

The Experiment

“Sometimes this whole world
is just one big prison yard.
Some of us are prisoners,
the rest of us are guards.”

— Bob Dylan, “George Jackson”

“Sure, this robe of mine doth change my disposition.”

— Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*

Stanford prison experiment:

“What happens when you put good people in an evil place? Does humanity win over evil, or does evil triumph? These are some of the questions we posed in this dramatic simulation of prison life conducted in the summer of 1971 at Stanford University. How we went about testing these questions and what we found may astound you. Our planned two-week investigation into the psychology of prison life had to be ended prematurely after only six days because of what the situation was doing to the college students who participated. In only a few days, our guards became sadistic and our prisoners became depressed and showed signs of extreme stress.” (Philip Zimbardo, psychologist, organizer of the Stanford prison experiment)

“Once you put a uniform on, and are given a role, I mean, a job, saying ‘your job is to keep these people in line,’ then you’re certainly not the same person if you’re in street clothes and in a different role. You really become that person once you put on the khaki uniform, you put on the glasses, you take the nightstick, and you act the part. That’s your costume and you have to act accordingly when you put it on.” (*Guard Hellmann*, participant)

Plato:

“That even those who practice it [justice] do so unwillingly, from an incapacity to do injustice, we would best perceive if we should in thought do something like this: give each, the just man and the unjust, license to do whatever he wants, while we follow and watch where his desire will lead each. We would catch the just man red-handed going the same way as the unjust man out of a desire to get the better; this is what any nature naturally pursues as good, while it is law which by force perverts it to honor equality” (Plato, *Republic*, 359b-c).

“And if they do imitate, they must imitate what’s appropriate to them from childhood: men who are courageous, moderate, holy, free, and everything of the sort; and what is slavish, or anything else shameful, they must neither do nor be clever at imitating, so that they won’t get a taste for the being from its imitation.” (Plato, *Republic*, 395c-d)

“What we wish to recognize is the following: surely some terrible, savage, and lawless form of desires is in every man, even in some of us who seem to be ever so measured.” (Plato, *Republic*, 572b)

Michel Foucault:

“But a punishment like forced labour or even imprisonment – mere loss of liberty – has never functioned without a certain additional element of punishment that certainly concerns the body itself: rationing of food, sexual deprivation, corporal punishment, solitary confinement ... There remains, therefore, a trace of ‘torture’ in the modern mechanisms of criminal justice – a trace that has not been entirely overcome, but which is enveloped, increasingly, by the non-corporal nature of the penal system” (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, pp. 15-16)

“It is ugly to be punishable, but there is no glory in punishing.” (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, p. 10)

“The strategic adversary is fascism ... the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us.” (Preface, *Anti-Oedipus*, xiii)

Hannah Arendt:

“The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together.” (*Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, p. 276.)

“The greatest evil perpetrated is the evil committed by nobodies, that is, by human beings who refuse to be persons” (*Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 111)

“... the only specific characteristic one could detect in his [Eichmann’s] past as well as in his behavior during the trial and the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite *authentic inability to think*.” (“Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture,” *Social Research*, no. 38/3 (Fall 1970), p. 417.)

“*Could the activity of thinking* as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, *could this activity be of such a nature that it 'conditions' men against evil-doing?*” (TMC, p. 418)