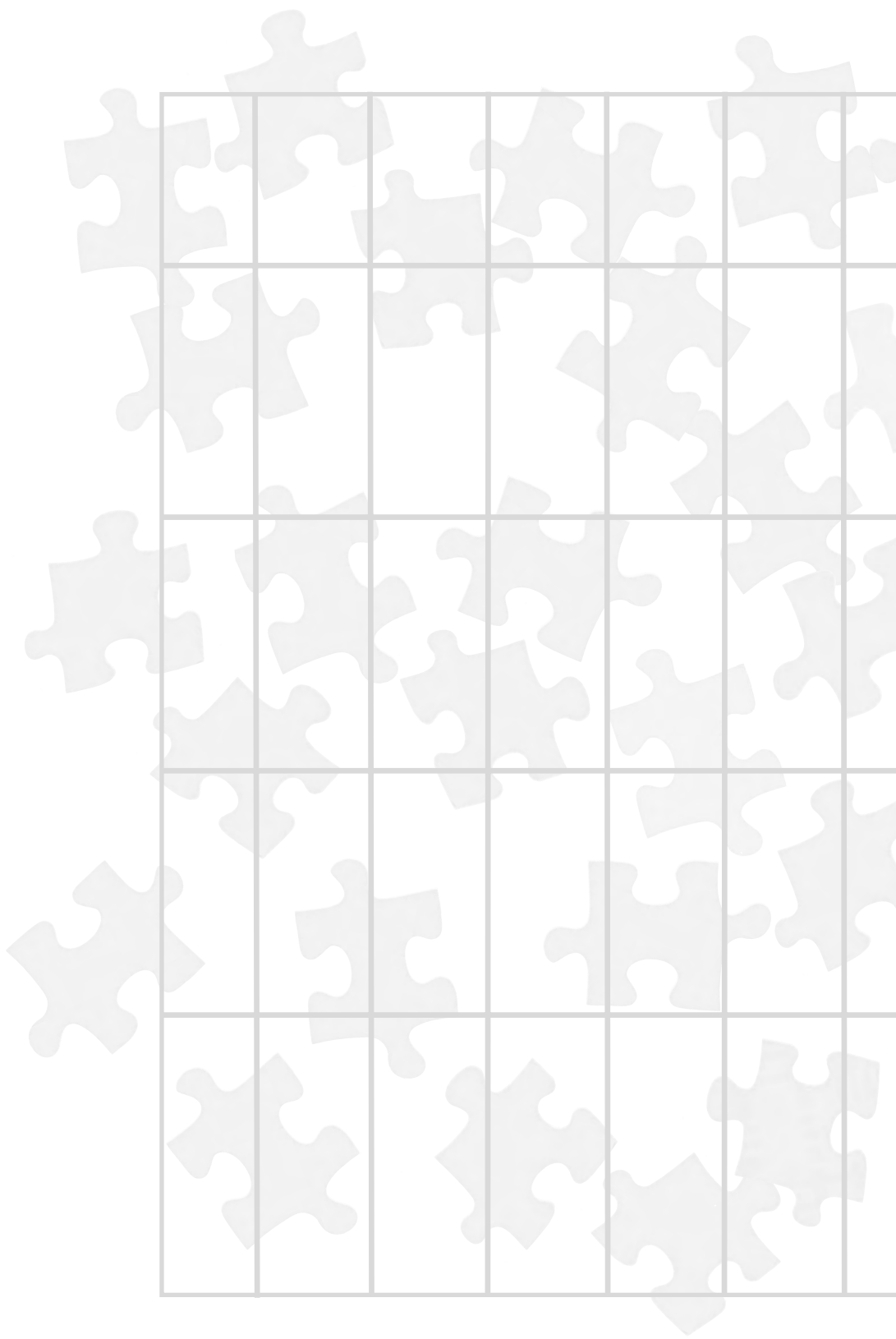


THE
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Understanding How Good People Turn Evil

Philip Zimbardo



RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

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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 passivity 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 mature 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 contributed 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 investigative reporter than a social psychologist. I worked at uncovering everything I could about this young man, from intensive interviews with him and conversations and correspondence with his family members to checking on his background 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-

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 cognitive challenge added to the terrific emotional strain that arose after Sergeant Ivan “Chip” Frederick was given a harsh sentence and I became an informal psychological 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 accept 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 realization 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 command had built a “bad barrel” in which a bunch of good soldiers became transformed 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, economic, 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 requires 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 standard medical model approach to curing individual ills and wrongs. However, unless 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 regulations, 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 excuse 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 acting 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 situational 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 absence of toys and technologies was other kids to play with. Some of these kids became 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 obeying 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 playground within a mile of where we lived, streets were all we had, and there was lit-

the 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 Lucifer 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 confident 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 students 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 minimal 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 rationalization. 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 understanding, however intuitive, of mental and social tactics of resistance. I outline 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 experiences 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 mortals 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 recognize 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 “banality of heroism,” which unfurls the banner of the heroic Everyman and Everywoman 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 uphold 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 research came out of an undergraduate class project on the psychology of imprisonment, 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 experience, I taught a summer school course at Stanford University covering these topics. 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 engaged 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 college 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 suffering they endured during and following this research.

SECONDARY RESEARCH

The task of assembling the archival prison experiment videos into DVD formats from which transcripts could be prepared fell to Sean Bruich and Scott Thompson, two exceptional Stanford students. In addition to highlighting significant episodes in these materials, Sean and Scott also helped pull together a wide array of background materials that we had gathered on various aspects of the study.

Tanya Zimbardo and Marissa Allen assisted with the next task of helping to organize and assemble extensive background materials from media clippings, my notes, and assorted articles. A team of other Stanford students, notably Kieran O'Connor and Matt Estrada, expertly conducted reference checking. Matt also transferred my audiotaped interview with Sergeant Chip Frederick into an understandable typescript.

I value the feedback that I received on various chapters in first and second drafts from colleagues and students alike, among them Adam Breckenridge, Stephen Behnke, Tom Blass, Rose McDermott, and Jason Weaver. Anthony Pratkanis and Cindy Wang earn special thanks for their assistance with the section of the final chapter that deals with resisting unwanted influence, as does Zeno Franco for his contributions to the new views on the psychology of heroism.

My understanding of the military situation at Abu Ghraib and other theaters of the war benefited from the wisdom of Warrant Officer Marci Drewry and of Colonel Larry James, also a military psychologist. Doug Bracewell has continually supplied me with useful online sources of information about a host of topics related to issues I deal with in the two chapters of the book on Abu Ghraib. Gary Myers, the legal counsel for Sergeant Frederick, not only served on this case for an extended period without remuneration but also provided me with all the source materials and information that I needed to make sense of that complex setting. Adam Zimbardo offered a perceptive analysis of the sexual nature of the “trophy photos” that emerged from the “fun and games” on Tier 1A’s night shift.

In partitioning my acknowledgments, a major share goes to Bob Johnson (my psychologist co-author buddy on our introductory psychology textbook, *Core Concepts*). Bob read the entire manuscript and offered endlessly valuable suggestions on ways to improve it, as did Sasha Lubomirsky, who helped to coordinate Bob’s input with that of Rose Zimbardo. Rose is a Distinguished Professor of English Literature who made sure that every sentence of this book functioned as it should to convey my message to general readers. Thanks to each of them for handling this chore with such grace and good sense.

Thanks also to my Random House editor, Will Murphy, for his meticulous editing, a lost art among many editors, and his valiant attempt to pare it down to essential themes. Lynn Anderson performed admirably and astutely as copy editor, who, along with Vincent La Scala, added consistency and clarity to my mes-

sages. John Brockman has been the guardian angel agent for this book and its promotion.

Finally, having written for a dozen or so hours on end, day in and night out, my aching body was prepped for the next round by my massage therapist, Jerry Huber, of Healing Winds Massage in San Francisco, and by Ann Hollingsworth of the Gualala Sea Spa, whenever I worked at my Sea Ranch hideout.

To each of these helpers, family, friends, colleagues, and students, who enabled me to transform thoughts into words into a manuscript and into this book, please accept my sincerest thanks.

Ciao,

Phil Zimbardo

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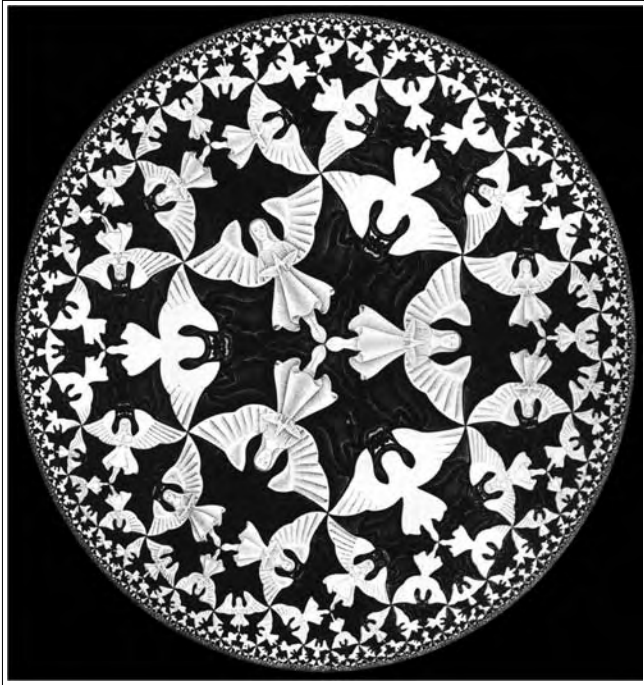
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CHAPTER ONE

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 perspectives are equally possible. Once aware of the congruence between good and evil, you cannot see only one and not the other. In what follows, I 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 between 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, trumpets, 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 corrupting 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 intermediaries 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 harmony 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 offers 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 involve the supernatural—what we recognize, with a shudder, as the diabolic 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 caritas 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, enmeshed in doing their jobs, surviving within an often turbulent crucible of human nature. We will seek to understand the nature of their character transformations 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, 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.”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 situation, 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 experiences 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 concentration 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 together will come out of a body of research in experimental social psychology, particularly 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, perpetrators 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 responsibility hook. They are freed from even considering their possible role in creating,

sustaining, perpetuating, or conceding to the conditions that contribute to delinquency, 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, certainly 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 intervention, such as being offered a special opportunity. In short, we can learn to become 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 approach has been to identify inherent personal qualities that lead to the action: genetic 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 murder and wound scores of other students and teachers rocks suburban communities.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 countries 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 injustice 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 perspective, 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 responsible? *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* conditions 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 researchers assume that the vectors of disease transmission come from the environment, creating conditions that foster illness. Sometimes the sick person is the end product of environmental pathogens, which unless counteracted will affect others, 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 conditions 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 psychologists, 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 individualist 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 usually 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 governed 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 invited 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 people 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 population 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 extermination 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, tortured, and boiled in oil or burned at the stake.

Given that the Church and its State alliances were run by men, it is no wonder 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, deformed, 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 generated 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 ultimate 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 misdeeds 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 supervision. 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 define 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

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, torment 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 begins with creating stereotyped conceptions of the other, dehumanized perceptions 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 powerful emotions of fear and hate.

The social philosopher Sam Keen brilliantly depicts how this hostile imagination 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, proposed 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.” This process was seeded in elementary school textbooks by means of images and texts that rendered all Jews contemptible and not worthy of human compassion. Here I would like to consider briefly a recent example of attempted genocide along with the use of rape as a weapon against humanity. Then I will show how one aspect of this complex psychological process, the dehumanization component, can be studied in controlled experimental research that isolates its critical features for systematic analysis.

CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY: GENOCIDE, RAPE, AND TERROR

Literature has taught us for at least three thousand years that no person or state is incapable of evil. In Homer's account of the Trojan War, Agamemnon, commander of the Greek forces, tells his men before they engage their enemy, "We are not going to leave a single one of [the Trojans] alive, down to the babies in their mothers' wombs—not even they must live. The whole people must be wiped out of existence . . ." These vile words come from a noble citizen of one of the most civilized nation-states of its time, the home of philosophy, jurisprudence, and classical drama.

We live in the "mass murder century." More than 50 million people have been systematically murdered by government decrees, enacted by soldiers and civilian forces willing to carry out the kill orders. Beginning in 1915, Ottoman Turks slaughtered 1.5 million Armenians. The mid-twentieth century saw the Nazis liquidate at least 6 million Jews, 3 million Soviet POWs, 2 million Poles, and hundreds of thousands of "undesirable" peoples. As Stalin's Soviet empire murdered 20 million Russians, Mao Zedong's government policies resulted in an even greater number of deaths, up to 30 million of the country's own citizens. The Communist Khmer Rouge regime killed off 1.7 million people of its own nation in Cambodia. Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party is accused of killing 100,000 Kurds in Iraq. In 2006, genocide has erupted in Sudan's Darfur region, which most of the world has conveniently ignored.¹²

Note that almost exactly the same words that Agamemnon used three millennia ago were also spoken in our own time, in the African nation of Rwanda, as the ruling Hutus were in the process of wiping out their former neighbors, the Tutsi minority. One victim recalls what one of her tormentors told her: "We're going to kill all the Tutsi, and one day Hutu children will have to ask what a Tutsi child looked like."

The Rape of Rwanda

The peaceful Tutsi people of Rwanda in Central Africa learned that a weapon of mass destruction could be a simple machete, used against them with lethal efficiency. The systematic slaughter of Tutsis by their former neighbors, the Hutus, spread throughout the country in a few months during the spring of 1994 as death squads killed thousands of innocent men, women, and children with machetes and nail-studded clubs. A report by the United Nations estimates that between 800,000 and a million Rwandans were murdered in about three months' time, making the massacre the most ferocious in recorded history. Three quarters of the entire Tutsi population were exterminated.

Hutu neighbors were slaughtering former friends and next-door neighbors—on command. A Hutu murderer said in an interview a decade later that "The worst thing about the massacre was killing my neighbor; we used to drink to-

gether, his cattle would graze on my land. He was like a relative." A Hutu mother described how she had beaten to death the children next door, who looked at her with wide-eyed amazement because they had been friends and neighbors all their lives. She reported that someone from the government had told her that the Tutsi were their enemies and had given her a club and her husband a machete to use against this threat. She justified the slaughter as doing "a favor" to those children, who would have become helpless orphans given that their parents had already been murdered.

Until recently, there was little recognition of the systematic use of rape of these Rwandan women as a tactic of terror and spiritual annihilation. By some accounts it began when a Hutu leader, Mayor Silvester Cacumbibi, raped the daughter of his former friend and then had other men also rape her. She later reported that he had told her, "We won't waste bullets on you; we will rape you, and that will be worse for you."

Unlike the rapes of Chinese women by Japanese soldiers in Nanking (to be described subsequently), where the details of the nightmare were blurred by failures in early reporting and the reluctance of the Chinese to relive that experience by sharing it with outsiders, much is known about the psychological dynamics of the rape of Rwandan women.¹³

When the citizens of the village of Butare defended its borders against the onslaught of the Hutus, the interim government dispatched a special person to deal with what it considered a revolt. She was the national minister of family and women's affairs and Butare's favorite daughter, having grown up in the area. Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, a Tutsi and former social worker who lectured on women's empowerment, was the only hope of this village. That hope was instantly shattered. Pauline supervised a terrible trap, promising the people that the Red Cross would provide food and shelter in the local stadium; in reality, armed Hutu thugs (the Interahamwe) were awaiting their arrival, eventually murdering most of the innocent sanctuary seekers. They were machine-gunned, grenades were thrown into the unsuspecting throngs, and survivors were sliced apart with machetes.

Pauline gave the order that "Before you kill the women, you need to rape them." She ordered another group of these thugs to burn alive a group of seventy women and girls they were guarding and provided them with gasoline from her car to do so. Again she invited the men to rape their victims before killing them. One of the young men told a translator that they couldn't rape them because "we had been killing all day and we were tired. We just put the gasoline in bottles and scattered it among the women, then started burning."

A young woman, Rose, was raped by Pauline's son, Shalom, who announced that he had "permission" from his mother to rape Tutsi women. She was the only Tutsi allowed to live so she could deliver a progress report to God as the witness of the genocide. She was then forced to watch her mother being raped and twenty of her relatives slaughtered.

A U.N. report estimated that at least 200,000 women were raped during this

brief period of horror, many of them killed afterward. "Some were penetrated with spears, gun barrels, bottles or the stamens of banana trees. Sexual organs were mutilated with machetes, boiling water and acid; women's breasts were cut off" (p. 85). "Making the matter worse, the rapes, most of them committed by many men in succession, were frequently accompanied by other forms of physical torture and often staged as public performances to multiply the terror and degradation" (p. 89). They were also used as a public way of promoting social bonding among the Hutu murderers. This shared emergent camaraderie is often a by-product of male group rape.

The extent of the inhumanity knew no boundaries. "A 45-year old Rwandan woman was raped by her 12-year-old son—with Interahamwe holding a hatchet to his throat—in front of her husband, while their five other young children were forced to hold open her thighs" (p. 116). The spread of AIDS among the living rape victims continues to wreak havoc in Rwanda. "By using a disease, a plague, as an apocalyptic terror, as biological warfare, you're annihilating the procreators, perpetuating death unto generations," according to Charles Strozier, professor of history at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York (p. 116).

How do we even begin to understand the forces that were operating to make Pauline a new kind of criminal: one woman against enemy women? A combination of history and social psychology can provide a framework based on power and status differentials. First, she was moved by the widespread sense of the lower status of the Hutu women compared with the beauty and arrogance of Tutsi women. They were taller and lighter-skinned and had more Caucasian features, which made them appear more desirable to men than Hutu women were.

A racial distinction had arbitrarily been created by Belgian and German colonialists around the turn of the twentieth century to distinguish between people who for centuries had intermarried, spoke the same language, and shared the same religion. They forced all Rwandans to carry identification cards that declared them to be in either the majority Hutu or the minority Tutsi, with the benefits of higher education and administrative posts going to the Tutsi. That became another source of Pauline's pent-up desire for revenge. It was also true that she was a political opportunist in a male-dominated administration, needing to prove her loyalty, obedience, and patriotic zeal to her superiors by orchestrating crimes never before perpetrated by a woman against an enemy. It also became easier to encourage the mass murders and rapes of Tutsis by being able to view them as abstractions and also by calling them by the dehumanizing term "cockroaches," which needed to be "exterminated." Here is a living documentary of the hostile imagination that paints the faces of the enemy in hateful hues and then destroys the canvas.

As unimaginable as it may be to any of us for someone to intentionally inspire such monstrous crimes, Nicole Bergevin, Pauline's lawyer in her genocide trial, reminds us, "When you do murder trials, you realize that we are all susceptible, and you wouldn't even dream you would ever commit this act. But you come

to understand that everyone is [susceptible]. It could happen to me, it could happen to my daughter. It could happen to you” (p. 130).

Highlighting even more clearly one of the main theses of this book is the considered opinion of Alison Des Forges of Human Rights Watch, who has investigated many such barbarous crimes. She forces us to see our reflection mirrored in these atrocities:

This behavior lies just under the surface of any of us. The simplified accounts of genocide allow distance between us and the perpetrators of genocide. They are so evil we couldn't ever see ourselves doing the same thing. But if you consider the terrible pressure under which people were operating, then you automatically reassert their humanity—and that becomes alarming. You are forced to look at the situation and say, “What would I have done? Sometimes the answer is not encouraging.” (p. 132)

The French journalist Jean Hatzfeld interviewed ten of the Hutu militia members now in prison for having macheted to death thousands of Tutsi civilians.¹⁴ The testimonies of these ordinary men—mostly farmers, active churchgoers, and a former teacher—are chilling in their matter-of-fact, remorseless depiction of unimaginable cruelty. Their words force us to confront the unthinkable again and again: that human beings are capable of totally abandoning their humanity for a mindless ideology, to follow and then exceed the orders of charismatic authorities to destroy everyone they label as “The Enemy.” Let's reflect on a few of these accounts, which make Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* pale in comparison.

“Since I was killing often, I began to feel it did not mean anything to me. I want to make clear that from the first gentleman I killed to the last, I was not sorry about a single one.”

“We were doing a job to order. We were lining up behind everyone's enthusiasm. We gathered into teams on the soccer field and went out hunting as kindred spirits.”

“Anyone who hesitated to kill because of feelings of sadness absolutely had to watch his mouth, to say nothing about the reason for his reticence, for fear of being accused of complicity.”

“We killed everyone we tracked down [hiding] in the papyrus. We had no reason to choose, to expect or fear anyone in particular. We were cutters of acquaintances, cutters of neighbors, just plain cutters.”

“Our Tutsi neighbors, we knew they were not guilty of no misdoing, but we thought all Tutsis at fault for our constant troubles. We no longer looked

at them one by one, we no longer stopped to recognize them as they had been, not even as colleagues. They had become a threat greater than all we had experienced together, more important than our way of seeing things in the community. That's how we reasoned and how we killed at the same time."

"We no longer saw a human being when we turned up a Tutsi in the swamps. I mean a person like us, sharing similar thoughts and feelings. The hunt was savage, the hunters were savage, the prey was savage—savagery took over the mind."

A particularly moving reaction to these brutal murders and rapes, which expresses a theme we will revisit, comes from one of the surviving Tutsi women, Berthe:

"Before, I knew that a man could kill another man, because it happens all the time. Now I know that even the person with whom you've shared food, or with whom you've slept, even he can kill you with no trouble. The closest neighbor can kill you with his teeth: that is what I have learned since the genocide, and my eyes no longer gaze the same on the face of the world."

Lieutenant General Roméo Dallaire has authored a powerful testimony about his experiences as the force commander for the U.N. Assistance Mission to Rwanda in *Shake Hands with the Devil*.¹⁵ Although he was able to save thousands of people by his heroic ingenuity, this top military commander was left devastated by his inability to summon more aid from the United Nations to prevent many more atrocities. He ended up with severe post-traumatic stress disorder as a psychological casualty of this massacre.¹⁶

The Rape of Nanking, China

So graphically horrifying—yet so easily visualized—is the concept of rape that we use the term metaphorically to describe other, almost unimaginable atrocities of war. Japanese soldiers butchered between 260,000 and 350,000 Chinese civilians in just a few bloody months of 1937. Those figures represent more deaths than the total annihilation caused by the atomic bombing of Japan and all the civilian deaths in most European countries during all of World War II.

Beyond the sheer number of Chinese slaughtered, it is important for us to recognize the "creatively evil" ways devised by their tormentors to make even death desirable. The author Iris Chang's investigation of that horror revealed that Chinese men were used for bayonet practice and in decapitation contests. An estimated 20,000 to 80,000 women were raped. Many soldiers went beyond rape to disembowel women, slice off their breasts, and nail them to walls alive. Fathers

were forced to rape their daughters and sons their mothers as other family members watched.¹⁷

War engenders cruelty and barbaric behavior against anyone considered the Enemy, as the dehumanized, demonic Other. The Rape of Nanking is notorious for the graphic detail of the horrific extremes soldiers went to to degrade and destroy innocent civilian “enemy non-combatants.” However, were it a singular incident and not just another part of the historical tapestry of such inhumanities against civilians we might think it an anomaly. British troops executed and raped civilians during the U.S. Revolutionary War. Soviet Red Army soldiers raped an estimated 100,000 Berlin women toward the end of World War II and between 1945 and 1948. In addition to the rapes and murders of more than 500 civilians at the My Lai massacre in 1968, recently released secret Pentagon evidence describes 320 incidents of American atrocities against Vietnamese and Cambodian civilians.¹⁸

Dehumanization and Moral Disengagement in the Laboratory

We can assume that most people, most of the time, are moral creatures. But imagine that this morality is like a gearshift that at times gets pushed into neutral. When that happens, morality is disengaged. If the car happens to be on an incline, car and driver move precipitously downhill. It is then the nature of the circumstances that determines outcomes, not the driver’s skills or intentions. This simple analogy, I think, captures one of the central themes in the theory of moral disengagement developed by my Stanford colleague Albert Bandura. In a later chapter, we will review his theory, which will help explain why some otherwise good people can be led to do bad things. At this point, I want to turn to the experimental research that Bandura and his assistants conducted, which illustrates the ease with which morality can be disengaged by the tactic of dehumanizing a potential victim.¹⁹ In an elegant demonstration that shows the power of dehumanization, one single word is shown to increase aggression toward a target. Let’s see how the experiment worked.

Imagine you are a college student who has volunteered for a study of group problem solving as part of a three-person team from your school. Your task is to help students from another college improve their group problem-solving performance by punishing their errors. That punishment takes the form of administering electric shocks that can be increased in severity over successive trials. After taking your names and those of the other team, the assistant leaves to tell the experimenter that the study can begin. There will be ten trials during each of which you can decide the shock level to administer to the other student group in the next room.

You don’t realize that it is part of the experimental script, but you “accidentally” overhear the assistant complaining over the intercom to the experimenter that the other students “seem like animals.” You don’t know it, but in two other

conditions to which other students like you have been randomly assigned, the assistant describes the other students as “nice guys” or does not label them at all.

Do these simple labels have any effect? It doesn’t seem so initially. On the first trial all the groups respond in the same way by administering low levels of shock, around level 2. But soon it begins to matter what each group has heard about these anonymous others. If you know nothing about them, you give a steady average of about a level 5. If you have come to think of them as “nice guys,” you treat them in a more humane fashion, giving them significantly less shock, about a level 3. However, imagining them as “animals” switches off any sense of compassion you might have for them, and when they commit errors, you begin to shock them with ever-increasing levels of intensity, significantly more than in the other conditions, as you steadily move up toward the high level 8.

Think carefully for a moment about the psychological processes that a simple label has tripped off in your mind. You overheard a person, whom you do not know personally, tell some authority, whom you have never seen, that other college students like you seem like “animals.” That single descriptive term changes your mental construction of these others. It distances you from images of friendly college kids who must be more similar to you than different. That new mental set has a powerful impact on your behavior. The post hoc rationalizations the experimental students generated to explain why they needed to give so much shock to the “animal-house” students in the process of “teaching them a good lesson” were equally fascinating. This example of using controlled experimental research to investigate the underlying psychological processes that occur in significant real-world cases of violence will be extended in chapters 12 and 13 when we consider how behavioral scientists have investigated various aspects of the psychology of evil.

Our ability to selectively engage and disengage our moral standards . . . helps explain how people can be barbarically cruel in one moment and compassionate the next.

—Albert Bandura²⁰

Horrific Images of Abuse at Abu Ghraib Prison

The driving force behind this book was the need to better understand the how and why of the physical and psychological abuses perpetrated on prisoners by American Military Police at the Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq. As the photographic evidence of these abuses rocketed around the world in May 2004, we all saw for the first time in recorded history vivid images of young American men and women engaged in unimaginable forms of torture against civilians they were supposed to be guarding. The tormentors and the tormented were captured in an extensive display of digitally documented depravity that the soldiers themselves had made during their violent escapades.

Why did they create photographic evidence of such illegal acts, which if found would surely get them into trouble? In these “trophy photos,” like the proud displays by big-game hunters of yesteryear with the beasts they have killed, we saw smiling men and women in the act of abusing their lowly animal creatures. The images are of punching, slapping, and kicking detainees; jumping on their feet; forcibly arranging naked, hooded prisoners in piles and pyramids; forcing naked prisoners to wear women’s underwear over their heads; forcing male prisoners to masturbate or simulate fellatio while being photographed or videotaped with female soldiers smiling or encouraging it; hanging prisoners from cell rafters for extended time periods; dragging a prisoner around with a leash tied to his neck; and using unmuzzled attack dogs to frighten prisoners.

The iconic image that ricocheted from that dungeon to the streets of Iraq and every corner of the globe was that of the “triangle man”: a hooded detainee is standing on a box in a stress position with his outstretched arms protruding from under a garment blanket revealing electrical wires attached to his fingers. He was told that he would be electrocuted if he fell off the box when his strength gave out. It did not matter that the wires went nowhere; it mattered that he believed the lie and must have experienced considerable stress. There were even more shocking photographs that the U.S. government chose not to release to the public because of the greater damage they would surely have done to the credibility and moral image of the U.S. military and President Bush’s administrative command. I have seen hundreds of these images, and they are indeed horrifying.

I was deeply distressed at the sight of such suffering, of such displays of arrogance, of such indifference to the humiliation being inflicted upon helpless prisoners. I was also amazed to learn that one of the abusers, a female soldier who had just turned twenty-one, described the abuse as “just fun and games.”

I was shocked, but I was not surprised. The media and the “person in the street” around the globe asked how such evil deeds could be perpetrated by these seven men and women, whom military leaders had labeled as “rogue soldiers” and “a few bad apples.” Instead, I wondered what circumstances in that prison cell block could have tipped the balance and led even good soldiers to do such bad things. To be sure, advancing a situational analysis for such crimes does not excuse them or make them morally acceptable. Rather, I needed to find the meaning in this madness. I wanted to understand how it was possible for the characters of these young people to be so transformed in such a short time that they could do these unthinkable deeds.

Parallel Universes in Abu Ghraib and Stanford’s Prison

The reason that I was shocked but not surprised by the images and stories of prisoner abuse in the Abu Ghraib “Little Shop of Horrors” was that I had seen something similar before. Three decades earlier, I had witnessed eerily similar scenes as they unfolded in a project that I directed, of my own design: naked, shackled pris-

oners with bags over their heads, guards stepping on prisoners' backs as they did push-ups, guards sexually humiliating prisoners, and prisoners suffering from extreme stress. Some of the visual images from my experiment are practically interchangeable with those of the guards and prisoners in that remote prison in Iraq, the notorious Abu Ghraib.

The college students role-playing guards and prisoners in a mock prison experiment conducted at Stanford University in the summer of 1971 were mirrored in the real guards and real prison in the Iraq of 2003. Not only had I seen such events, I had been responsible for creating the conditions that allowed such abuses to flourish. As the project's principal investigator, I designed the experiment that randomly assigned normal, healthy, intelligent college students to enact the roles of either guards or prisoners in a realistically simulated prison setting where they were to live and work for several weeks. My student research associates, Craig Haney, Curt Banks, and David Jaffe, and I wanted to understand some of the dynamics operating in the psychology of imprisonment.

How do ordinary people adapt to such an institutional setting? How do the power differentials between guards and prisoners play out in their daily interactions? If you put good people in a bad place, do the people triumph or does the place corrupt them? Would the violence that is endemic to most real prisons be absent in a prison filled with good middle-class boys? These were some of the exploratory issues to be investigated in what started out as a simple study of prison life.

EXPLORING THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

Our journey together will be one that the poet Milton might say leads into "darkness visible." It will take us to places where evil, by any definition of the word, has flourished. We will meet a host of people who have done very bad things to others, often out of a sense of high purpose, the best ideology, and moral imperative. You are alerted to watch for demons along the path, but you may be disappointed by their banality and their similarity to your next-door neighbor. With your permission, as your adventure guide, I will invite you to walk in their shoes and see through their eyes in order to give you an insider's perspective upon evil, up close and personal. At times, the view will be downright ugly, but only by examining and understanding the causes of such evil might we be able to change it, to contain it, to transform it through wise decisions and innovative communal action.

The basement of Stanford University's Jordan Hall is the backdrop I will use to help you understand what it was like to be a prisoner, a guard, or a prison superintendent at that time in that special place. Although the research is widely known from media sound bites and some of our research publications, the full story has never before been told. I will narrate the events as they unfold in first person, present tense, re-creating the highlights of each day and night in chronological

sequence. After we consider the implications of the Stanford Prison Experiment—ethical, theoretical, and practical—we will expand the bases of the psychological study of evil by exploring a range of experimental and field research by psychologists that illustrates the power of situational forces over individual behavior. We will examine in some detail research on conformity, obedience, deindividuation, dehumanization, moral disengagement, and the evil of inaction.

“Men are not prisoners of fate, but only prisoners of their own minds,” said President Franklin Roosevelt. Prisons are metaphors for constraints on freedom, both literal and symbolic. The Stanford Prison Experiment went from initially being a symbolic prison to becoming an all-too-real one in the minds of its prisoners and guards. What are other self-imposed prisons that limit our basic freedoms? Neurotic disorders, low self-esteem, shyness, prejudice, shame, and excessive fear of terrorism are just some of the chimeras that limit our potentiality for freedom and happiness, blinding our full appreciation of the world around us.²¹

With that knowledge in mind, Abu Ghraib returns to capture our attention. But now let us go beyond the headlines and TV images to appreciate more fully what it was like to be a prison guard or a prisoner in that horrid prison at the time of those abuses. Torture forces its way into our investigation in the new forms that it has taken since the Inquisition. I will take you into the court-martial of one of those military policemen, and we will witness some of the negative fallout of the soldiers' actions. Throughout, we will bring to bear all we know about the triadic components of our social psychological understanding, focusing on acting people in particular situations, created and maintained by systemic forces. We will put on trial the command structure of the U.S. military, CIA officials, and top government leaders for their combined complicity in creating a dysfunctional system that spawned the torture and abuses of Abu Ghraib.

The first part of our final chapter will offer some guidelines on how to resist unwanted social influence, how to build resistance to the seductive lures of influence professionals. We want to know how to combat mind control tactics used to compromise our freedom of choice to the tyranny of conformity, compliance, obedience, and self-doubting fears. Although I preach the power of the situation, I also endorse the power of people to act mindfully and critically as informed agents directing their behavior in purposeful ways. By understanding how social influence operates and by realizing that any of us can be vulnerable to its subtle and pervasive powers, we can become wise and wily consumers instead of being easily influenced by authorities, group dynamics, persuasive appeals, and compliance strategies.

I want to end by reversing the question with which we started. Instead of considering whether you are capable of evil, I want you to consider whether you are capable of becoming a hero. My final argument introduces the concept of the “banality of heroism.” I believe that any one of us is a potential hero, waiting for the right situational moment to make the decision to act to help others despite

personal risk and sacrifice. But we have far to travel before we get to that happy conclusion, so *andiamo!*

Power said to the world,
“You are mine.”
The world kept it prisoner on her throne.
Love said to the world, “I am thine.”
The world gave it the freedom of her house.
—Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds*²²