



The Lucifer Effect by Philip Zimbardo

When Roles Become Real

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.

Actors learn to talk, walk, eat, and even to think and to feel as demanded by the role they are performing. Their professional training enables them to maintain the separation of character and identity, to keep self in the background while playing a role that might be dramatically different from who they really are.

British television series *The Edwardian Country House* lived the lives of British servants working on a posh country estate. The actor became an autocratic master. Exercised absolute power over a household of underservants whom he bossed: "Suddenly you realize that you don't have to speak. All I had to do was lift my finger up and they would keep quiet."

Roles and Responsibility for Transgressions

To the extent that we can both live in the skin of a role and yet be able to separate ourselves from it when necessary, we are in a position to "explain away" our personal responsibility for the damage we cause by our role-based actions. We abdicate responsibility for our actions, blaming them on that role, which we convince ourselves is alien to our usual nature. This is an interesting variant of the Nuremberg Trial defense of the Nazi SS leaders: "I was only following orders." Instead the defense becomes "Don't blame me, I was only playing my role at that time in that place—that isn't the real me."