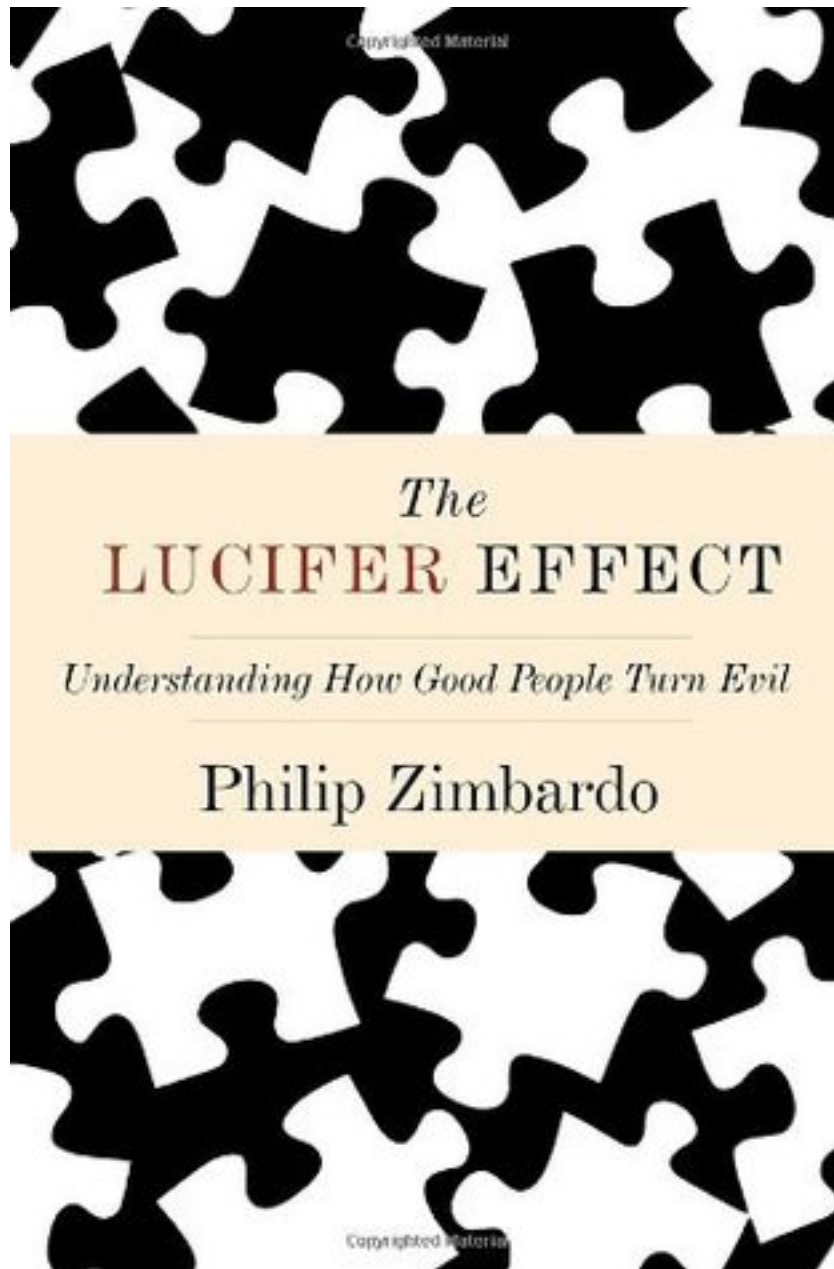


The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil Book PDF Download



By:
Philip G. Zimbardo

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What people Say:

Rebecca

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

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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.

Katie

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

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who won't mind the liberal spin that Zimbardo includes.

Amanda

I, after a couple of weeks, have finally finished "The Lucifer Effect." I normally don't dog ear books because, well, that's almost sacrilegious, but there were points that I knew I wanted to come back to. Like this one which really came out there unexpectedly, and had me laughing so hard.

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The guy was so angry that he then had to step out of the room and let the board continue the parole hearing. Wow.

Then there was this little tidbit about the lessons learned when a normally powerless person is given power: this is the transformation.

The sum of the whole: Systems create these Situations that then once submerged into them; ordinary "good" people would do things that are categorically "evil."

Once a person is put into a set "situation" created by this "system" they emerge from it not able recognize who they are; they are not going to be the same person. This is why surprise,

surprise the people, who committed those acts against prisoners at Abu Ghraib, while responsible for their actions, aren't solely to blame.

The entire portion of the book accounting the Horrors of Abu Ghraib was unbelievably fascinating. It really gave you a complete view of what happened from the bottom up. Riveting read I must say.

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.

David

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 o

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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

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 (

). 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.

Thomas Edmund

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

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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.