

Discuss the  
psychology behind  
evil philosophy essay



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\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

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1. [Obedient experiments](#) \n \t
2. [Group norms and conformity](#) \n \t
3. [Situation and Disposition](#) \n \t
4. [Can the law prevent groups from making good people turn bad?](#) \n \t
5. [Conclusion](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

Evil is seen as the opposite of good. According to Myer (2010), " Evil acts occurred partly because thousands of people followed orders". This can be reflected in the case of Nazi Germany where 6 million of Jews along with gypsies, homosexuals, trades unionists and the disabled being slaughtered. This world worst mass evil case Holocaust of World War II has casted a shadow over society. What has triggered the mass murderer? Are good people turning bad during that time? Are people having evil behavior? Is evil exists in individual and humanity? The book by Philip Zimbardo, " The Lucifer Effect" describes the point in time when an ordinary, normal person first crosses the boundary between good and evil to engage in an evil action. It's a representative of transformation of human character. Such transformations are situational act, social influence, personal attributes of morality, compassion or sense of justice or fair play? Evil is the exercise of power to intentionally harm, hurt or destroy in psychological, physically or mortality way to others (Zimbardo, 2007). It could also commit crimes against humanity. Philip Zimbardo (2007) also provided a comprehensive definition of evil in his book " The Lucifer Effect that " Evil consists in intentionally

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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. In short, it is "knowing better but doing worse".

Most people perceive evil as an entity, a quality that is inherent in some people and not in others. Bad seeds ultimately produce bad fruits. Some thought evil is caused by an external force. In the book of "People of the Lie", Scott Peck raises the possibility that evil sometimes is caused by evil powers such as demon. He reflects a historical notion that spiritual powers cause evil, whether directly in the form of possession or indirectly in the form of spiritual oppression. Personally, I don't think dark spiritual forces cause much evil as it's not scientifically proven that devils exist.

Many studies focused on the situational factors than other factors that create evil acts. Is evil caused by disposition or situation? Does this relate to those serial killer murders such as Jeffrey Dahmer, did he do it intentionally? All of this will be covered in details in the subsequent sections.

## **Obedient experiments**

Muzafer Sherif study of young boys competing in the competition at the summer camp has turned hostile followed by bitter conflict. The result showed that it was group processes rather than personality that had produced the conflict.

Stanley Milgram carried out experiment on obedience to authority in 1971.

The result of the study concluded nearly two-thirds of the volunteers

followed orders and delivered the maximum shock despite of the screaming  
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from the learner. According to Miller (2011), " The result is a chilling demonstration of the power of a situation to corrupt ordinary people, and it lent support to Milgram's fear that the Holocaust could happen again."

Reverend Jim Jones, Pastor commanded his followers to commit mass suicide in 1978 where 912 Americans committed suicide or were murdered by family and friends in Guyana because of their blind obedience. Why do people obey to this suicide event? Could it due to social influence that shape individual's behavior? Will culture help to define the situation? University of Texas carried out the observation to the students and found that about 30 percent of their time was spent in conversation with others (Myers, 2010). This has shown that relationships carried a large part in human being. The power of social situation may lead us to act conflicting to our expressed attitude and powerful evil situation does have the tendency to overwhelm good intentions and convincing people to agree with untruth or comply to cruelty act.

## **Group norms and conformity**

Muzafer Sherif conducted a classic study on conformity in 1936. From the result of the study, the subjects had conformed to the group judgment and say the light was moving about 4 inches. The subjects had been changed by group experience and they had increased their conformity to group norms. Sherif's experiment showed group norms are established through interaction of individuals and the leveling-off extreme opinions. The result is a consensus agreement that tends to be a compromise even if it is wrong. Based on this finding, people may turn bad due to social influence. In Milgram's studies, people were less likely to administer high levels of shock if they had the support of another person who resisted the experiment. Same

goes to Zimbardo's study, when the prisoners were isolated, they were typically ineffective but when they worked together as a group, their resistance was much more successful.

### Asch conformity experiments

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) prison study explores the social and psychological consequences of putting people in groups of unequal power and it examines when people accept inequality and when they challenge it. The result was different from Zimbardo's study as those volunteers were live in a different generation, culture and background. There is no clear cut instruction to the guard, in authority issue and the relationship with authority is not clear cut either. In Zimbardo's study, it was an exercise of leadership where the guards were instructed how to behave. There was one particular aggressive guard in SPE but in the BBC study, prisoner seems to emerge to the leadership role. The findings from the study were the relationship between group identification, group organization and group power (Haslam & Reicher, 2007). This has suggested that it is powerlessness and the failure of groups that makes tyranny psychologically acceptable.

### **Situation and Disposition**

Zimbardo (2004) captured the difference between situational and dispositional orientation as " While a few bad apples might spoil the barrel (filled with good fruits/people), a vinegar barrel will always transform sweet cucumbers into sour pickles - regardless of the best intentions, resilience, and genetic nature of those cucumbers." He had listed three situational factors. First, a simple situational factor can impact behavior where the

influence force could be group identity, social modeling, time pressure and etc. Second, the situational approach redefines heroism where the minority who resist pressure towards compliance and conformity should be considered heroic. Third, the situational approach should encourage us to share personal humbleness when trying to understand the unthinkable, unimaginable acts of evil.

In the case of Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE), the participants are referred as ordinary students via the newspaper recruit. From the study, the power of situation has shaped individual's behavior. What was the volunteer's personality who took part in the prison study? It is possible for people who volunteered in the prison study may show particular characteristics when they are put in a particular situations, dispose them to engage in abusive, abhorrent or other cruelty behaviors towards people. People who don't volunteer might not behave in the same way if put in the same situation. If this is correct, it has implications in the situationist arguments where in the right or wrong situation, anyone could become bad. Carnahan and McFarland couldn't test the theory using the SPE data, they re-run the volunteering part of the study to see what type of people would volunteer in the two weeks of prison life. Below is the extract from their abstract:

" Volunteers for the prison study scored significantly higher on measures of the abuse-related dispositions of aggressiveness, authoritarianism, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and social dominance and lower on empathy and altruism, two qualities inversely related to aggressive abuse. Although implications for the SPE remain a matter of conjecture, an interpretation in terms of person-situation interactionism rather than a strict situationist <https://assignbuster.com/discuss-the-psychology-behind-evil-philosophy-essay/>

account is indicated by these findings." The study on hooliganism provided an explanation that violent group conduct have approached it from two perspectives: an individual differences approach like positive attitudes to violence explain violent behavior and a social identity approach which assumes individuals become violent in certain situations where they feel anonymous and therefore lack of accountability. Haslam & Reicher (2007) re-access the idea of ordinary people commit cruelty act and they show that perpetrators act thoughtfully, creatively and with conviction. With the BBC prison study, they had made the case for an interactionist approach to tyranny. From the study for SPE, people do not follow brutal leaders or enact brutal roles in groups unquestioningly and automatically. For those who has eventually succumb, the journey to the depths of depravity is conscious and demanding (Haslam & Reicher, 2007). This has triggered the importance of three social dynamics: First, who is drawn to tyrannical groups? Second, how are people transformed by group membership? Third, when do authoritarian views gain influence? From the three dynamics, whether a person embraces one position or group will depend upon its implications for their membership of the valued group. If people join the groups they like and understand about the groups are the insights of self-categorization theory. To be effective, tyrants need to have social influence.

Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance explains how people "rationalize" bad behavior (Crump, 2008). The theory predicts that people who commit acts that other people would unhesitatingly label as evil will come to view those acts as good, or at least as not so evil and they will do it because the attitudinal change made them more comfortable. Cognitive dissonance

prevents people from admitting them. Zimbardo experiment has shown the power of dissonance phenomenon. Ordinary people, having no particular inclination toward evil, will engage in evil behavior if the alignment of their behavior and their self-perceptions induces them to. Cognitive dissonance works gradually persuading behavior can be found from the experiment conducted by Jonathan Freedman and Scott Frazer. The experiment was using foot in the door technique by getting people to display a three inches card of " Drive Carefully" before the large ugly sign.

Situation - social influence, compliance, identification, internalization.

culture, gender

Conformity, obedienc, minority influence, self-fulfilling prophecy

Group

Disposition - personality traits

Locating evil within particular people: the rush to the dispositional

The dynamic of inhumanity - five steps from evil to virtue

Using the psychology of evil to do good

## **Can the law prevent groups from making good people turn bad?**

Numerous cases such as widespread official perjury by members of the Los Angeles Police Department led to investigations of nearly seventy officers and tainted hundreds of criminal convictions. Managers at Enron Corporation had committed pervasive acts of fraud that lost billions of dollars for

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shareholders, and the jailers at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq on the abusing act. We may think shouldn't all this cover by the act of law? According to Crump (2008), the answers are elusive. Ordinary people may engage in repeated and open crimes when influenced by groups.

Deindividuation / war / violence - warrior appearance (J. Watson 1971)

7 Social processes that grease the slippery slope of evil

Mindlessly taking the first small step

Dehumanization of others

De-individuation of self (anonymity)

Diffusion of personal responsibility

Blind obedience to authority

Uncritical conformity to group norms

Passive Tolerance of Evil Through Inaction, or indifference

In New or Unfamiliar Situation

" Nothing is easier than to denounce the evil doer; Nothing more difficult than understanding him"

Dostoevsky

Understanding is not excusing

Refocus away from Evil to understand Heroes

" Banality of Heroism: Ordinary people do extra-ordinary moral deeds in certain situations. Counterpoint to Hannah Arendt's " Banality of Evil"

Traditional Societal Heroes - Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King are exceptions - they organize their lives around sacrifice for a cause

Childrens' Fantasy Heroes - Superman, Spider Man, Wonder Woman are not reality models for kids, they possess supernatural talents.

Most heroes are Everyday People, who emerge as heroes only in particular situations

## **Conclusion**