
An Analysis of the Evil Nature of Humanity in Stanford Prison Experiment

Morality vs Evil Nature

Psychology is the way that human beings are able to get a deeper understanding of each other. The people that study psychology experience astonishing outcomes of the ways of mankind. Dr. Phillip Zimbardo is a psychologist known for his research on the corruptive ways of human nature. In 1971, Dr. Zimbardo conducted the Stanford Prison Experiment. This experiment tested what happens when average people are put in an evil place like prison. Does morality overcome the evil, or will the evil become victorious? Like Dr. Zimbardo, Hsun Tzu was also involved in the understanding of human mentality. He wrote of his beliefs in "Man's Nature is Evil". Dr. Zimbardo's outcome of the experiment showed that evil overcomes good. Despite those who disagree with Dr. Zimbardo's impression of his experiment, the Stanford Prison Experiment confirms that a negative environment will nullify an individual's ethical behavior through a lack of authority and the influence of others.

Without a proper authority figure to teach us morality, we become blind to it. In the experiment, a participant was nicknamed "John Wayne" for his ruthless behavior of fellow prisoners. He abused his power as a guard and began dehumanizing the prisoners in cruel ways. Nobody stopped him and nobody showed him the wrong in what he did. His abuse of power continued until the end of the experiment because he lacked proper guidance. Tzu's theory shows that evil will grow from an absence of authority as he argues, "Now let someone try doing away with the authority of the ruler... He will find that the powerful impose upon the weak and rob them... and in no time the world will be given up to chaos and mutual destruction" (Tzu 88). The world around us has tendencies leading to degradation and disorder without the proper teaching of morality. People will abuse their power or become abused. We witnessed such acts in the experiment as guards exhibited harsh ways in treating people that they viewed as less than them. The cruel ways of man will overcome his good.

Mob mentality is the way people are influenced by the behaviors of people around them. The experiment displayed this mentality as the guards copied each other's negative behavior. The guards wore identical uniforms with reflective sunglasses that blocked anyone from seeing humanity through their eyes. The environment that they occupied caused evil. Day after day, the guards would harass the prisoners repeatedly with the aid of "John Wayne". His unethical treatment of the prisoners caused other guards to mock his behavior or become bystanders. At the end of the experiment, he questions why no one stopped his behavior. This reveals our

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selfish nature of witnessing evil but not stopping it. Tzu concludes this analysis as he reflects, “But if a man associates with men who are not good, then he will hear only deceit and lies and will see only conduct that is marked by wantonness, evil, and greed” (92). The environment that mankind inhabits will either appeal to morality or his negative ways. In an environment involving people showing negative behavior, it will impact others to influence that same behavior. The people influenced will become victims of their own selfishness.

On the opposing side, some disagree with Dr. Zimbardo’s conclusion because they view man as inherently good, no matter the circumstances. The experiment showed a prisoner given the number 416, starting his own hunger strike as a rebellion against the torment of the guards and a way out of the prison. Some may use his rebellion as his morality overcoming evil but this is not correct because this was an appeal to his selfishness. Though enacted in a different way than the guards, he used the hunger strike to show his determination in getting out of the prison by any means necessary. Humans want what they lack, in this case prisoner 416 felt that he started to lose his freedom and identity. He acted alone and for his changing impulses. Tzu challenges inherited good in humans as he describes, “Now Mencius states that man’s nature is good, but this is neither in accord with the facts, nor can it be proved to be valid” (89). Inherited good nature has not been proven to be valid. We are capable of good with proper teaching. The facts about human nature indicate the evil ways that humans have, as seen in many psychological studies such as this experiment. We act on impulses benefitting ourselves before anyone else.

The selfish nature of humans overcomes their morality when placed in a negative environment. Without proper guidance of righteousness, individuals will abuse their power and a negative environment will cause mimicked behavior of destruction. In the end, the experiment had gotten so out of hand that it took a fellow psychologist to show Dr. Zimbardo of all the unethical events that took place. As a result, Dr. Zimbardo called off the experiment early. Society must occupy positive environments to ensure morality. In order for future generations to become successful, they must follow the guidelines of good behavior and steer clear of negative environments.

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