

Capitalism Makes Us Better People

How is it that people are induced to commit evil, even when they consider themselves “good”? What social dynamics encourage—or discourage—cruelty toward other human beings? Cato research fellow Will Wilkinson offered new insights on these important questions at a June 12, 2008, Cato Book Forum centered on *The Lucifer Effect*, by Philip Zimbardo.

WILL WILKINSON: *The Lucifer Effect* is a powerful, tonic work aimed at, according to the subtitle, “Understanding How Good People Turn Evil.” Any work that helps us better understand the horrors of Nanking, Auschwitz, My Lai, Rwanda or, closer to home, the dehumanization and wanton cruelty of Abu Ghraib, is most welcome and merits our closest attention. As I’m scarcely qualified to comment on the de-tails of experimental social psychology, I’m going to take a rather more global perspective. I’ll also be brazenly conjectural, but hopefully in a usefully stimulating way.

For starters, I wonder whether “Understanding How Good People Turn Evil” is really the right question.

What is the target of explanation here? This is a trickier question than it may at first appear, because the normal case can seem anomalous if you dwell inside the anomaly. And life inside the United States at the beginning of the 21st century is far from the natural human condition. What seems odd to us may not in fact be odd. We may be the odd ones. Here’s an analogy: when first studying development economics, many students are initially tempted to think that the question is “Why are some places so poor?” Well, that’s a rich person’s question. Relative poverty, hunger, illness, and “premature” death don’t require a special explanation. That’s the baseline human condi-

tion. The rare deviations from the baseline cry out for attention and explanation, and hold the key to understanding the baseline as well: How do societies ever get rich?

It strikes me that Zimbardo’s question may be like the question of why some places are poor. The question of why it is that human beings are tribal, conformist, disposed to terrible violence, and easily organized by authority into acts of dehumanizing cruelty and murder may be simply to ask why human nature is what it is. Maybe because that’s what people are like in the normal case, and goodness has never been the default. Perhaps the better question is, Why are we ever cooperative, cosmopolitan, caring, peaceful, and good? The Stanford Experiment (a classic study on the psychology of power and pain infliction conducted by Zimbardo) and Abu Ghraib may simply be efflorescences of our base nature—enabled by contexts where the normal constraints of modernity have fallen away.

That the interesting question may be “Why are we ever good?” was brought home to me by an essay by Steven Pinker in the *New Republic* last year in which he reports the completely stunning, and mostly baffling, precipitous decline in violence in recent history. This essay rocked my world, and made my already strong Whiggish tendencies that much stronger. Here’s some of what Pinker said:

The decline of violence is a fractal phenomenon, visible at the scale of millennia, centuries, decades, and years. It applies over several orders of magnitude of violence, from genocide to war to rioting to homicide to the treatment of children and animals. And it appears to be a worldwide trend, though not a homogeneous one. The leading edge has been in Western societies, especially England and Holland, and there seems to have been a tipping point at the onset of the Age of Reason in the early seventeenth century.

At the widest-angle view, one can see a whopping difference across the millennia that separate us from our pre-state ancestors. Contra leftist anthropologists who celebrate the noble savage, quantitative body counts—such as the proportion of prehistoric skeletons with axe marks and embedded arrowheads or the proportion of men in a contemporary foraging tribe who die at the hands of other men—suggest that pre-state societies were far more violent than our own. It is true that raids and battles killed a tiny percentage of the numbers that die in modern warfare. But, in tribal violence, the clashes are more frequent, the percentage of men in the population who fight is greater, and the rates of death per battle are higher. According to anthropologists like Lawrence Keeley, Stephen LeBlanc, Phillip Walker, and Bruce Knauft, these factors combine to yield populationwide rates of death in tribal warfare that dwarf those of modern times. If the wars of the 20th century had killed the same proportion of the population that die in the wars of a typical tribal society, there would have been two billion deaths, not 100 million. . . .

On the scale of decades, comprehensive data again paint a shocking-

ly happy picture: Global violence has fallen steadily since the middle of the twentieth century. According to the Human Security Brief 2006, the number of battle deaths in interstate wars has declined from more than 65,000 per year in the 1950s to less than 2,000 per year in this decade. In Western Europe and the Americas, the second half of the century saw a steep decline in the number of wars, military coups, and deadly ethnic riots.

Zooming in by a further power of ten exposes yet another reduction. After the Cold War, every part of the world saw a steep drop-off in state-based conflicts, and those that do occur are more likely to end in negotiated settlements rather than being fought to the bitter end. Meanwhile, according to political scientist Barbara Harff, between 1989 and 2005 the number of campaigns of mass killing of civilians decreased by 90 percent. . . . As deplorable as they are, the abuses at Abu Ghraib and the lethal injections of a few murderers in Texas are mild by the standards of atrocities in human history. But, from a contemporary vantage point, we see them as signs of how low our behavior can sink, not of how high our standards have risen.

That's completely amazing. Some neo-conservatives lament that we have lost the cultural will to send tens of thousands of young men and women through the meat grinder of war. I think they're right that the culture has changed. We are less willing both to kill and to die. But, obviously, that's worth celebrating. The Iraq war has already cost more in real terms than the Vietnam or the Korean wars, but it has been much, much less deadly, and there's probably a good reason for that. We demand it.

So this is a question I want to put to *Zimbardo*. What can your work do to help us explain this?

Here is where I become wildly conjectural. Behavior has complex causes, and individual dispositions—personality, character,

virtue—are only part of the story. The evidence presented by *Zimbardo* and others that context shapes behavior is overwhelming. Like *Hayek*, I don't think "rationality," for example, is a native feature of the mind, but is an emergent set of norms that arise in



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a particular cultural context to coordinate our various natural cognitive functions. Likewise, I tend to think that “character” has a great deal to do with the internalization of certain kinds of contingent social norms, norms that may simply evaporate provided a sudden discontinuity in social context. As *Zimbardo* says, whether there are bad apples often depends on the barrels. And the overall social system is a mass manufacturer of barrels.

My conjecture is that the interrelated advance of economic growth and the spread of liberal cultural norms is in effect creating better apples by manufacturing better barrels. That's why there is less violence and death. To put it sharply and contentiously, liberal capitalism is ridding the world of evil.

Zimbardo argues that the identification of the nature of our abiding dispositions to do evil is the best defense against it. I agree that it is a good defense. Knowledge is power. But knowledge doesn't come from nowhere. The Leland Stanford Junior University, where Professor *Zimbardo* works, certainly didn't come from nowhere. It is a cause and consequence of wealth. The best defense against evil is prosperity and freedom, in part because it produces the science that helps us understand our own behavior and stand guard against our own worst inclinations.

As *Zimbardo* argues:

We are not slaves to the power of situational forces. But we must learn methods of resisting and opposing them. In all the situations we have explored together, there were always a few, a minority who stood firm. The time has come to try to expand their numbers by thinking about how they were able to resist.

I agree. That advice is excellent individually. And if scaled up culturally, it is a wonderful recipe for a culture of mindfulness, responsibility, individuality, and critical independence. It is true that as human beings we are conformist and subject to pressure from authority. Our behavior is in large part shaped by social expectations. So we must come to expect the best. We must try to create a culture of individualism and self-responsibility for people to conform to, and to create an authoritative common understanding that “I was just doing my job” is no excuse.

But it is important to grasp that, somehow, we are already succeeding in resisting and opposing the situational forces that lead to evil, without even trying. My guess is that it is, in a word, globalization. The expansion of the cooperative order and the prosperity and freedom it tends to bring, simply makes life seem less cheap and expendable. But it also creates situational contexts in which cooperation and peace are reinforced over and over again. The much-derided “bourgeois virtues” in the end turn out to be the key ingredient in a good apple.