

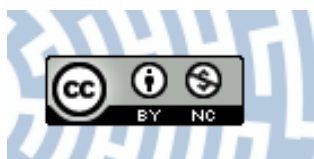


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Book Review:

Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect. Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. Warsaw 2008, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 458 p.

Taking up the challenge to review an undoubtedly monumental work such as *The Lucifer Effect* by Philip Zimbardo I would like to remark that as a matter of fact it seems to be impossible to present, even in a most concise way, a summary or describe particular chapters of this immense work. Taking into account the perfect logical structure of the publication as well as the author's cohesion of thought, exposition and argumentation it is not only impossible but also pointless. Still, alternatively, a totally different concept of talking, or writing about *The Lucifer Effect* might be worth presenting, which is answering a couple of questions essential from the perspective of the assessment of the work.

Adapting this concept, the first necessity is to put forward a question which is fundamental for the reviewer: "What is this work?" It might seem that the borders between fiction, popularised scientific literature and scientific works par excellence are clearly defined, thus it is difficult to find a literary means of expression which would be problematic in terms of principal classification. But this is exactly the case of Zimbardo's recently published book. Yet, it would be ridiculous to treat this situation as a flaw, as *The Effect* is both an example of outstanding literary craft and art and equally extensive knowledge and academic experience represented by the author. I raise no objections to treating this work as an academic manual (as it was recognized as such by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education) and a popularised scientific work aimed at hobbyists. Such a subterfuge significantly broadens the circle of potential readers which is a particularly positive phenomenon if the work's essentials are taken into consideration.

In this way we brush upon the next question, which put most colloquially might be drawn up in the following way: "What is the book about?" As far as the previous paragraph has been devoted to the formal classification of the work, this

one deals with the problem of subject assessment. Trying to answer it in a possibly simple manner, it must be remarked that this work is a complex study of psychology of good and evil, deindividuation and dehumanization of an individual, and the environment influence on human behaviour. But, if the reviewed book was essentially merely a set of presented problems, it would not answer its vital question, which is a logical conclusion of the delivered lecture on: *Understanding how good people turn evil?* Going deeply into the content of the book and bearing in mind the author's scientific interests, we come to a conclusion that this work transcends the simple frames of the academic understanding of the psychology of good and evil.

A considerable part of the work is devoted to SPE (Stanford Prison Experiment). This awfully drastic experience taking place in the early 70s is referred to not accidentally, corresponding with the general subject of the book but also constituting a perfect background for the Abu Ghraib incidents. In both cases the parallel between the situational influences and psychological processes is investigated. The conclusions shed new light on the way of perceiving, but first and foremost assessing or quite frequently judging particular pathological behaviours and actions, being a certain kind of contribution to the study of universal evil determinants and the analysis of the cause of particular attitudes to evil. Admittedly, the fact of the constant presence of this problem is undeniable, thus, anybody who takes a scarcest interest in the growing individualisation of societies and entailing menaces, does not require further proofs of the phenomenon. The author's personal participation in the trial procedures of the Abu Ghraib incidents and the unlimited access to the investigation documents definitely give his recollections and conclusions the merit of authenticity. Therefore, taking into consideration his personal and scientific experience as well as his formal psychological education, the statement that Philip Zimbardo seems to be a researcher predestined to study the subject is obvious.

Asking another question: "What is the conclusion?," the answer is extremely imprecise, heterogeneous. For after overwhelmingly depressing conclusions referring to the construction of human psyche and its vulnerability to conformism towards evil, there follows a chapter summarizing the author's reflections on the phenomenon which he calls "the banality of heroism." Such a structure enables us to realize how far we can widen the circle of social heroes, so according to the concept, they are people who do not submit to a conformist reflex action towards pathogenic circumstances. The author quotes an array of strategies how to deal with the environment influence in order to defend their own system of axioms. Heroism, as Zimbardo understands it, while confronted with the "banality of evil," takes on a completely new dimension, and, as it seems, almost utilitarian in reference with

dynamic social changes. Heroism deprived, in a way, of pathos allows of reaching its essence and thus, enriches the social understanding of heroism.

In conclusion, we cannot escape the question: "How to assess this work?" The answer to the final question seems to be the simplest of all. *The Lucifer Effect* is a work deserving the highest recognition. There are numerous reasons for granting this book such an excellent reception, and the subject itself being extremely important and up-to-date seems to be one of them. Another one is the manner of approaching the issue, i. e. significantly versatile, but at the same time complex and fascinating, professional and lucid. The assumptions and theses supported by a vast empirical material constitute further premises to consider this work eminent. Finally, the author's experience and the mixture of his personal involvement as well as professional distance to the issue, unobtainable for many researchers, makes us perceive it as an obligatory book not only for social psychologists but also lawyers, sociologists and social studies specialists.