* causes of behavior. When faced with

some unusual behavior, some unexpected event, some anomaly that doesn't

make sense, how do we go about trying to understand it? The traditional ap-

proach has been to identify inherent personal qualities that lead to the action: ge-

netic makeup, personality traits, character, free will, and other dispositions. Given

violent behavior, one searches for sadistic personality traits. Given heroic deeds,

the search is on for genes that predispose toward altruism.

In the United States, a rash of shootings in which high school students mur-

der and wound scores of other students and teachers rocks suburban communi-

ties.7 In England, a pair of ten-year-old boys kidnap two-year-old Jamie Bulger

from a shopping center and brutally murder him in cold blood. In Palestine and

Iraq, young men and women become suicide bombers. In most European coun-

tries during World War II, many people protected Jews from capture by the Nazis

even though they knew that if they were caught, they and their families would be

killed. In many countries "whistle-blowers" risk personal loss by exposing injus-

tice and immoral actions of superiors. Why?

The traditional view (among those who come from cultures that emphasize

individualism) is to look within for answers—for pathology or heroism. Modern

psychiatry is dispositionally oriented. So are clinical psychology and personality

and assessment psychology. Most of our institutions are founded on such a per-

spective, including law, medicine, and religion. Culpability, illness, and sin, they

assume, are to be found within the guilty party, the sick person, and the sinner.

They begin their quest for understanding with the "Who questions": *Who* is re-

sponsible? *Who* caused it? *Who* gets the blame? and *Who* gets the credit?

Social psychologists (such as myself) tend to avoid this rush to dispositional

judgment when trying to understand the causes of unusual behaviors. They pre-



fer to begin their search for meaning by asking the "What questions": *What* con-

ditions could be contributing to certain reactions? *What* circumstances might be

involved in generating behavior? *What* was the situation like from the perspective

of the actors? Social psychologists ask: To what extent can an individual's actions

be traced to factors outside the actor, to situational variables and environmental

processes unique to a given setting?

The dispositional approach is to the situational as a medical model of health

is to a public health model. A medical model tries to find the source of the illness,

disease, or disability within the affected person. By contrast, public health re-

searchers assume that the vectors of disease transmission come from the environ-

ment, creating conditions that foster illness. Sometimes the sick person is the end

product of environmental pathogens, which unless counteracted will affect oth-

ers, regardless of attempts to improve the health of the individual. For example, in

the dispositional approach a child who exhibits a learning disability may be given

a variety of medical and behavioral treatments to overcome that handicap. But in

many cases, especially among the poor, the problem is caused by ingesting lead in

paint that flakes off the walls of tenement apartments and is worsened by condi-

tions of poverty—the situational approach. These alternative perspectives are not

just abstract variations in conceptual analyses but lead to very different ways of

dealing with personal and societal problems.

The significance of such analyses extends to all of us who, as intuitive psy-

chologists, go about our daily lives trying to figure out why people do what they do

and how they may be changed to do better. But it is the rare person in an individu-

alist culture who is not infected with a dispositional bias, always looking first to

motives, traits, genes, and personal pathologies. Most of us have a tendency both

to overestimate the importance of dispositional qualities and to underestimate

the importance of situational qualities when trying to understand the causes of

other people's behavior.

In the following chapters I will offer a substantial body of evidence that

counterbalances the dispositional view of the world and will expand the focus to

consider how people's character may be transformed by their being immersed in

situations that unleash powerful situational forces. People and situations are usu-

ally in a state of dynamic interaction. Although you probably think of yourself as

having a consistent personality across time and space, that is likely not to be true.

You are not the same person working alone as you are in a group; in a romantic

setting versus an educational one; when you are with close friends or in an

anonymous crowd; or when you are traveling abroad as when at home base.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* and the Inquisition's WID Program

One of the first documented sources of the widespread use of the dispositional

view to understand evil and rid the world of its pernicious influence is found in a

text that became the bible of the Inquisition, the *Malleus Maleficarum,* or "The



Witches' Hammer."8 It was required reading for the Inquisition judges. It begins

with a conundrum to be solved: How can evil continue to exist in a world gov-

erned by an all-good, all-powerful God? One answer: God allows it as a test of

men's souls. Yield to its temptations, go to Hell; resist its temptations, and be in-

vited into Heaven. However, God restricted the Devil's direct influence over people

because of his earlier corruption of Adam and Eve. The Devil's solution was to

have intermediaries do his evil bidding by using witches as his indirect link to peo-

ple they would corrupt.

To reduce the spread of evil in Catholic countries, the proposed solution was

to find and eliminate witches. What was required was a means to identify witches,

get them to confess to heresy, and then destroy them. The mechanism for witch

identification and destruction (which in our times might be known as the WID

program) was simple and direct: find out through spies who among the popula-

tion were witches, test their witchly natures by getting confessions using various

torture techniques, and kill those who failed the test. Although I have made light

of what amounted to a carefully designed system of mass terror, torture, and ex-

termination of untold thousands of people, this kind of simplistic reduction of the

complex issues regarding evil fueled the fires of the Inquisition. Making "witches"

the despised dispositional category provided a ready solution to the problem of

societal evil by simply destroying as many agents of evil as could be identified, tor-

tured, and boiled in oil or burned at the stake.

Given that the Church and its State alliances were run by men, it is no won-

der that women were more likely than men to be labeled as witches. The suspects

were usually marginalized or threatening in some way: widowed, poor, ugly, de-

formed, or in some cases considered too proud and powerful. The terrible paradox

of the Inquisition is that the ardent and often sincere desire to combat evil gen-

erated evil on a grander scale than the world had ever seen before. It ushered

in the use by State and Church of torture devices and tactics that were the ulti-

mate perversion of any ideal of human perfection. The exquisite nature of the

human mind, which can create great works of art, science, and philosophy,

was perverted to engage in acts of "creative cruelty" that were designed to break

the will. The tools of the trade of the Inquisition are still on display in prisons

around the world, in military and civilian interrogation centers, where torture is

standard operating procedure (as we shall see later in our visit to Abu Ghraib

Prison).9

Power Systems Exert Pervasive Top-Down Dominance

My appreciation of the power residing in systems started with an awareness of

how institutions create mechanisms that translate ideology—say, the causes of

evil—into operating procedures, such as the Inquisition's witch hunts. In other

words, my focus has widened considerably through a fuller appreciation of the

ways in which situational conditions are created and shaped by higher-order



factors— *systems* of power. Systems, not just dispositions and situations, must be

taken into account in order to understand complex behavior patterns.

Aberrant, illegal, or immoral behavior by individuals in service professions,

such as policemen, corrections officers, and soldiers, is typically labeled the mis-

deeds of "a few bad apples." The implication is that they are a rare exception and

must be set on one side of the impermeable line between evil and good, with the

majority of good apples set on the other side. But who is making the distinction?

Usually it is the guardians of the system, who want to isolate the problem in order

to deflect attention and blame away from those at the top who may be responsible

for creating untenable working conditions or for a lack of oversight or supervi-

sion. Again the bad apple-dispositional view ignores the apple barrel and its potentially corrupting situational impact on those within it. A systems analysis focuses on the barrel makers, on those with the power to design the barrel. It is the "power elite," the barrel makers, often working behind the scenes, who arrange many of the conditions of life for the rest of us, who must spend time in the variety of institutional settings they have constructed. The sociologist C. Wright Mills has illuminated this black hole of power:

> The power elite is composed of men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women; they are in positions to make decisions having major consequences. Whether they do or do not make such decisions is less important than the fact that they do occupy such pivotal positions: their failure to act, their failure to make decisions, is itself an act that is often of greater significance than the decisions they do make. For they are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society. They rule the big corporations. They run the machinery of state and claim its prerogatives. They direct the military establishment. They occupy strategic command posts of the social structure, in which are now centered the effective means of power and the wealth and celebrity which they enjoy.10

As the interests of these diverse power brokers coalesce, they come to de-

fine our reality in ways that George Orwell prophesied in *1984.* The military-

corporate-religious complex is the ultimate megasystem controlling much of the

resources and quality of life of many Americans today.

It is when power is wedded to chronic fear that it becomes

formidable.

—Eric Hoffer, *The Passionate State of Mind*

The Power to Create "The Enemy"

The powerful don't usually do the dirtiest work themselves, just as Mafia dons

leave the "whackings" to underlings. Systems create hierarchies of dominance

The Psychology of Evil



with influence and communication going down—rarely up—the line. When a

power elite wants to destroy an enemy nation, it turns to propaganda experts to

fashion a program of hate. What does it take for the citizens of one society to hate

the citizens of another society to the degree that they want to segregate them, tor-

ment them, even kill them? It requires a "hostile imagination," a psychological

construction embedded deeply in their minds by propaganda that transforms

those others into "The Enemy." That image is a soldier's most powerful motive,

one that loads his rifle with ammunition of hate and fear. The image of a dreaded

enemy threatening one's personal well-being and the society's national security

emboldens mothers and fathers to send sons to war and empowers governments

to rearrange priorities to turn plowshares into swords of destruction.

It is all done with words and images. To modify an old adage: Sticks and

stones may break your bones, but names can sometimes kill you. The process be-

gins with creating stereotyped conceptions of the other, dehumanized percep-

tions of the other, the other as worthless, the other as all-powerful, the other as

demonic, the other as an abstract monster, the other as a fundamental threat to

our cherished values and beliefs. With public fear notched up and the enemy

threat imminent, reasonable people act irrationally, independent people act in

mindless conformity, and peaceful people act as warriors. Dramatic visual images

of the enemy on posters, television, magazine covers, movies, and the Internet

imprint on the recesses of the limbic system, the primitive brain, with the power-

ful emotions of fear and hate.

The social philosopher Sam Keen brilliantly depicts how this hostile imagina-

tion is created by virtually every nation's propaganda on its path to war and reveals

the transformative powers on the human psyche of these "images of the enemy."11

Justifications for the desire to destroy these threats are really afterthoughts, pro-

posed explanations intended for the official record but not for critical analysis of

the damage to be done or being done.

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 neighbors, co-workers,

even friends into despised enemies of the State who deserved the "final solution."