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Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil (Book Review)

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Zimbardo, Philip. *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. New York: Random House Trade Paperback Edition, 2008. 551 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8129-7444-7. Reviewed by Natalie Sandbulte, Instructor of Psychology at Dordt College

The notion of impossibility seems far-fetched in our post-modern, instant gratification, technology-filled culture. Youth across America are taught, “If you can dream it, you can be it.” There are many problems with this type of thinking, including individualism and the belief in personal invulnerability, or “that could never happen to me”: “I could never get caught drinking and driving. I could never get cancer and die. I could never harm another human being. Bad things only happen to other people.”

Christians are not exempt from this type of thinking. We tend to attribute others’ successes to the situation and their failures to personal characteristics. However, when *we* succeed, we give ourselves personal credit and dismiss the influence of the situation. When we fail, we like to blame situational factors that were out of our control.

In reality, both influences (personality and situation) are important and worthy of examination. By emphasizing one explanation over the other for our and others’ behaviors or outcomes, we become lazy in our thoughts and actions. When we “let down our guard,” we are more prone to act and think in ways that are biblically (and socially) irresponsible. In such cases, because of our fallen sinful state, we are capable of *anything*.

The universal potential in people for doing evil is precisely the topic of Philip Zimbardo’s book *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. Zimbardo, a senior social psychologist at Stanford University, is well known for his study of the power of the situation to influence a person’s behavior. *The Lucifer Effect* is a collection of Zimbardo’s major research findings over the past thirty years, integrated with many other concepts from the field of social psychology. In a sense, the book is a “mini” textbook on social psychology, filled with meaningful applications. Zimbardo warns about powerful situational influences and offers “self-help” tools for fighting against these powerful forces. As such, the appropriate audience for this book includes educators, leaders, students, and the average person. Although quite lengthy, the chapter design allows the reader to pick and choose specific situational analyses that build on the information provided in the first chapter. In addition, an index provides quick references for educators searching for a particular topic or idea.

In 1971, Zimbardo conducted his now-famous Stanford Prison Experiment in the basement of the Stanford University psychology department. Zimbardo wanted to know what would happen when he put good (i.e., psychologically healthy) people into an evil situation. Zimbardo states that “evil consists in intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize, or destroy innocent others – or using one’s authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so

on your behalf” (5). Using careful measures and controls, Zimbardo and his team crafted a mock prison setting where volunteer male college students were randomly assigned to the role of either guard or prisoner. After a mere two days, both the guards and the prisoners had fully internalized their respective roles. Zimbardo describes in detail the guards’ shocking treatment of “prisoners” throughout the five days of the experiment. What began as a “mock” prison setting evolved into a place of emotional turmoil and abuse.

As a result of his years of analysis on the Stanford Prison Experiment, Zimbardo pinpoints an evil *system* as being a powerful force in making good people behave in pathological ways. *Systems* contain particular situations (behavioral contexts), which include networks of people, expectations, social norms, policies, and laws. This notion has vast implications for the evil events in recent world history. Zimbardo focuses a large portion of the book on the tragic abuse and torture that took place at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. American soldiers, given orders to interrogate and “break” the Iraqi prisoners, fell into the trap of using torture as a form of persuasion and retaliation.

In addition to Abu Ghraib, Zimbardo also explores the tragedies of the Holocaust, the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, the mass suicides of Jim Jones’ followers, and the genocides in Rwanda, to name a few. The persistent message that Zimbardo emphasizes across evil events is the powerful interaction of the person, the situation, and the system to create such atrocities.

Although Zimbardo does not write from a Christian perspective, there is much overlap between his analysis and a biblical understanding of human nature. I found Zimbardo’s explanations and insights intriguing and helpful in thinking about why people can be seemingly “transformed” into doing evil. Sin has infiltrated every part of creation – genes, people, nature, situations, and systems. Because we are prone toward evil, God commands us to be aware of and on guard against ungodly influences. We need to recognize the power of situations and systems to transform our already “weakened” personal attributions. All three combine to produce a powerful interaction, which, when evil, is a direct result of sin.

Zimbardo’s overall conclusions are consistent with reformational thought. However, some of his assumptions deserve critique. First, the subtitle, *Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, assumes that at least some people are good. In fact, Zimbardo believes that most people, most of the time, are moral creatures. Reformer John Calvin’s notion of total depravity would suggest that we are the complete opposite of good – we are innately sinful, *evil*, by our very nature and birth into a fallen world.

Second, according to Zimbardo, problems occur when people fall into neutral, *unintentionally* decreasing “moral” awareness of one’s actions and going along with the status quo. According to a Christian perspective, we will act in evil ways throughout our lives, intentional or not. As such, we must be aware of our continual ability to do evil, not just when we “disengage” our morality. All too often, we tend to minimize our potential for evil, wanting to believe that we are genuinely “good” people. Zimbardo believes that our nature can be changed, directed more toward good than evil. As Christians, we know that our nature is inherently sinful and will not change until Christ comes again.

Third, Zimbardo believes we are constantly influenced by powerful situational cues, such that our behavior is dramatically altered. I agree: we are continually interacting with and responding to other people and elements of the situation. Zimbardo says even “good people” can be induced, seduced, and initiated into behaving in evil ways. I say “Yes!” to this statement and add that even Christians can

and do fall into this trap. This is a powerful reminder and lesson to be learned from Zimbardo’s research. However, we cut ourselves short, without hope, if we stop here. One aspect of being made in the image of God includes having the free will to act responsibly. It is therefore possible to “go against the grain” and *not* conform to powerful, evil, situational forces.

In summary, this book emphasizes the power of situations and systems to influence people towards acting in “evil” (sinful) ways. Failing to take into account the interaction of persons, situations, and systems creates a false understanding of the social structures that God created. All three are highly influential, both for good and for bad. If readers can get past Zimbardo’s emphasis on his own innovative, scholarly research, they will learn about an aspect of reality that makes sense and fits with a Christian worldview. And, you just might find yourself rethinking the truth of the statement “I could never do something like that.”