

What Is Evil?

Theological & Philosophical Investigations

Thursdays, 2:00 - 3:30pm (- Oct 12)

frederickuu.org/fcc

Covenant

- Use **“I” statements**: *speak from your own experience.*
- **Ask permission before sharing** other participants’ stories outside the group.
- **Lean-in/back**: be conscious of the level of participation that you bring to the conversation. Allow everyone a chance to speak before you speak again.
- You always have **permission to “pass.”**



Check-in

- Attendance
- “Evil” show & tell



How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ I do not believe it is self evident....
- ✦ It is a void from goodness. Perhaps a chosen isolation from God, and from fellow humans, animals, our planet, etc... based on one's greater perceived attachments to ego, greed, pride, lust, etc...
- ✦ Evil, quite possibly is knowing wrong from right and choosing it maliciously



How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ I was politely told to "butt out" of this discussion. I guess there's no room for divergent opinions.....
- ✦ I believe there's room for Lots of opinions here. IF we are reasonably polite to each other.



How does Facebook define evil?

- I believe it's hate...against something or someone....and sanctimonious people are fully capable.....
- (hate? I hate snakes. does that make me evil? I think not....)



How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ "Evil" is a matter of perspective. Just as the term "sin".
- ✦ Knowingly doing harm to any one: human or animal.
 - ✦ or the planet
- ✦ Evil is live backwards. Hope this helps.



How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ I think it has to do with something related to disconnecting ourselves from the divine
- ✦ This is also my belief... In other words intentionally acting from EGO, devoid of Spirit.
- ✦ I'm not sure I'd agree with that definition. Where does that leave those of us who believe in good, yet don't believe in a Supreme Being? Evil?
- ✦ I see evil as representing a profound and unfathomable distance between God and self which results in unthinkable acts of honoring and seeking this distance.

How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ Evil is a personal definition. The gradients of fear, despair and disbelief are measured individually.
- ✦ Evil is that which, in the case of a human being, negates someone's humanity, their right to flourish and thrive as whole and holy beings. That definition can be adjusted for non-humans as well.



How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ There are a lot of wounded broken people in the world doing bad things. I don't see that as evil just *wrong*.
- ✦ Evil you can feel. It's like a gluttonous darkness built on destroying. Its intent is what it wants at all cost despite knowing better. People in power are seeing it and not taking the steps to call it out .



How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ Evil is the gun lobby that promotes profit from sales of automatic weapons. Intense, aggressive, fearful emotions have existed for millennia.
- ✦ Evil is the failure of our elected leaders to prevent tools of mass death to fall into the hands of sick, hurting people, and our families' and communities' failures to embrace those wounded among us before they act out in destructive ways.



How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ I've heard lawyers say that most criminals are impulsive, angry, but not evil.
- ✦ However, when true evil was in the courtroom you could tell.
- ✦ It had to do with a deliberate intention to do harm, cause pain.



How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ To me, supreme evil is one who acts without feeling and with direct intent to cause great harm. To act without a shred of conscience, empathy, compassion or true humanity.
 - ✦ That's about the definition of a sociopath. A mental illness, not an evil being.



How does Facebook define evil?

M. Scott Peck:

- ✦ "There really are people and institutions made up of people, who respond with hatred in the presence of goodness and would destroy the good insofar as it is in their power to do so.
- ✦ They do this not with conscious malice but blindly, lacking awareness of their own evil -- indeed, seeking to avoid any such awareness.
- ✦ As has been described of the devil in religious literature, they hate the light and instinctively will do anything to avoid it, including attempting to extinguish it.
- ✦ They will destroy the light in their own children and in all other beings subject to their power."

How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ Evil people hate the light because it reveals themselves to themselves.
- ✦ They hate goodness because it reveals their badness; they hate love because it reveals their laziness.
- ✦ They will destroy the light, the goodness, the love in order to avoid the pain of such self-awareness.
- ✦ My second conclusion, then, is that evil is laziness carried to its ultimate, extraordinary extreme.
- ✦ *Love is the antithesis of laziness. Ordinary laziness is a passive failure to love. Some ordinarily lazy people may not lift a finger to extend themselves unless they are compelled to do so. Their being is a manifestation of non-love; still, they are not evil.*

How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ Truly evil people, on the other hand, actively rather than passively avoid extending themselves.
- ✦ They will take any action in their power to protect their own laziness, to preserve the integrity of their sick self.
- ✦ Rather than nurturing others, they will actually destroy others in this cause.
- ✦ If necessary, they will even kill to escape the pain of their own spiritual growth.
- ✦ As the integrity of their sick self is threatened by the spiritual health of those around them, they will seek by all manner of means to crush and demolish the spiritual health that may exist near them.

How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ I define evil, then, as the exercise of political power -- that is, the imposition of one's will upon others by overt or covert coercion -- in order to avoid extending one's self for the purpose of nurturing spiritual growth.
- ✦ Ordinary laziness is non-love; evil is anti-love."

How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ I have never been able to get my head around what is taught in some religions - that there is an evil force in the world that we must be aware of and fight against.
- ✦ I keep going back to people being damaged, mental illness, separation from the Divine. These things are not evil.



How does Facebook define evil?

- I also like the concept of Yin and Yang and how they balance and compliment one another. You can't have shadow without light!
- I don't know if evil is a force or a truly whacked out of sync bad ball bearing — but religious or not, evil is usually thought of as the total disrespect and opposition of what is good.
- But that asks the question: what is good?



How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ Evil is the lack of light, the lack of enlightenment...it serves a temporary purpose to awaken us...
- ✦ I define evil as the intentional suppression of consciousness. This could manifest anywhere from murder to willful ignorance.



How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ Evil, it seems to me, is a label that allows us to name a thing, thinking we really understand it, when we don't really understand it at all. With horrendous acts such as what happened last night, in their essence, they are unknowable.
- ✦ Better to focus on what happened and how to help the victims, and perhaps prevent additional such acts. That empowers us.
- ✦ To just call it evil, is as much as saying we are helpless before it.
- ✦ I am inclined to think the word "evil" is a meaningless word.



How does Facebook define evil?

- Someone who just lost their family in an airstrike in Afghanistan thinks the American "hero" piloting the aircraft is evil incarnate, that same person seeking and carrying out vengeance and revenge against Americans is considered evil incarnate. Perspective.
- The loon with the machine gun is a lunatic, an act of madness is enabled in part by the ease with which he could acquire an arsenal and use it against innocents.
- Right this minute there are many who are saying the suppliers of said arsenal have no responsibility or blame while reaping their profits. Perspective.

How does Facebook define evil?

- The first and most important thing to say is that evil is an *adjective*, not a noun.
- Second, it is an adjective that applies to *actions*, not actors.
- Thus, for me there is no "Evil," and there are no evil persons - though there are people who perform evil acts, sometimes repeatedly.

How does Facebook define evil?

- "Evil" should be reserved for those who knowingly and deliberately harm others for some kind of gain.
- So many questions arise from attempting to describe why the word evil exists in our vocabulary.
- As a child I was taught to be a 'good girl' and as a teen, I was taught to 'act like a lady'.
- Good/Bad, Light/Dark, Yin/Yang, Happy/Sad. What makes a child good or bad?
- What makes a teen a lady or a gentleman?
- Then another favorite is "guilty by reason of insanity". Are the criminally insane bad or evil? I was taught that bad was temporary and evil was permanent.

How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ Karen Armstrong in her book "Evil" concludes it is the Other.
- ✦ As our consciousness evolves we can see evil in ourselves, but such a negation of goodness requires a projection to the "Other" thus our ego saves face by the age old ploy of scapegoating.
- ✦ When our consciousness evolves to include, but transcend, this way of Being, we can address this problem.
- ✦ The mindset which allowed for the problem is not the same one which can solve it. We are gradually, one person at a time, evolving from postmodern to Integral consciousness. Our daily spiritual practices will grease the skids of that progression.

How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ On my own journey with meditation I began to experience a more expansive and spacious self as observer of my ego and to see my own ego-driven self as sinful or shadow.
- ✦ It was where I felt myself as victim or was resentful or needed things to be my way.
- ✦ It was "the knowledge of good and evil" and allowed me to make choices and to grow spiritually.
- ✦ The garden seems to me to be ourselves as innocents before the ego develops. And we long for that.
- ✦ Once we are aware of choices we can make them.
- ✦ Many are trapped in unawareness. Part of the mystery.

How does Facebook define evil?

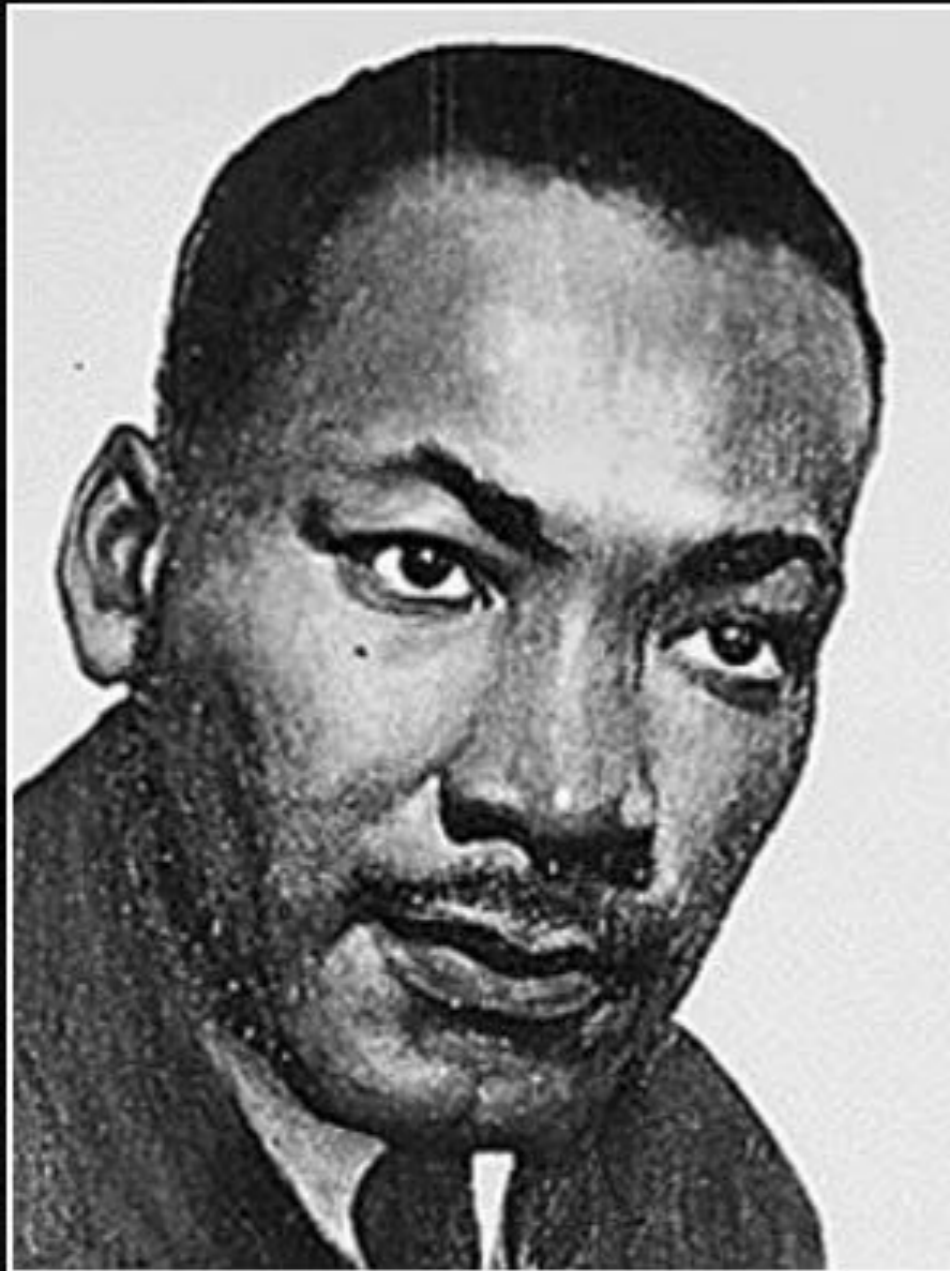
- ✦ I believe all beings attempt to avoid pain and suffering.
- ✦ "Evil" acts, to my mind, are desperate attempts to avoid suffering by releasing it, deflecting it, and perpetuating it on others.
- ✦ It doesn't work and ultimately I'm sure the perpetrators suffering is made even worse, but I suppose the act must provide some temporary relief or gratification, not totally unlike other addictions and unhealthy coping mechanisms.

How does Facebook define evil?

- ✦ I suppose this is more a psychological explanation than a moral one but perhaps the morality comes in when you consider how much it is a choice to cope with ones own suffering vs reflecting it back out on others and blaming them for your pain.
- ✦ My personal morality is based on trying to learn to see others as blameless souls connected to me and suffering along with me.
- ✦ That includes trying to find empathy and compassion for individuals who commit what others call evil. There, but for grace, go I.

Outline

1. *Why Study Evil?*
2. *Postmodernism & Evil*
3. *Evil & Theodicy/Freedom*
Evil & Conscience/Intention
4. *Evil as Sickness;*
Evil as Distance: Us & Them
5. **October 5: Evil & Obedience/Authority**
6. October 12: Personal Definitions of Evil, Takeaways, Insights, Commitments (~500 words?)



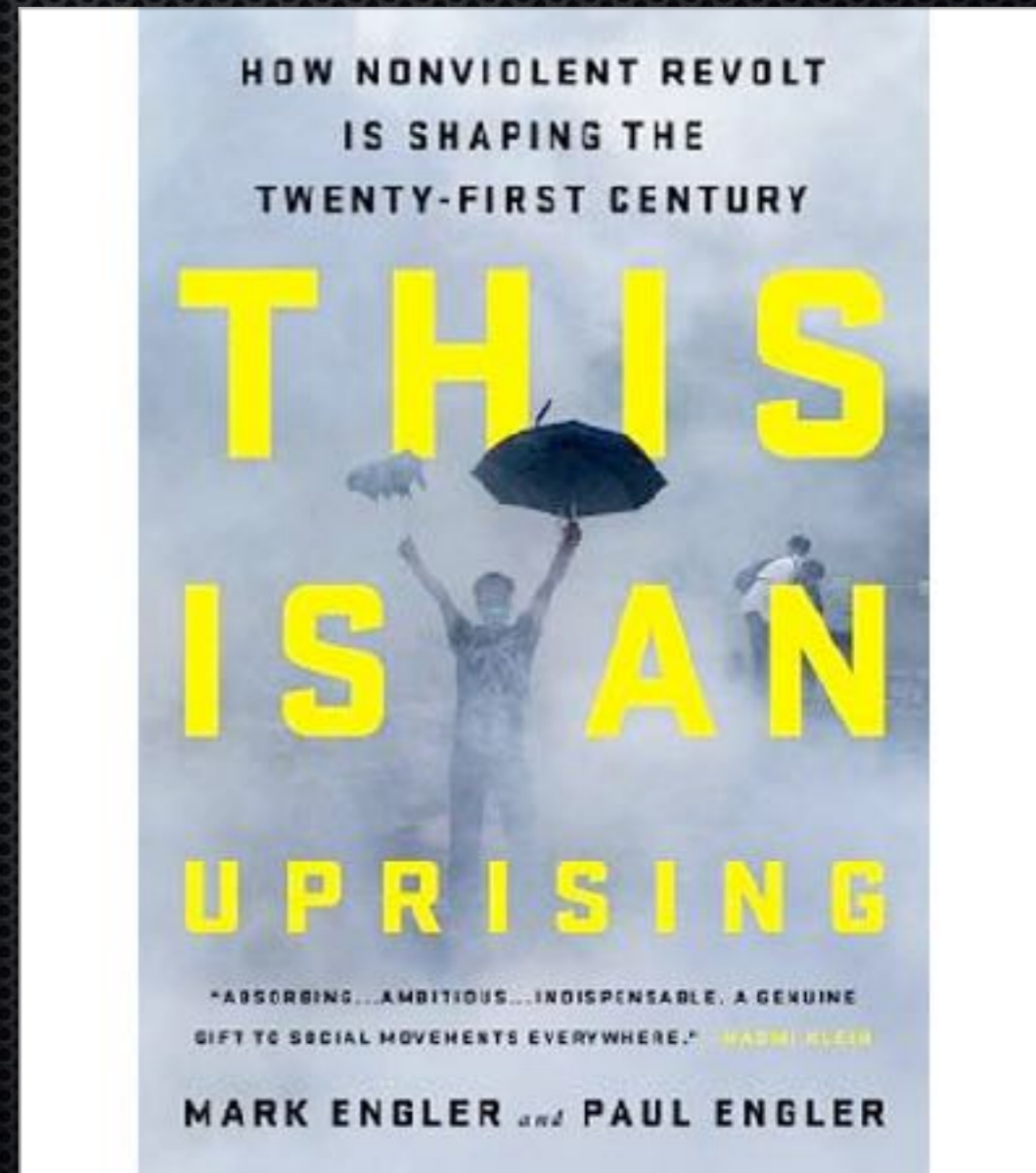
I became convinced that noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. No other person has been more eloquent and passionate in getting this idea across than Henry David Thoreau. As a result of his writings and personal witness, we are the heirs of a legacy of creative protest.

— *Martin Luther King* —

AZ QUOTES

Heretic = “to choose”

- ✦ Act up when you see someone violating “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.”
- ✦ Act up when your conscience is *tugging* on your heart—and you know you could make a difference.
- ✦ Act up that together we might build a world with peace, liberty, and justice—*not merely for some*—but for *all*.



youtube.com/watch?v=O1VOZhwRvWo

- ✦ American biographical drama film written and directed by Michael Almereyda
- ✦ Based on the 1961 Milgram experiment.

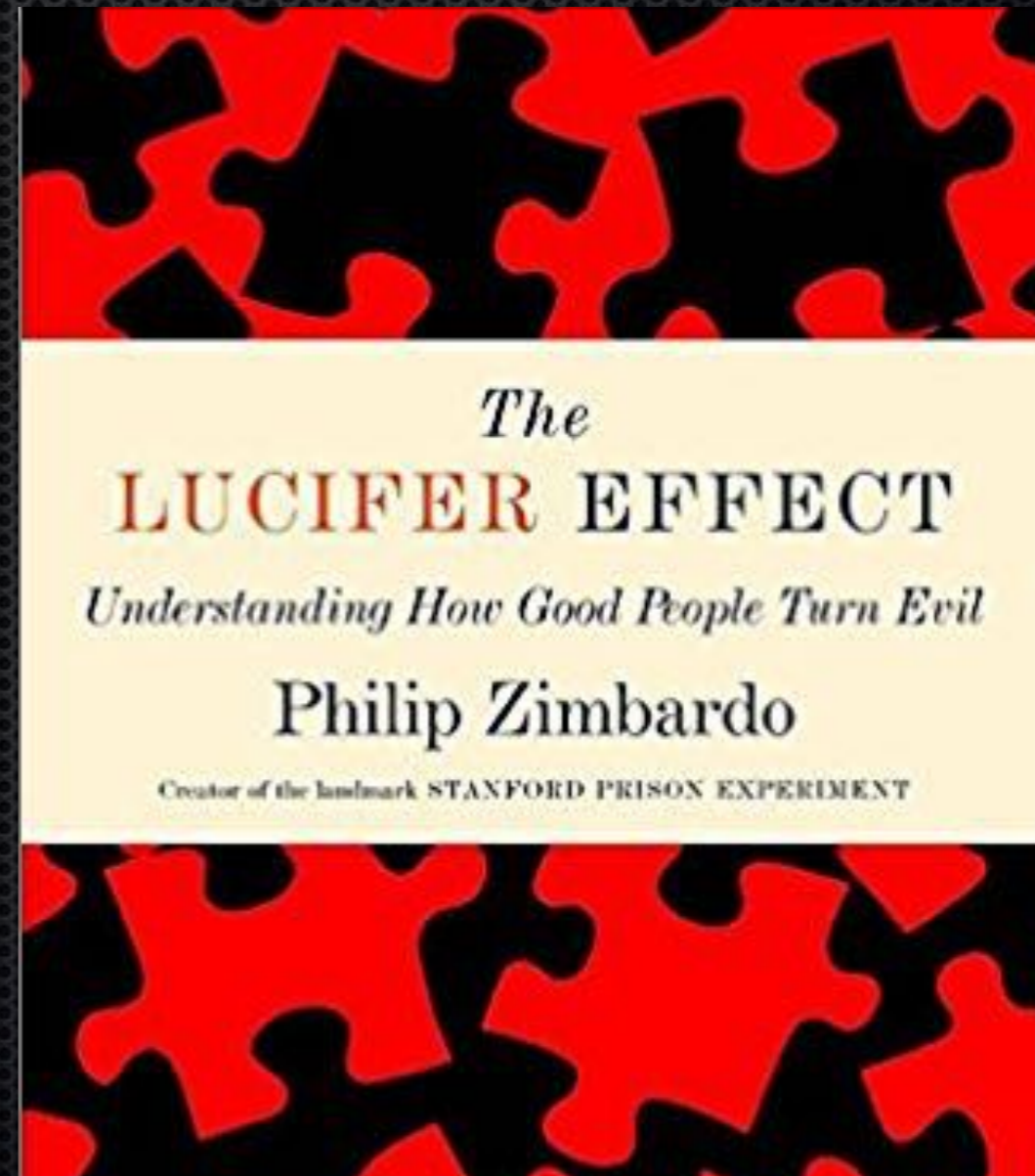


2015

Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment

- Average citizens were recruited off streets of Palo Alto, California in 1971 to be part of a 2-week prison experiment.
- Canceled prematurely after only a few days b/c it became too dangerous, volatile, and psychologically harmful.
- When divided at random into the roles of prisoners and guards, these average U.S. citizens—even knowing that it was all an experiment— began almost immediately to inhabit their roles in abusive and disturbing ways.

prisonexp.org



Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment

prisonexp.org

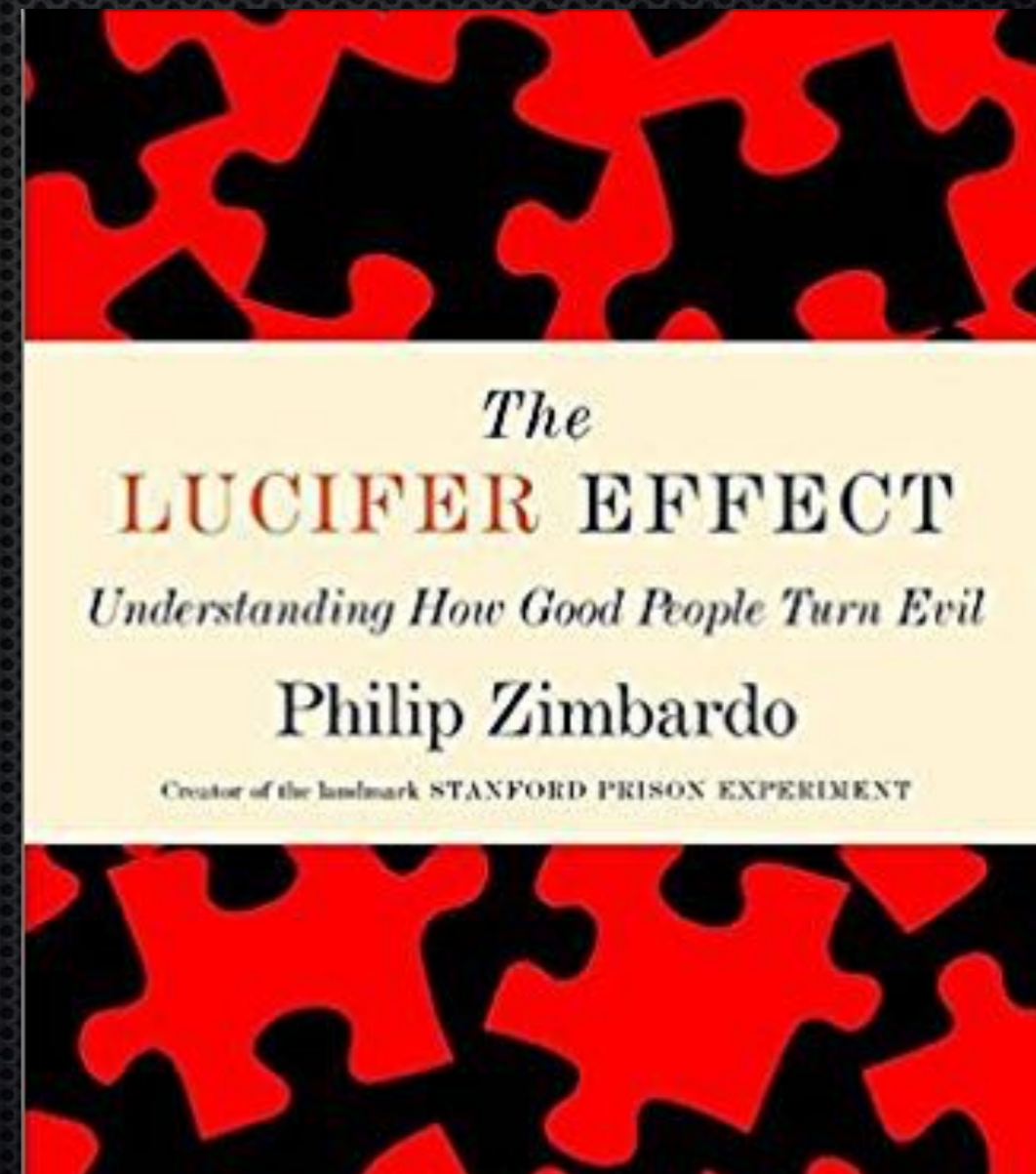
- ✦ Lesson: power of systems on influencing our behavior.
- ✦ Metaphor too often we blame “a few bad apples,” whereas the real problem is often “**pretty good apples**” in a “**bad barrel**” that causes them to spoil quickly.
- ✦ The barrel—the system—that needs to change



Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment

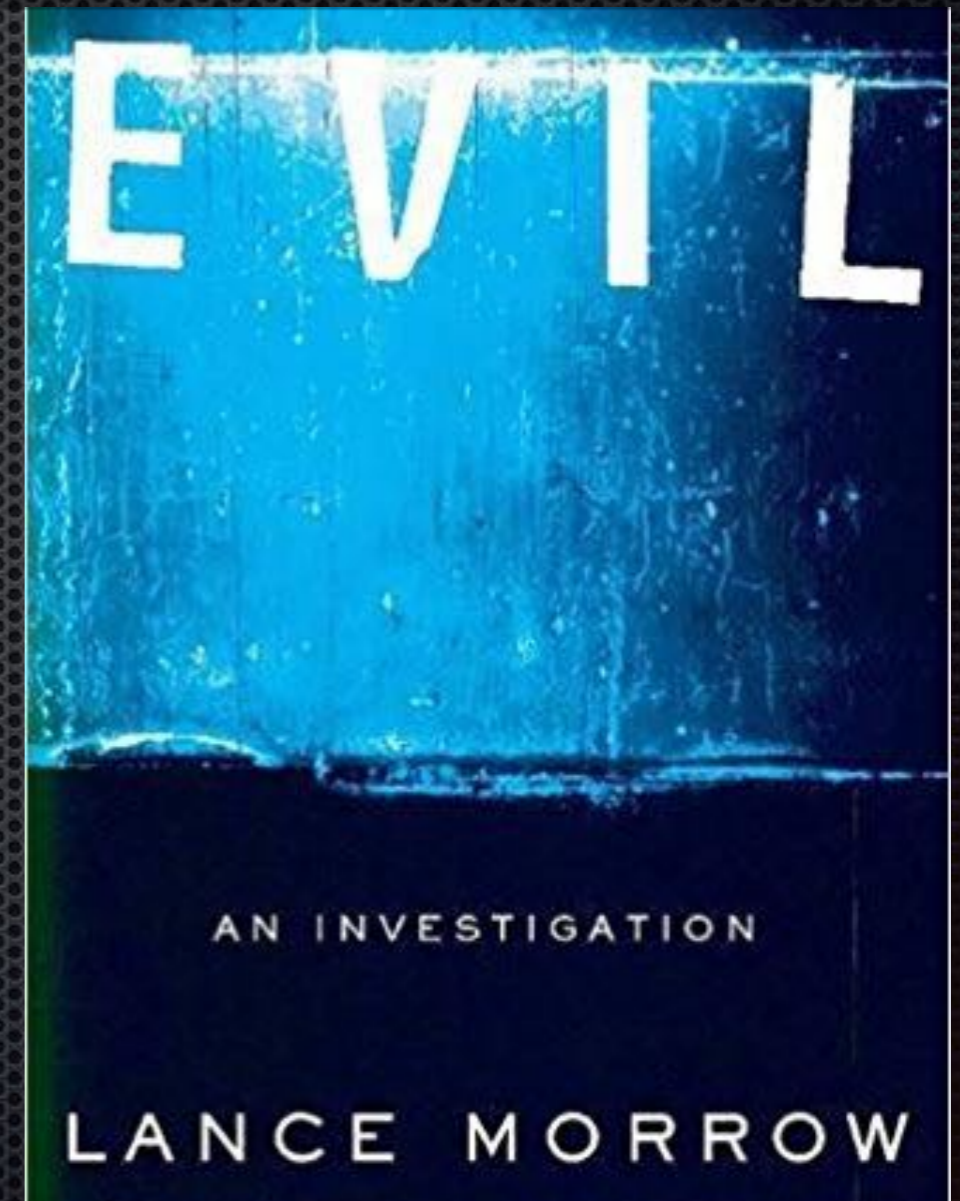
prisonexp.org

- ✦ Evil is 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: knowing better but doing worse.”
- ✦ Note: This book is **highly recommended.**



What does “evil” mean?

- Strange, versatile, dangerous word
- Can *describe* a genocide—and/or *incite* one
- Wandering, fluid quality
- Not systematic (although the Nazis bureaucratized it for a time)
- In between jobs, evil is organic, Protean, giving to flowing along the channels of least resistance.



2003

Understandings of Evil are *Generational*

GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

BRIDGEWORKS

TRADITIONALIST

- Never missed a Presidential Address **PATRIOTIC**
- World War II **LOYAL TO INSTITUTIONS**
- Family affected by The Great Depression **FISCALLY CONSERVATIVE**

BABY BOOMER

- Saw the first man land on the moon **OPTIMISTIC & IDEALISTIC**
- Protested the Vietnam War **QUESTIONS AUTHORITY**
- Has never worked and considering a second career **REDEFINING RETIREMENT**

GENERATION XER

- Watched the collapse of Enron **SKEPTICAL**
- Full-time career, full-time mom **WORK LIFE BALANCE**
- Grew up as a latchkey kid **INDEPENDENT**

MILLENNIAL

- Compromises to make decisions, big and small **COLLABORATIVE**
- Too busy paying rent for their education, more **PASSION OVER PAYCHECK**
- Has Facebook friends from 17 countries **GLOBALLY CONNECTED**

GENERATION EDGER

- Thinks in 140 characters **DIGITALLY INNATE**
- Started first company at age 14 **ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT**
- Cautious about student loans **REALISTIC**

Formed by persona/historical experiences

Understandings of Evil are *Contextual*

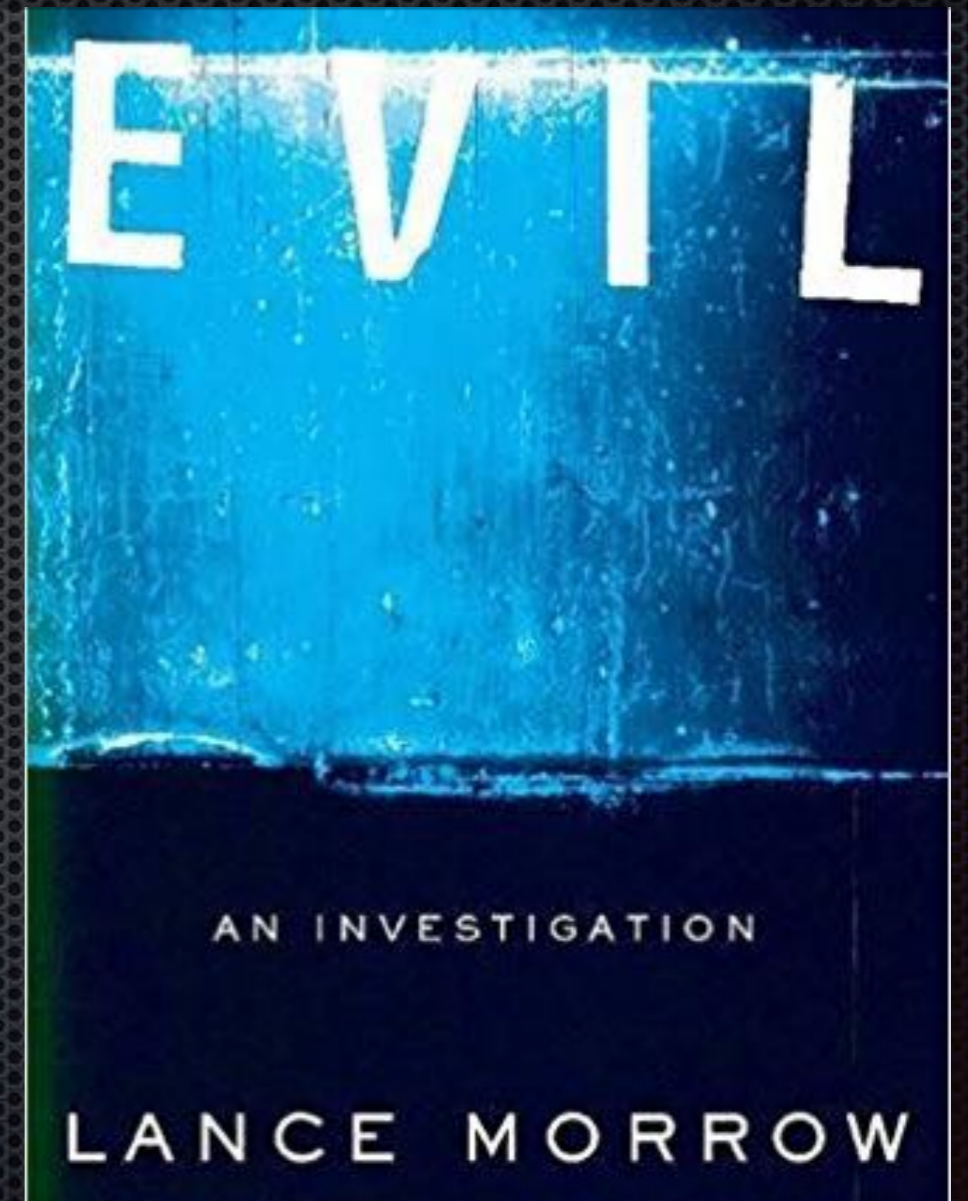


Japanese: most evil act putting self before community

American: acts against children (torture, rape, murder)

What does “evil” mean?

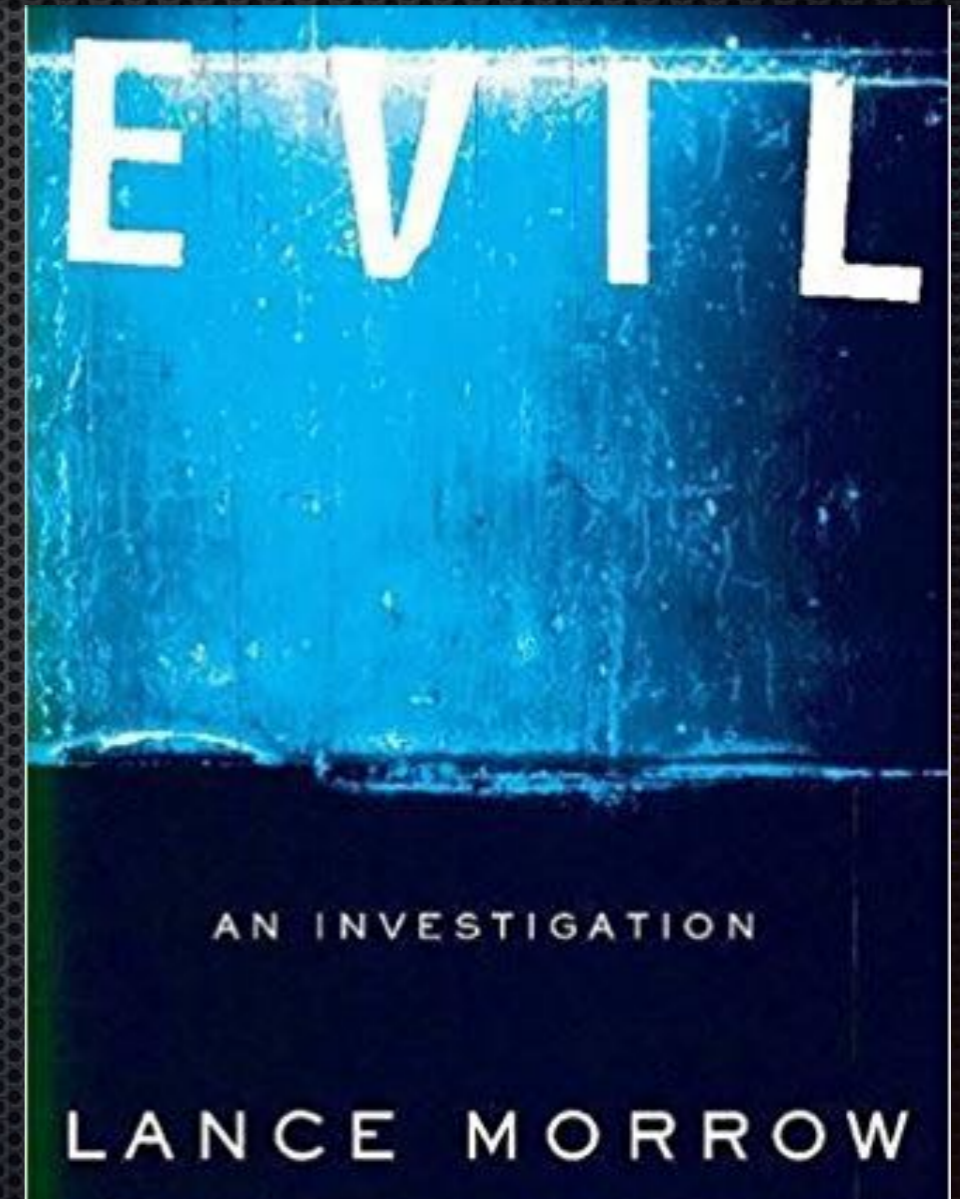
- ✦ Evil: “One Big Thing”
- ✦ evil: “many things”



2003

Axis of “Wrong”?!

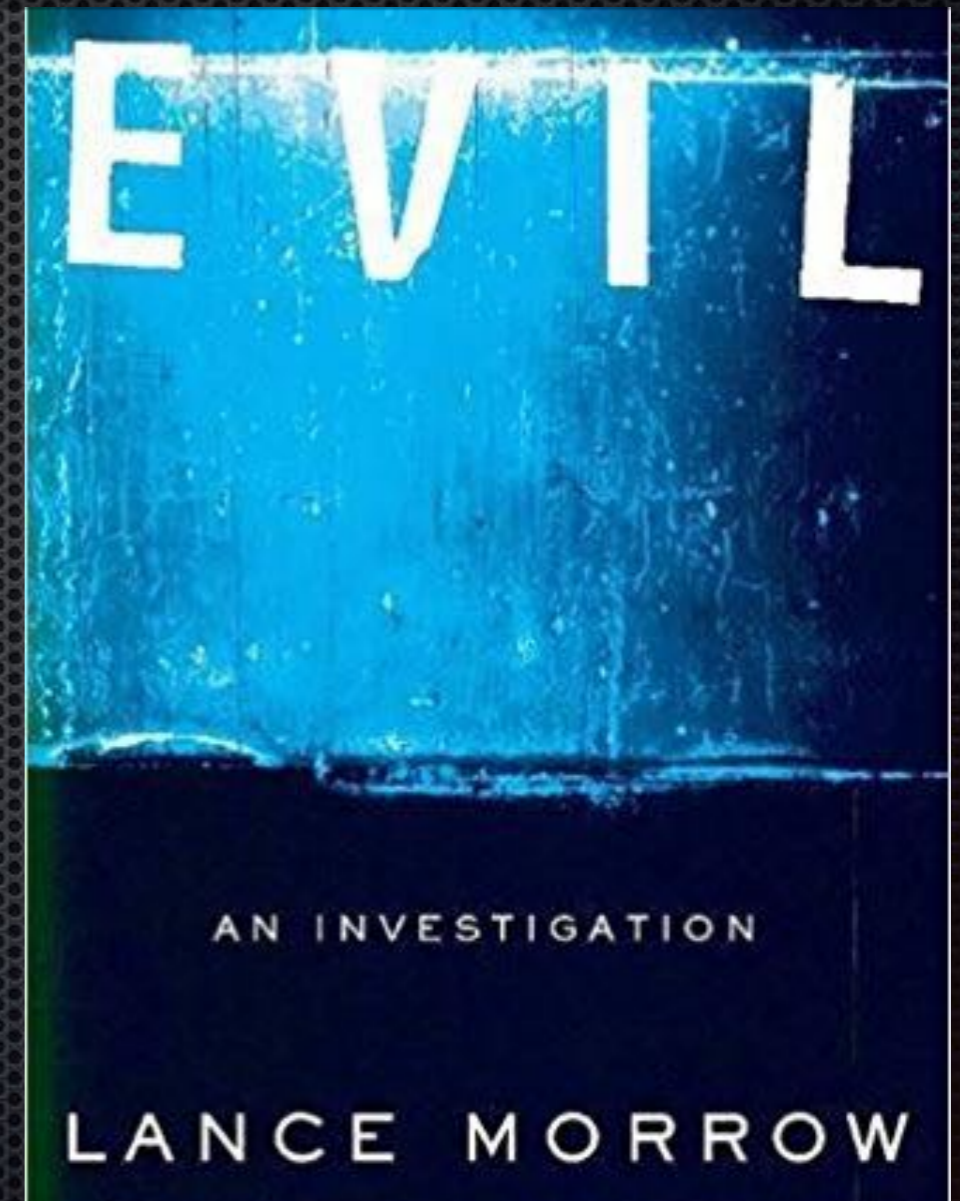
- **Wrong**: not in accordance with law, morality, or people’s sense of fairness, justice, and acceptable behavior
 - More utilitarian, employed in profane transactions of life *[act]*
- **Evil**: dark old majesty, belonging to realm of sacred/sacrilege.
 - Goes toward the origin of things *[essence]*



2003

Axis of “Wrong”?!

- ✦ Should be used sparingly, like “genius” or “masterpiece”
- ✦ *ne plus ultra* (“not more beyond”) - the perfect or most extreme example of its kind
- ✦ Where do you go from there?



2003

Gershom Scholem

- ✦ Scholar of Jewish mysticism
- ✦ “Today I think that evil in every in every instance is **only extreme, never radical**: it has no depth, and therefore has nothing demonic about it. Evil can lay waste the entire world, like a fungus, growing rampant on the surface.”



(1897-1982)

W.H. Auden, poet

Evil is unspectacular and always
human

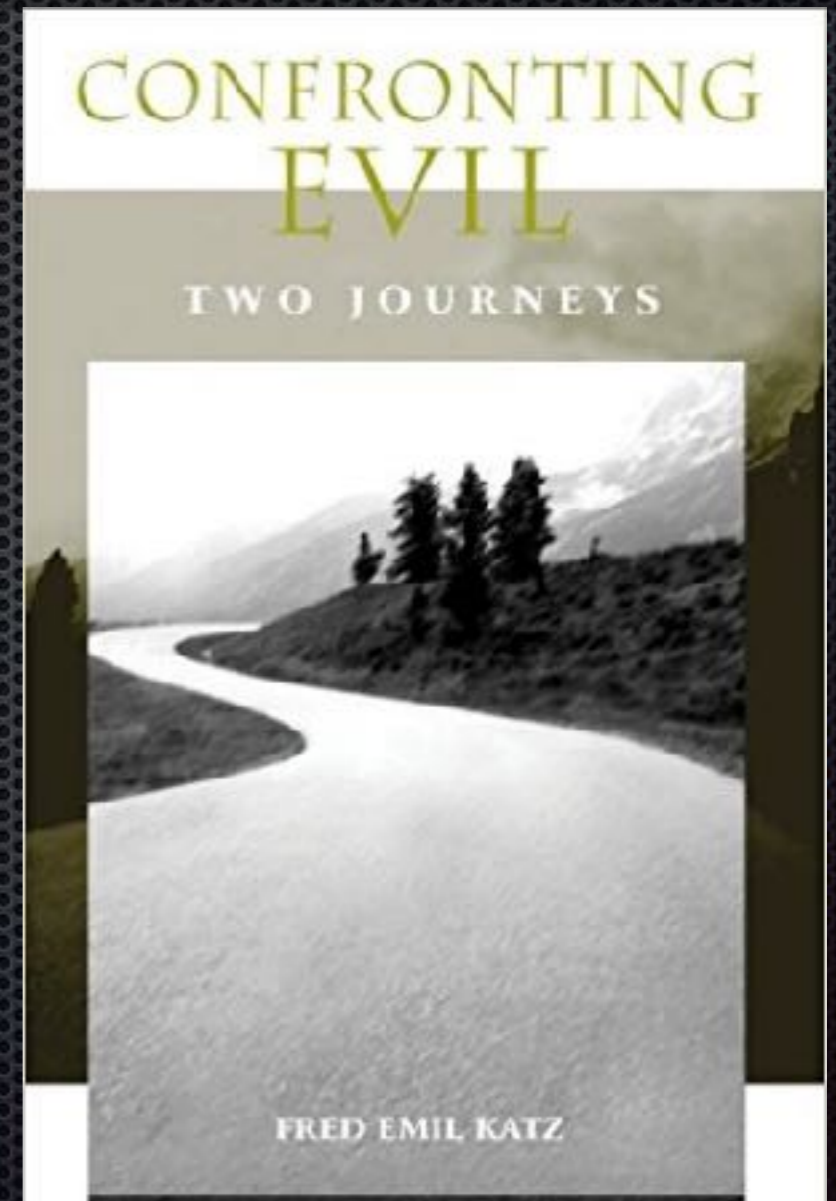
And shares our bed and eats at our
own table



(1907 - 1973)

Behavioral Definition of Evil

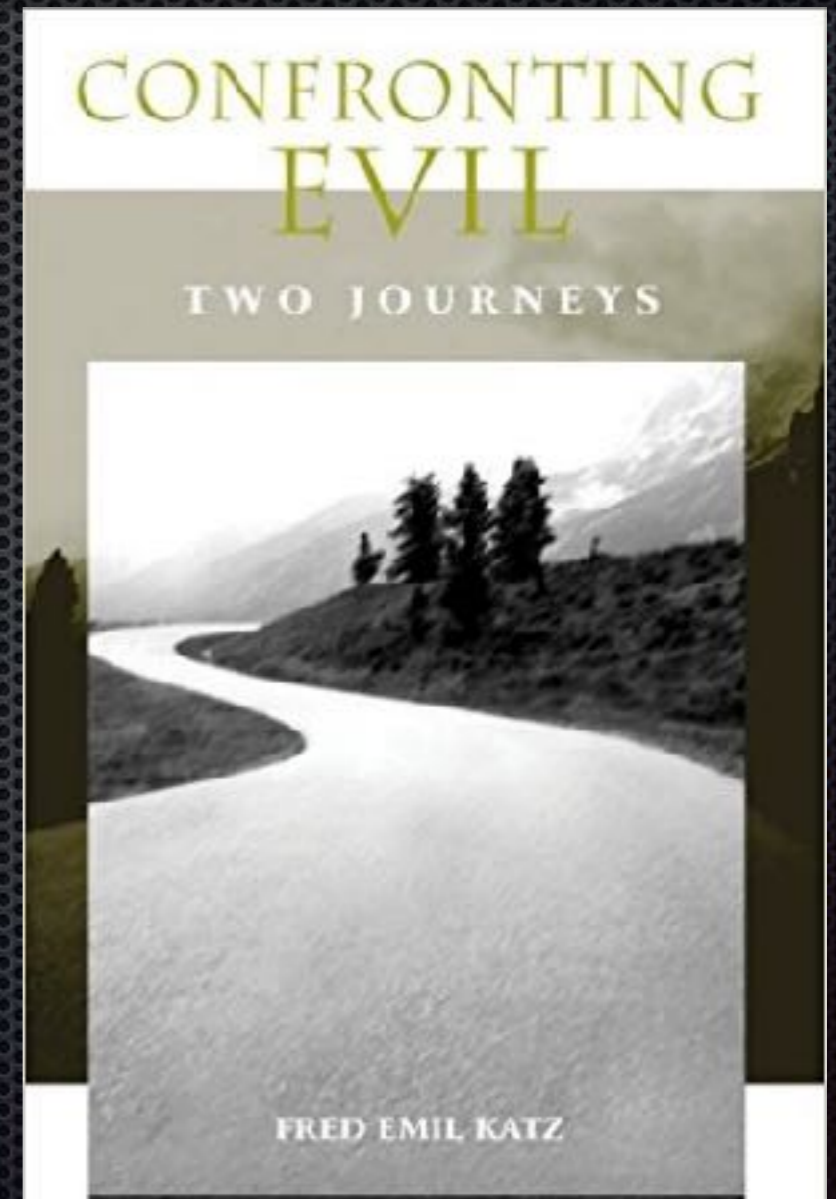
- Acts that deliberately depriving innocent people of their humanity, from small scale assaults on a person's dignity to outright murder
- Cease: fruitless search for monstrosity, sickness, and other aberrations as the root of evil.
- Most mundane activities of everyday life (*as well as the pursuit of our most noble aspirations*) can be harnessed for evil ends



2004

Local Moral Universe

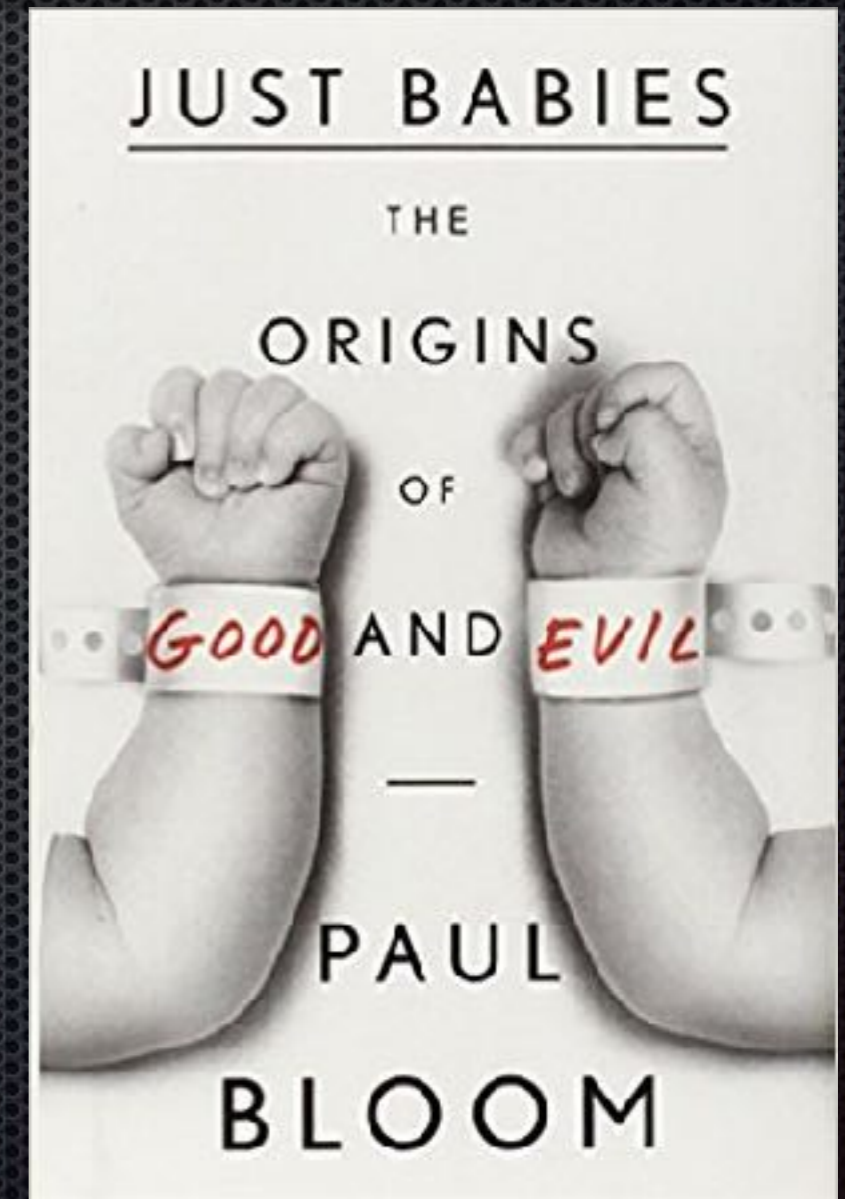
- All humans carry monstrous potential within themselves.
 - Culture of sanctity
 - Culture of cruelty



2004

Evolution

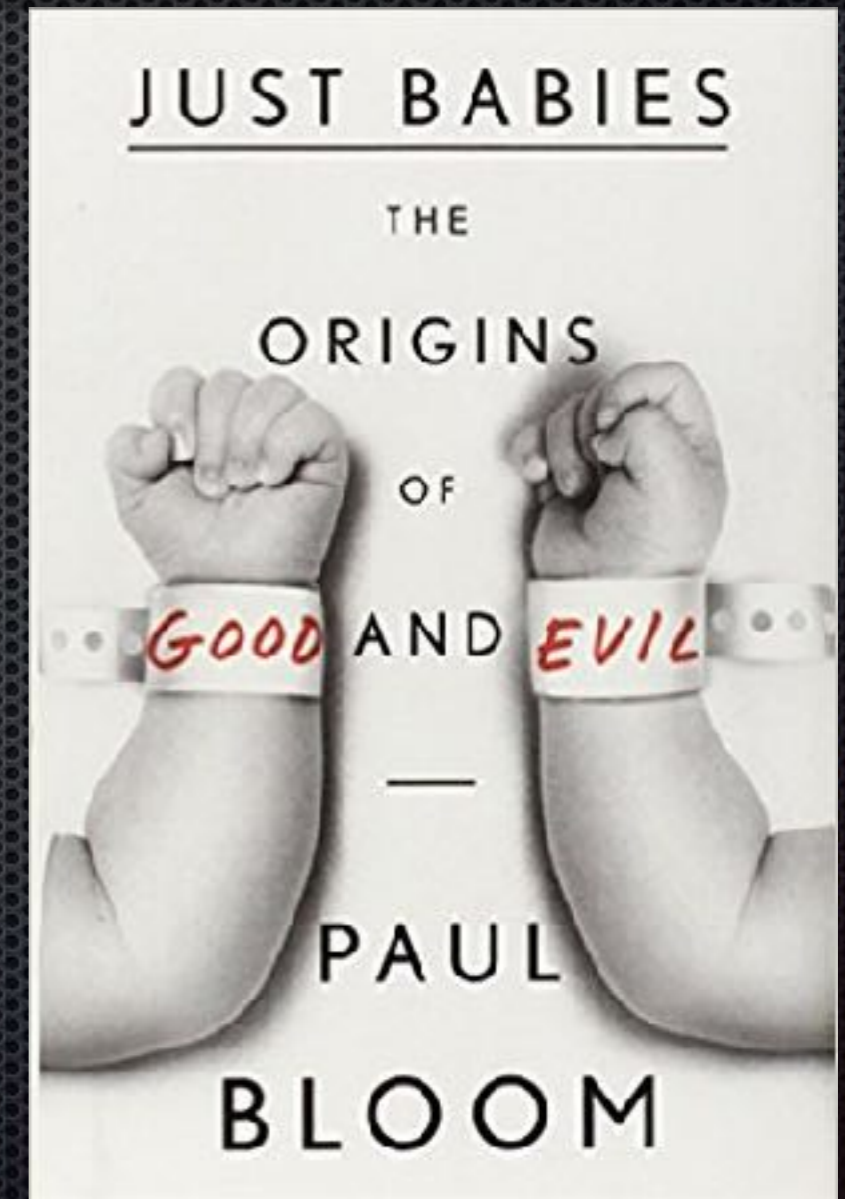
- Children expect equality, prefer resources divided equally, and biased to divide resources equally themselves



2004

Us/Them, Other

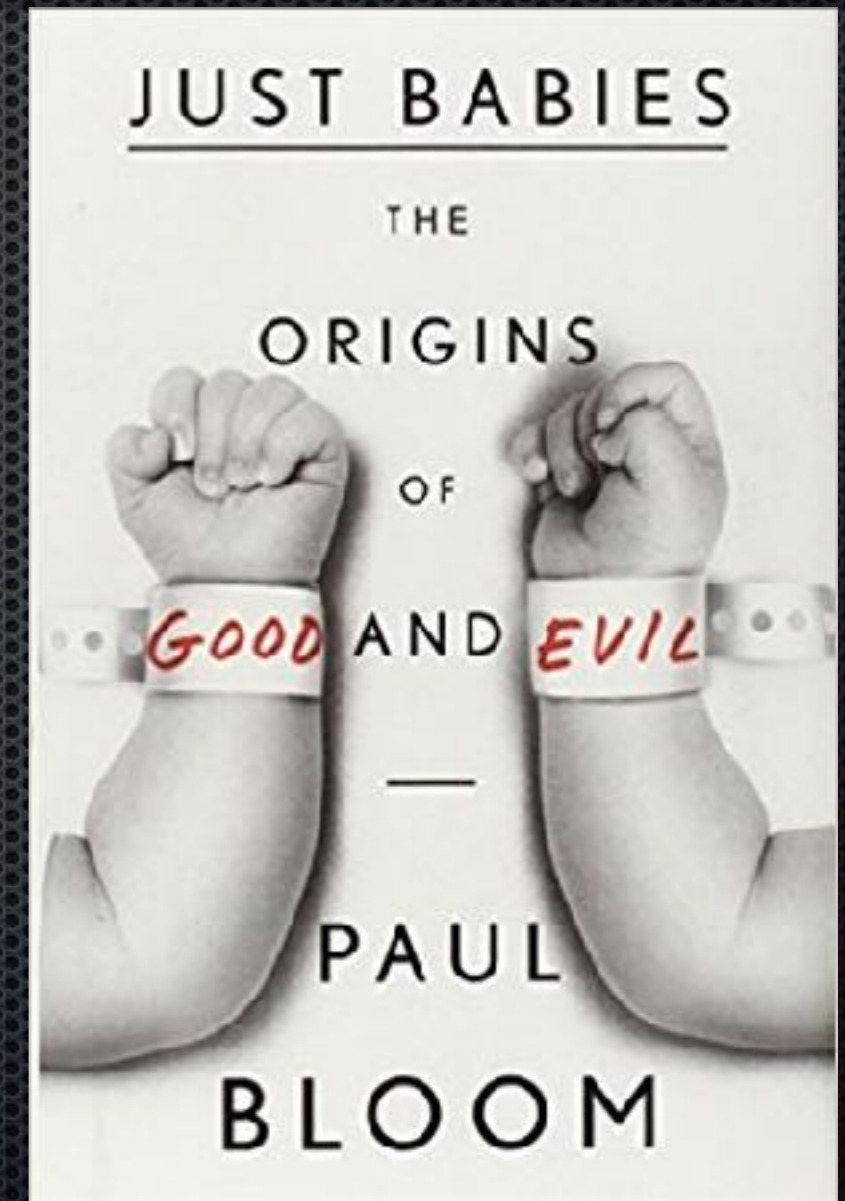
- Babies make distinctions between familiar and strange people almost immediately.
- Newborns prefer their mother's face, smell, and voice.



2004

Calling other “rats” or “cockroaches”

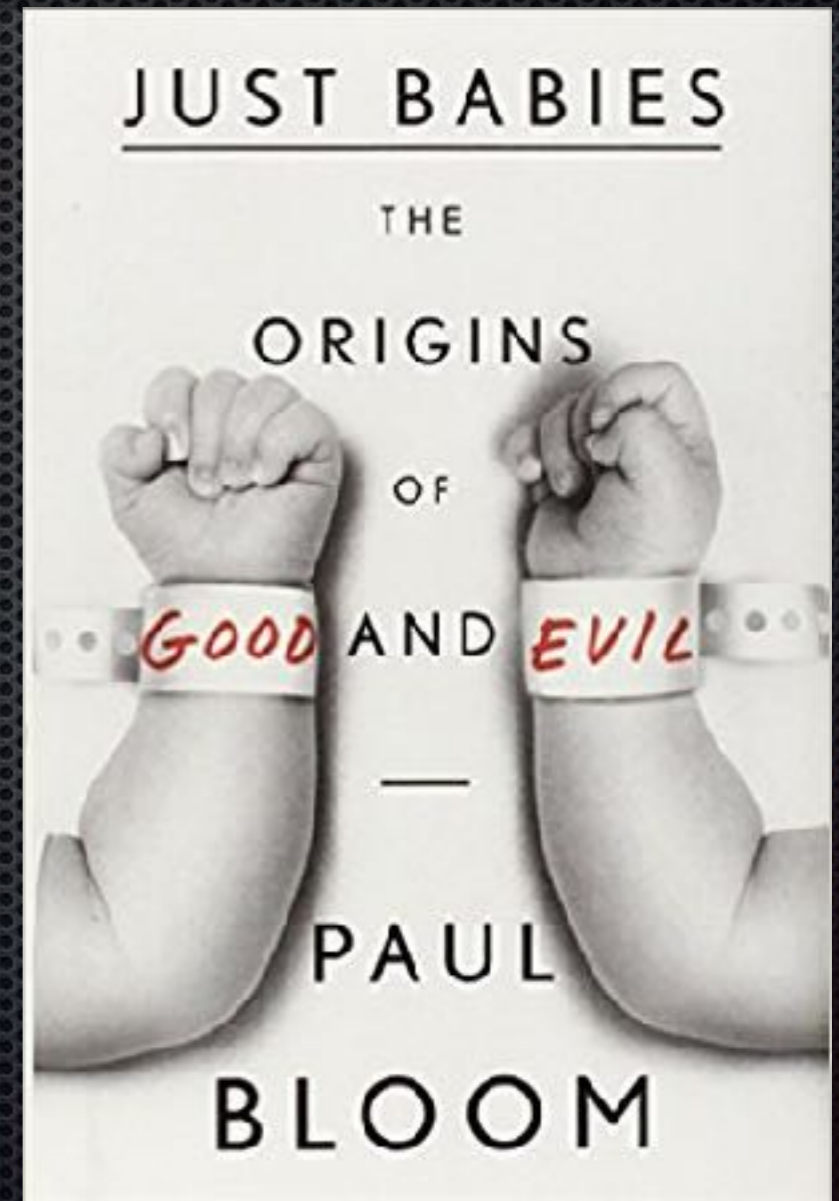
- **Disgust** is a powerful force for evil



2004

Evolution

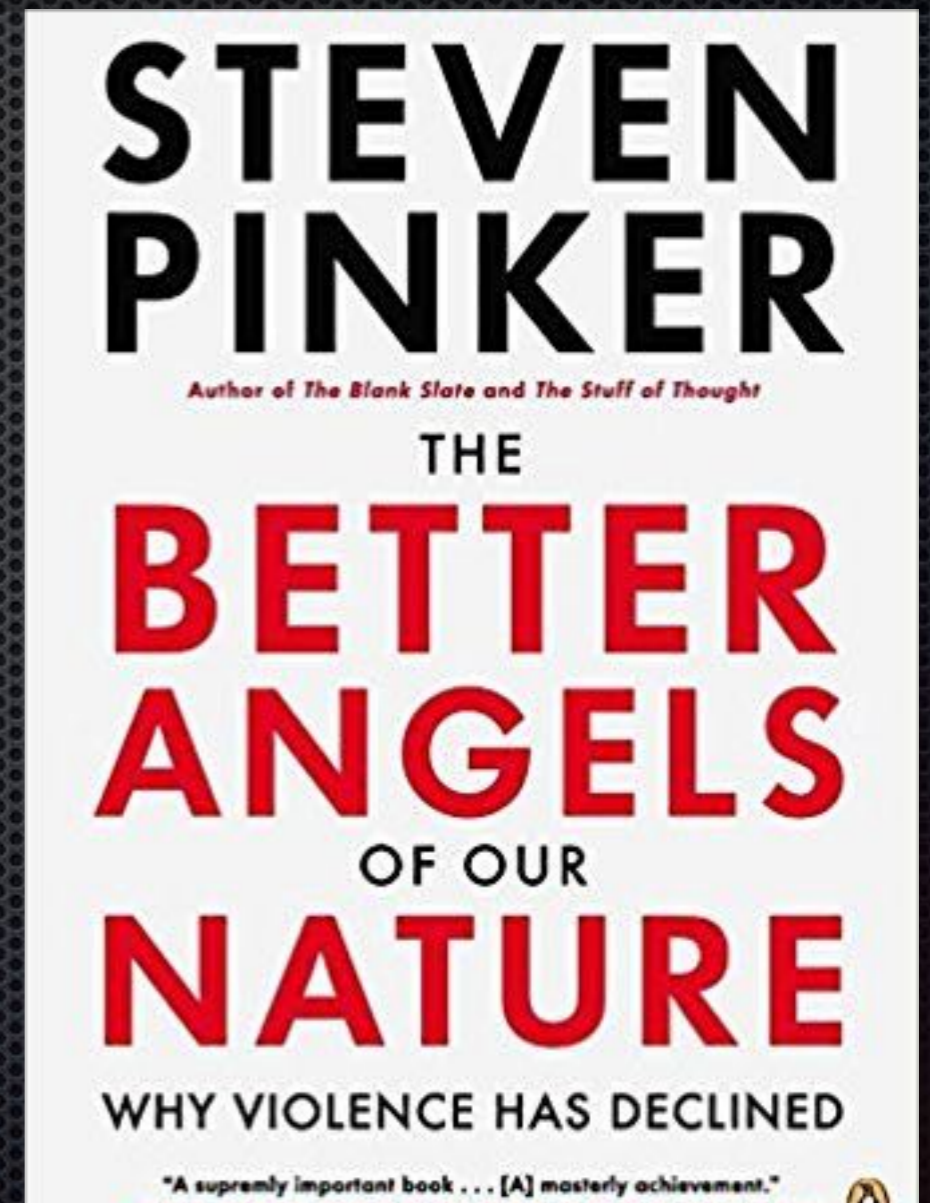
- Babies are moral animals, equipped by evolution with empathy and compassion, the capacity to judge the actions of others, and even some rudimentary understanding of justice and fairness
- As we grow up with also have reason, compassion, and imagination.



2004

[ted.com/talks/steven_pinker_on_the_myth_of_violence](https://www.ted.com/talks/steven_pinker_on_the_myth_of_violence)

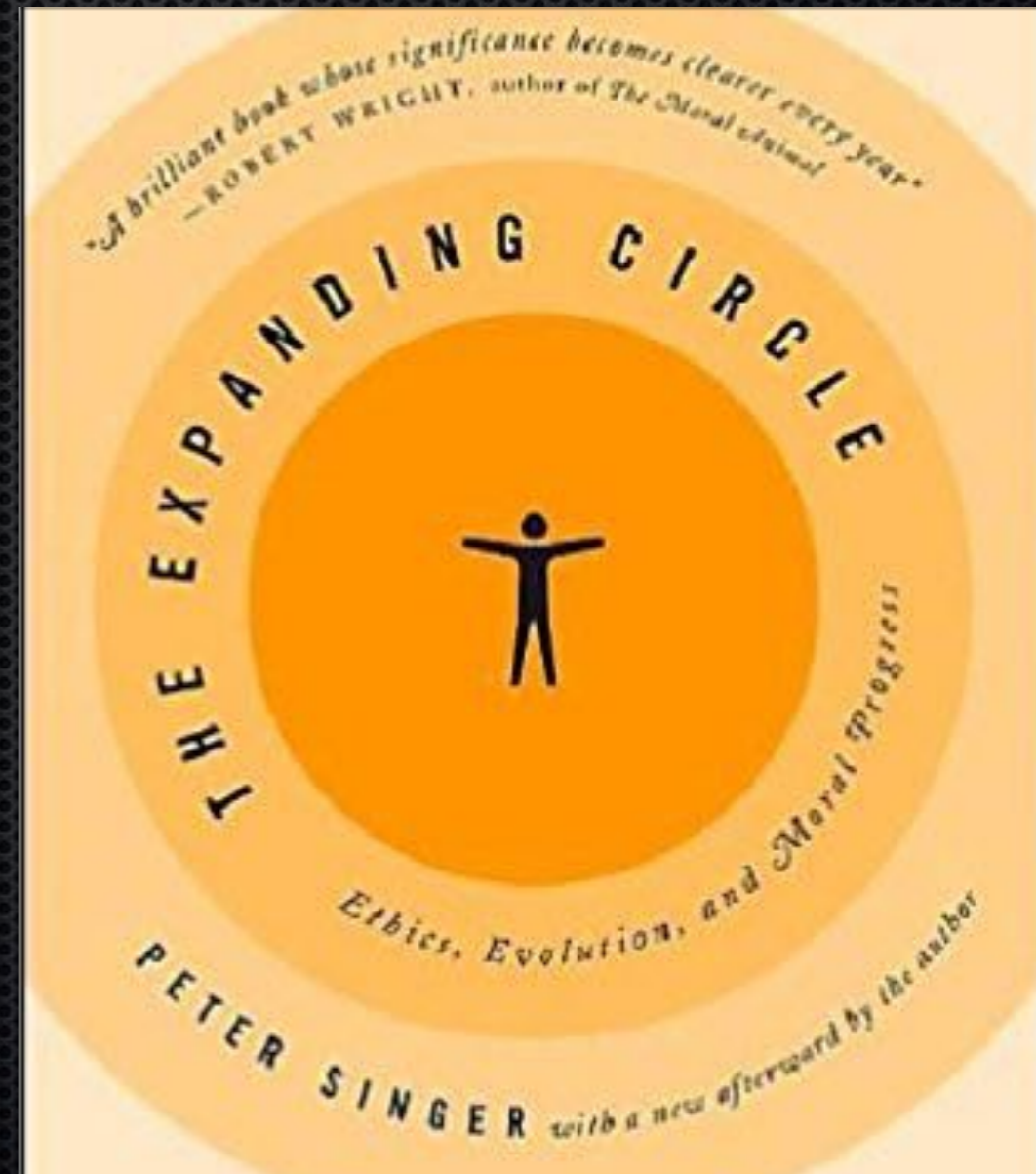
- Once reason violence has decreased is decline in cultures of personal retribution
- Shift to third-party punishment



2004

ted.com/speakers/peter_singer

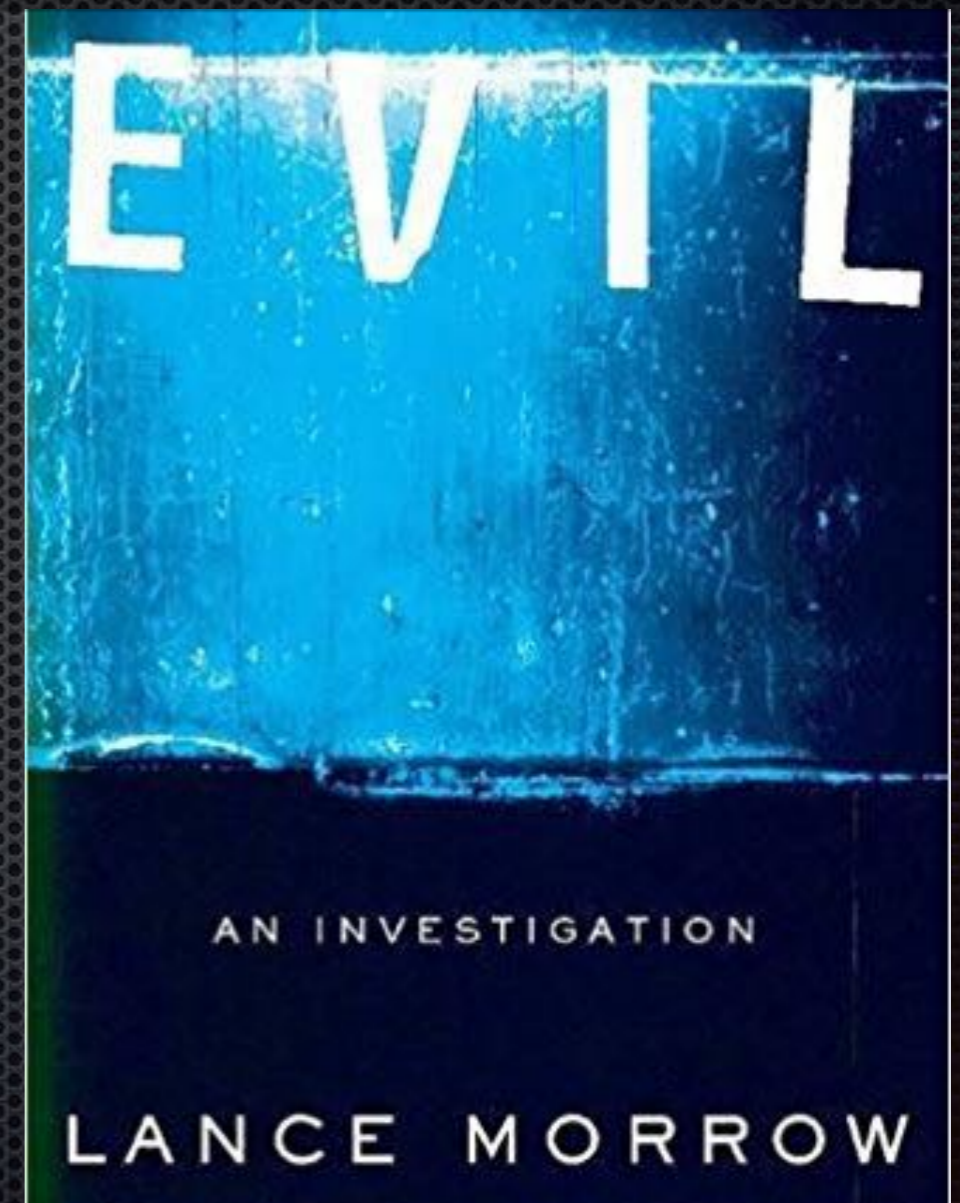
- ego-
- ethno-
- globo-
- cosmo-



1981

Why do people do evil?

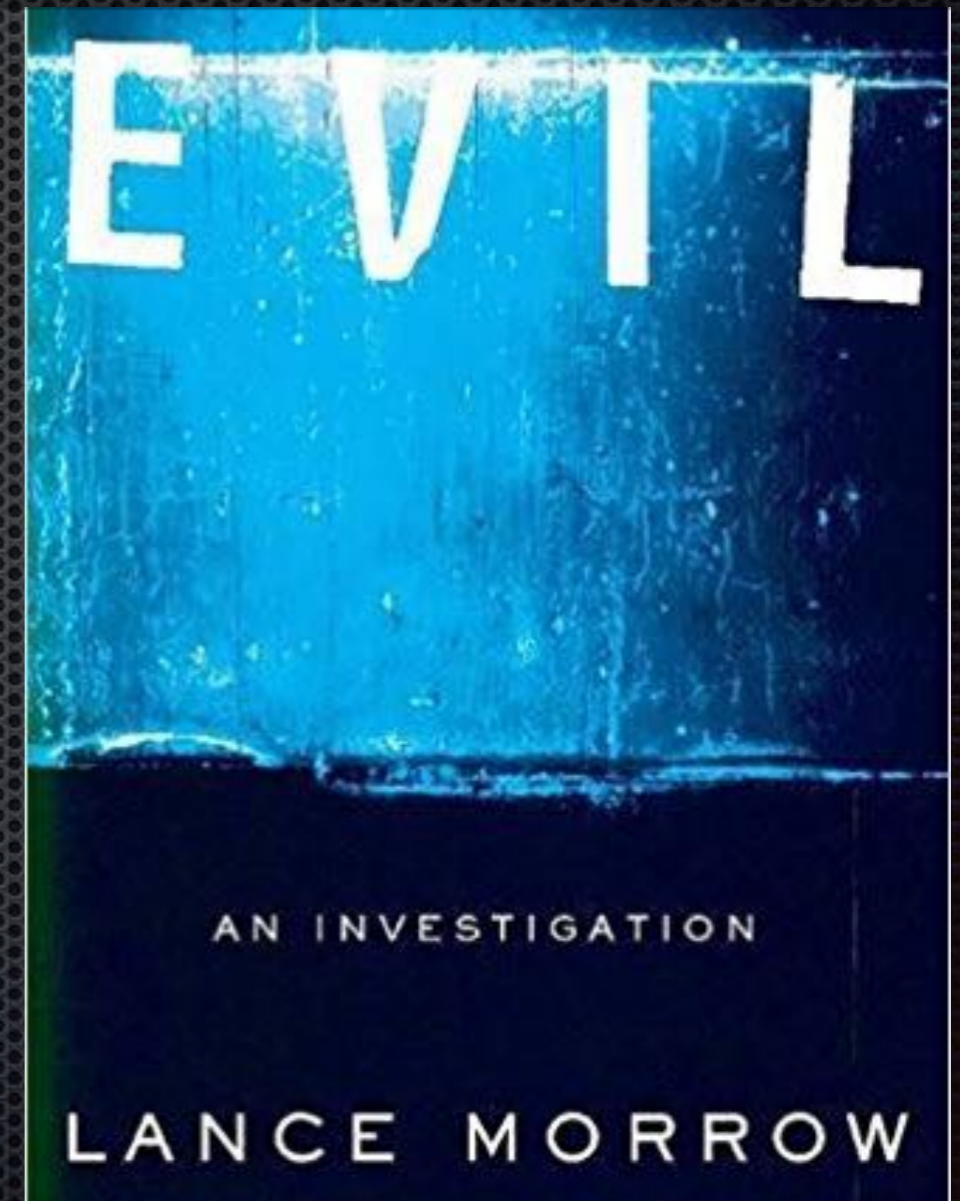
- pleasure, power, don't know any better, afraid
- because they think what they are doing is righteous, good, or necessary ("freedom fighter / terrorist")
- Revenge, prove point, rage
- HALT: Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired
- indifferent to suffering of others



2003

Why do people do evil?

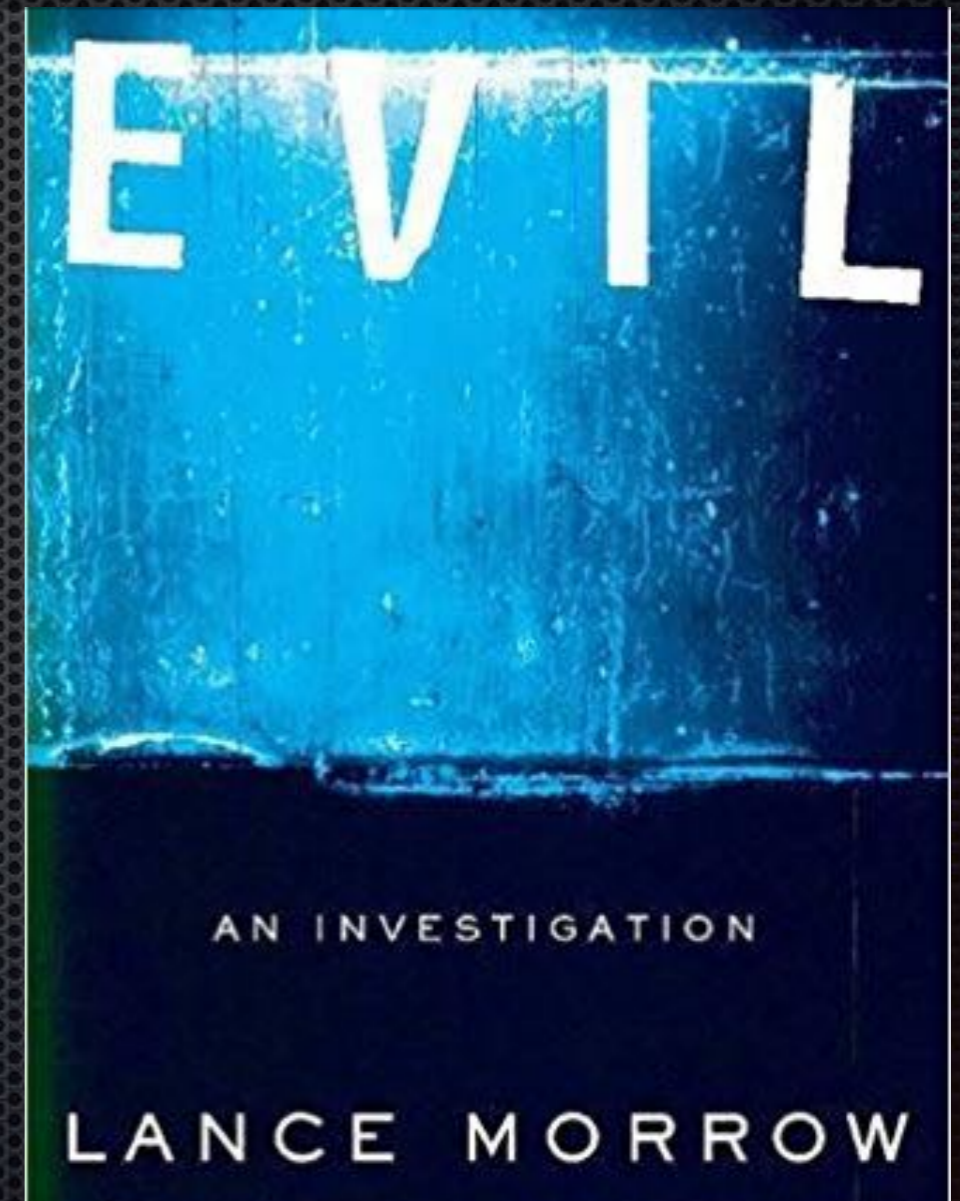
- morally stupid, forced to do it, caught up in mob frenzy
- compulsion, perverse itch to do harm
- customary among their people, Satan makes them do it
- accident, habituated to it, because they themselves were treated evilly once



2003

Why do people do evil?

- ✦ Morality is fragile & indispensable
- ✦ Must be encouraged/cultivated—
can't be taken for granted.



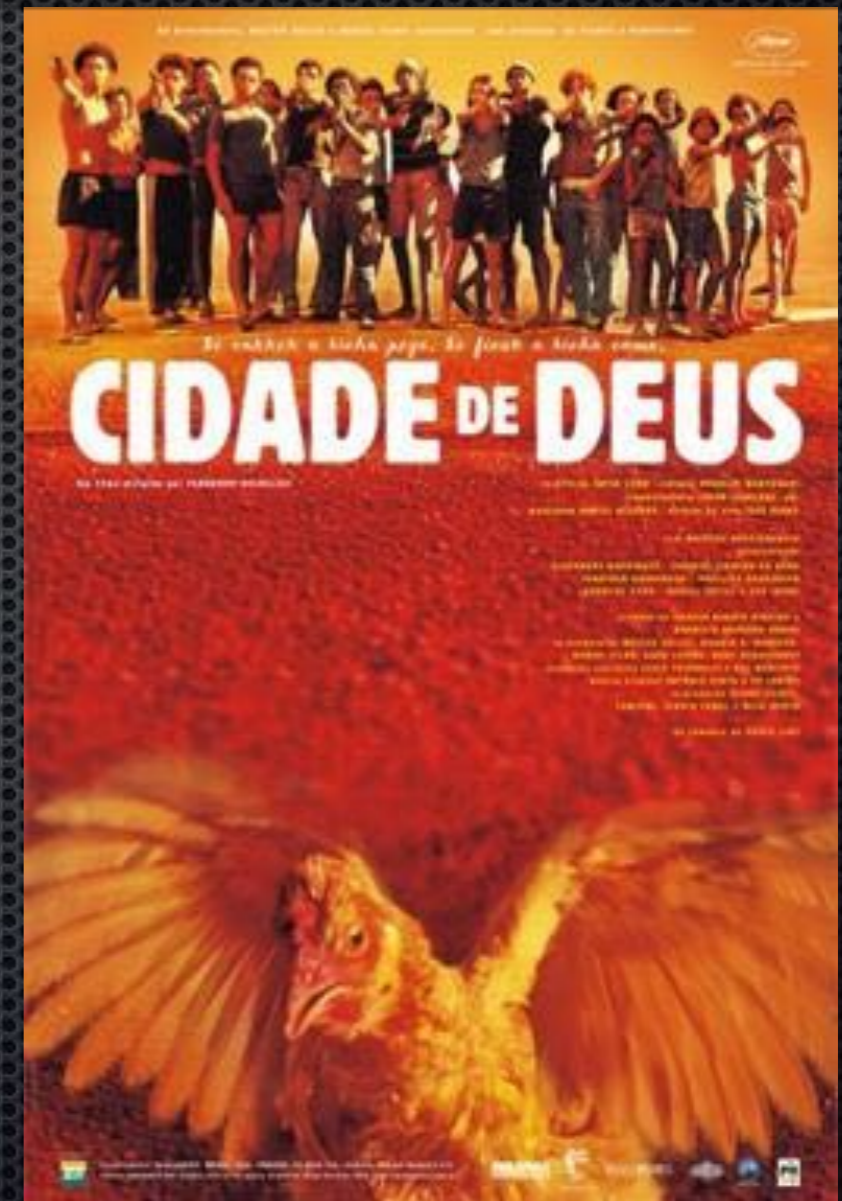
2003

- ✦ Adaptation of the 1853 slave narrative memoir by Solomon Northup, a New York State-born free African-American man
- ✦ Kidnapped in Washington, D.C. by two conmen, in 1841 and sold into slavery.
- ✦ Northup was put to work on plantations in the state of Louisiana for 12 years before being released.



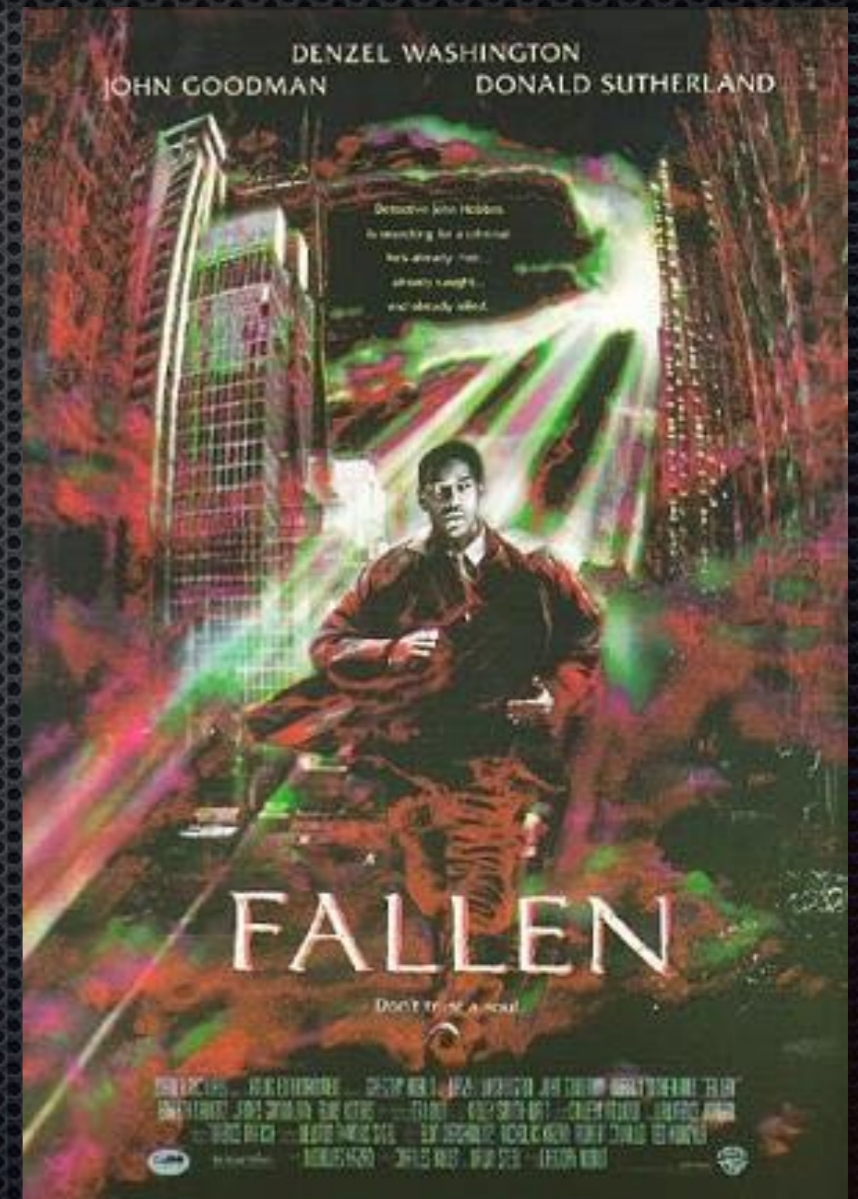
2013

- ✦ City of God (Portuguese)
- ✦ Adapted from 1997 novel by Paulo Lins
- ✦ Plot loosely based on real events.
- ✦ Depicts the growth of organized crime in a suburb of Rio de Janeiro, between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1980s
- ✦ Tagline: "If you run, the beast catches you; if you stay, the beast eats you"



2002

- ✦ Philadelphia police detective investigating murders committed by an apparent copycat killer.
- ✦ Murderer is later revealed to be a fallen angel known as Azazel, who possesses human beings by touch.



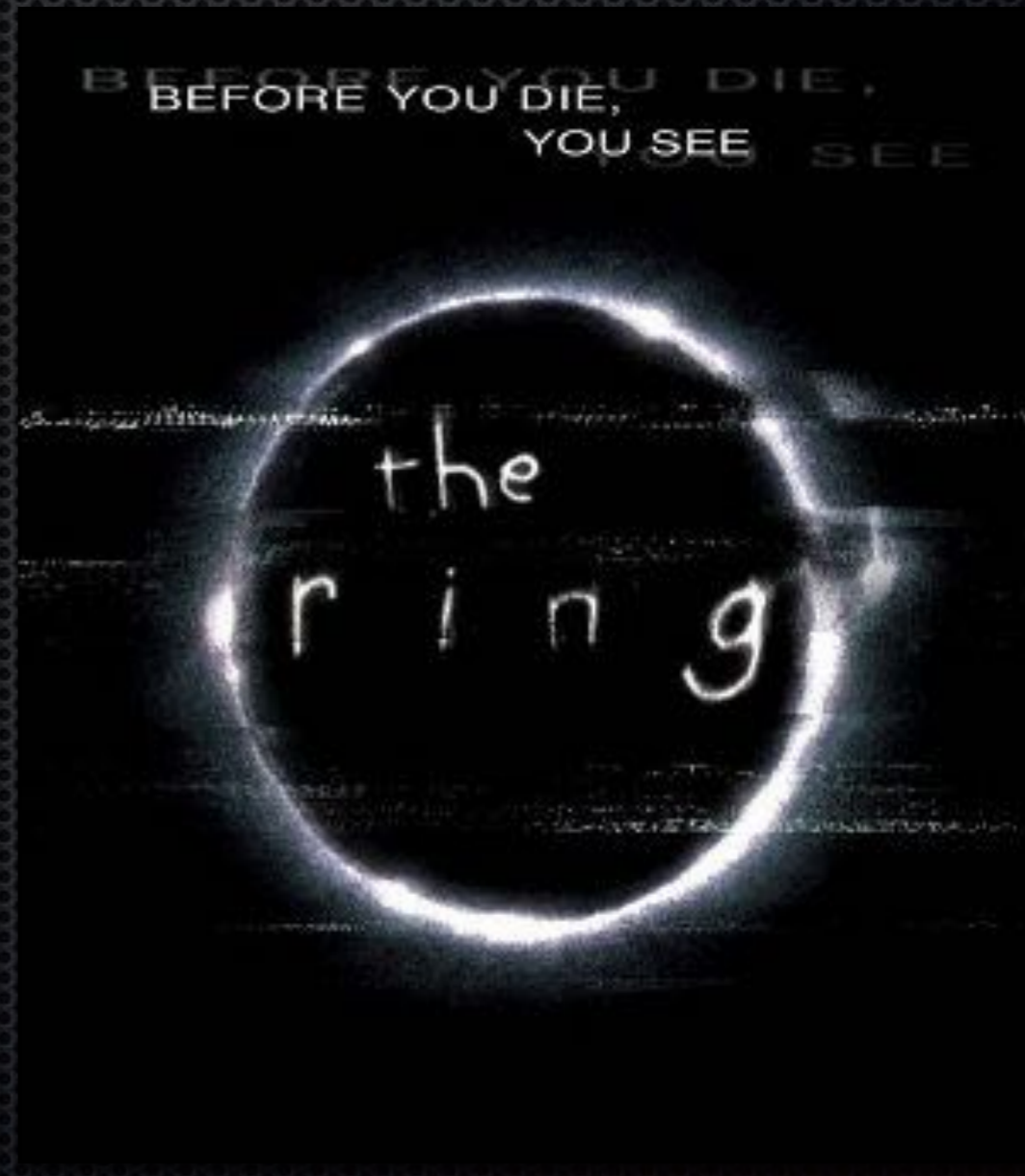
1998

- Young detective partnered with retiring deceiver tasked with tracking down a serial killer who uses the seven deadly sins as tropes in his murders.



1995

- ✦ Remake of 1998 Japanese horror film *Ringu*, which was based on the novel of the same name, written by Koji Suzuki.
- ✦ Teenagers discuss an urban legend about a videotape; whoever watches it dies seven days later.
- ✦ Katie confesses that she watched the tape with her friends the previous week.



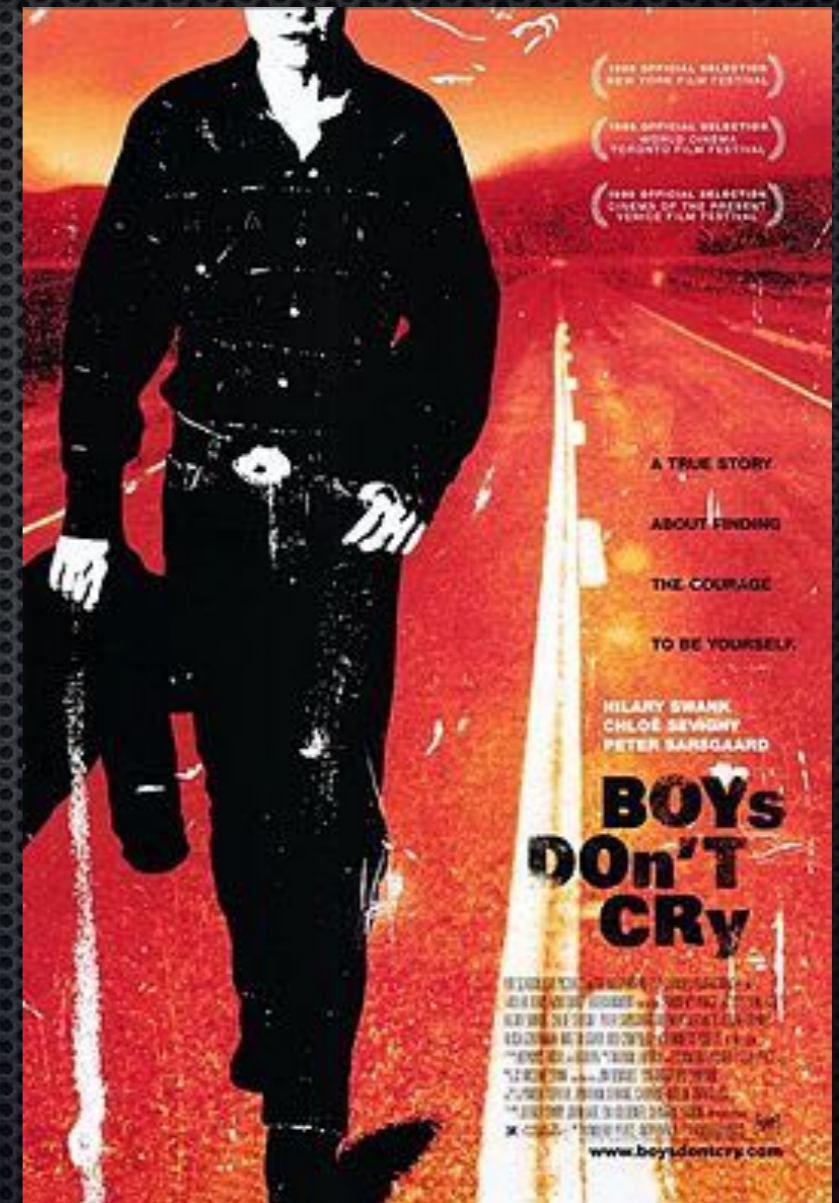
2002

- ✦ Young scientist whose rising star must confront the dark forces of politics, ego, and cultural insensitivity
- ✦ Based on the University of Iowa shooting in 1991.



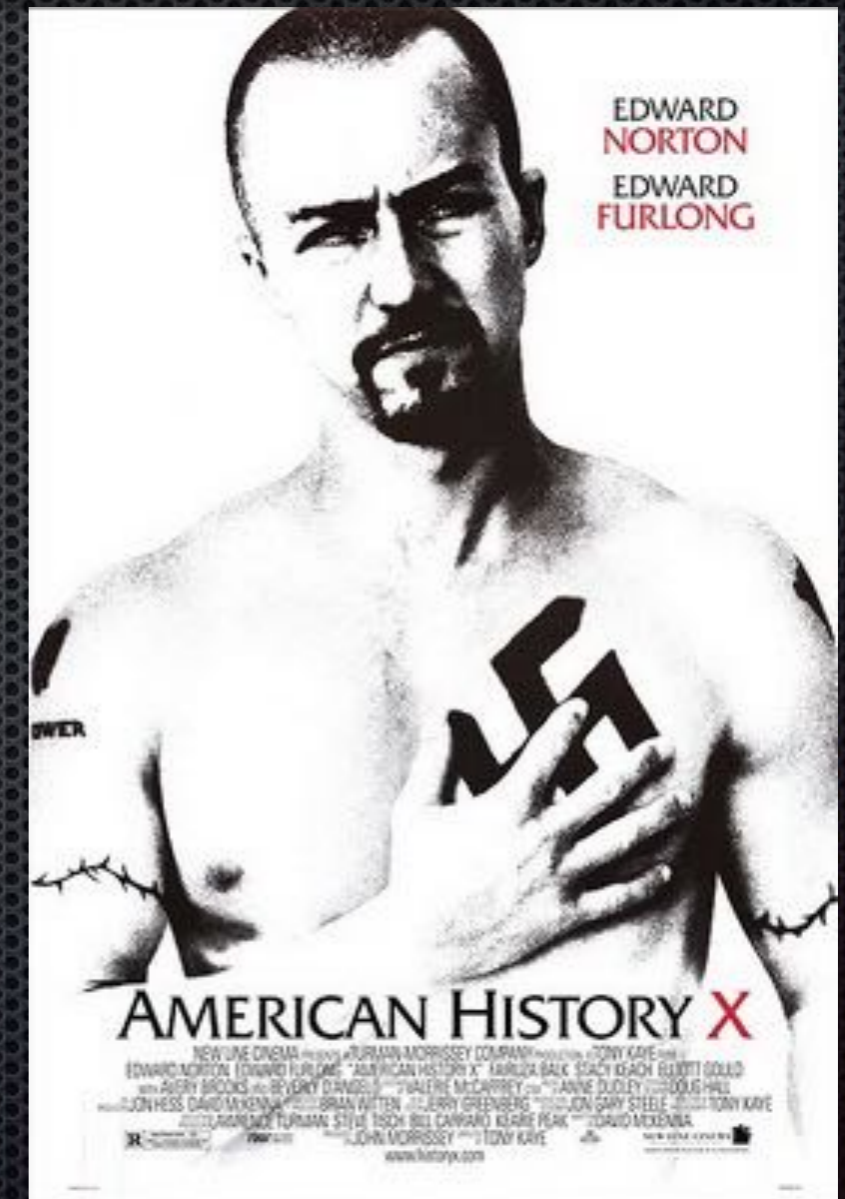
2007

- Dramatization of the real-life story of Brandon Teena, an American trans man played in the film by Hilary Swank, who adopts a male identity and attempts to find himself and love in Nebraska but falls victim to a brutal crime perpetrated by two male acquaintances.



1999

- ✦ Story of two brothers from Venice, Los Angeles who become involved in the neo-Nazi movement.
- ✦ Older brother serves three years in prison for voluntary manslaughter, changes his beliefs and tries to prevent his brother from going down the same path.



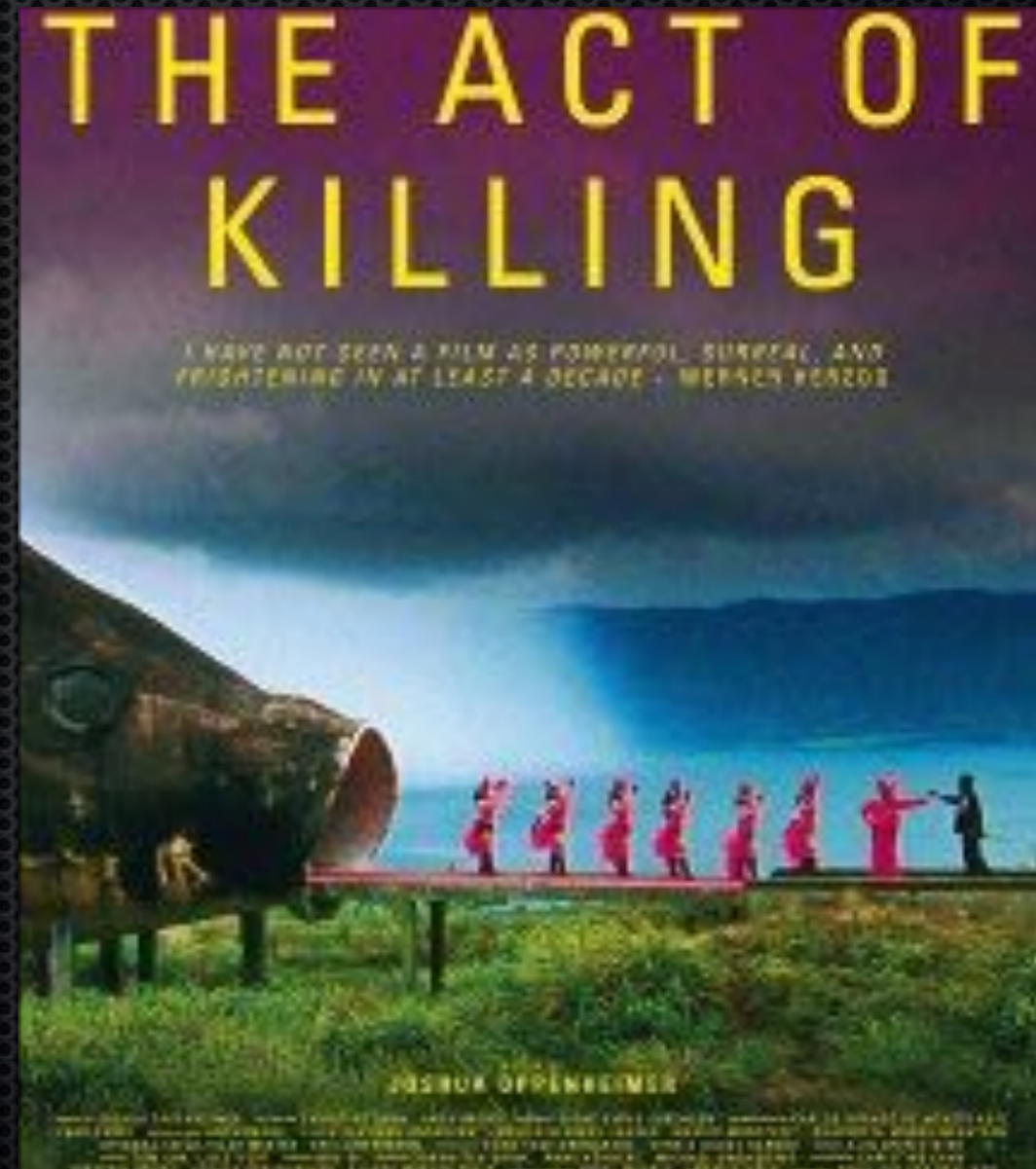
1998

- ✦ Loosely based on the FBI's investigation into the 1964 Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner murder case in Mississippi.
- ✦ FBI agents assigned to investigate the disappearance of three civil rights workers in fictional Jessup County, Mississippi.
- ✦ Met with hostility and backlash by the town's residents, local police and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).



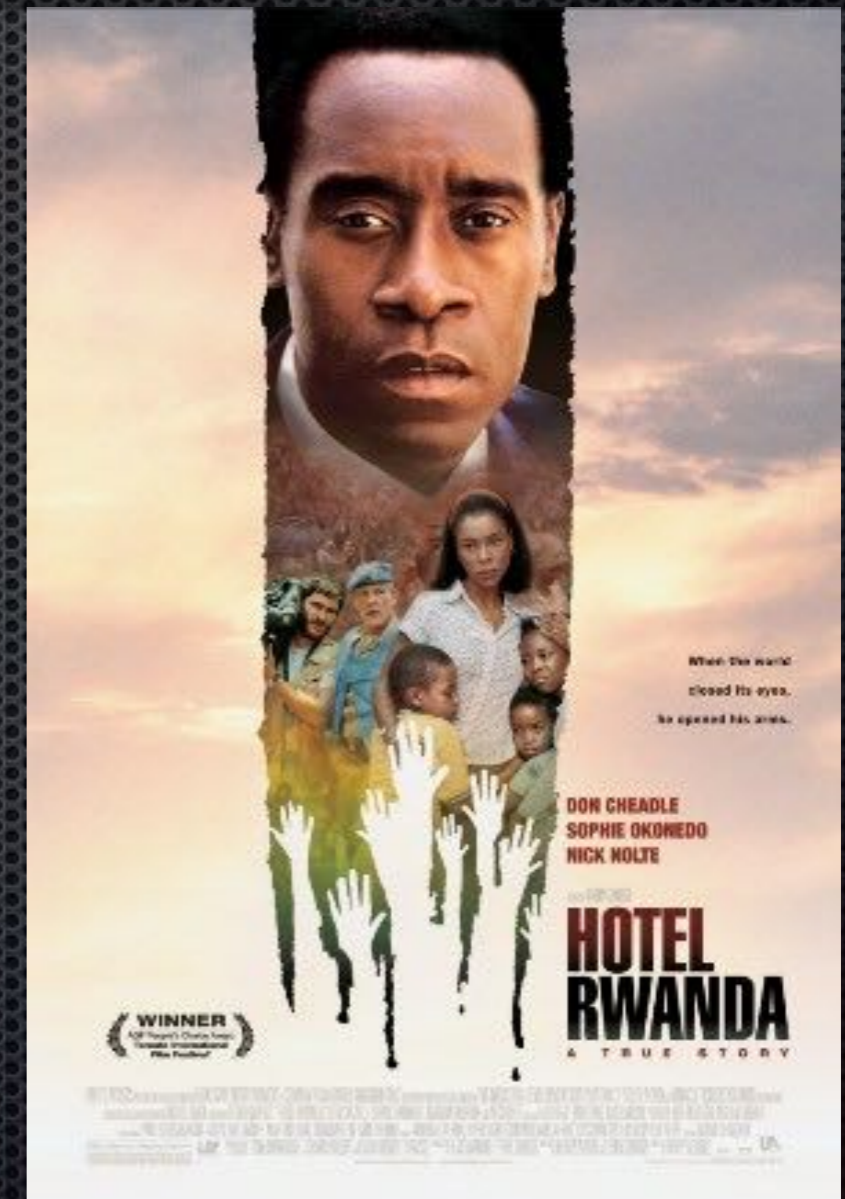
1998

- ✦ (Indonesian: Jagal, meaning "Butcher")
- ✦ Documentary film about individuals who participated in the Indonesian mass killings of 1965–66.



2012

- ✦ Based on the Rwandan genocide, which occurred during the spring of 1994,
- ✦ Called an African *Schindler's List*, documents Rusesabagina's acts to save the lives of his family and more than a thousand other refugees by providing them with shelter in a besieged Hôtel
- ✦ Explores genocide, political corruption, and the repercussions of violence.



2004

21st-century, postmodern perspective

- ✦ What is evil?
- ✦ What is/are the *source(s)* of evil? (Why does evil exist in history? Why does evil exist in the human heart?)
- ✦ What is/are the *nature(s)* of evil? (How is evil at work?)
- ✦ How we might best respond individually & collectively?

Discussion Questions

- ✦ Do you use the word evil?
 - ✦ Are you *comfortable* using the word “evil?” Why or why not?)
 - ✦ Should I/you/we/they be using the word evil more or less in such a time as this?
- ✦ Do you have a felt sense of what you mean when you regard something as “evil?”
 - ✦ Can you describe what it is that makes something “evil?”

Personal Definitions of Evil

- ✦ Review all the slides from this class.
- ✦ Reflect on the sharing, discussions and what has resonated with you most personally—positively or negatively.
- ✦ Consider any moments of insight, when you were suddenly seeing something differently or perhaps from a different angle.
- ✦ Spend a few minutes journaling these recollections.

Commitments

- ✦ As individuals, we cannot rid the world of evil.
- ✦ But evil can be fed by individual actions or systemic realities.
- ✦ What commitment(s) do you feel led to make to feed evil less?
- ✦ What single, achievable goal might you set?

Outline

1. *Why Study Evil?*
2. *Postmodernism & Evil*
3. *Evil & Theodicy/Freedom*
Evil & Conscience/Intention
4. *Evil as Sickness;*
Evil as Distance: Us & Them
5. *Evil & Obedience/Authority*
6. **October 12: Personal Definitions of Evil,
Takeaways, Insights, Commitments (~500
words?)**