***A Brief History of Good and Evil***

**7 “Deadly” Sins (Christianity)**

Wrath-

Greed-

Sloth-

Envy-

Lust-

Pride-

Gluttony-

**Ten Commandments (Christianity)**

1. You shall have no other Gods but me.
2. You shall not make for yourself any idol, nor bow down to it or worship it.
3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God
4. You shall remember and keep the Sabbath day holy.
5. Respect your father and mother.
6. You must not commit murder.
7. You must not commit adultery.
8. You must not steal.
9. You must not give false evidence against your neighbor.
10. You must not be envious of your neighbor’s goods. You shall not be envious of his hour nor his wife, nor anything that belongs to your neighbor.

***The Woman Who Fell from the Sky***

*from an Iroquois Creation story*

 In the beginning, in the Sky World, a pregnant wife asked her husband to fetch the delicacies she craved. But she wanted the bark of a root of the Great Tree in the middle of the Sky World, which none were permitted to touch. Finally, however, he gave in, and scraped away soil to bare the root of the Tree. Underneath was a hole, and as the woman peered down into it, she fell through. The birds helped transport her as she fell, and the great Sea Turtle received her on his back. Here, on the Sea Turtle's back, she planted bits of the roots and plants she had brought from the Sky World. And she walked across the turtle's back, planting, praying and creating the Earth that we know as Turtle Island.

 The woman who had fallen from the sky then had a daughter, who became impregnated by the West Wind. While in the womb, the daughter's unborn twins began to quarrel about how they should emerge, the left-handed twin refusing to be born in the usual way. Instead, he forced himself out of his mother's left armpit, killing her as a result. The newborn twins then buried their mother, who became Corn Mother, source of corn, beans and squash, the Three Sisters of the Iroquois. From her heart grew sacred tobacco, used to send messages and thanks to the Sky World.

 The two brothers continued to compete with each other as they created the animals and plants, and in the process, represented different ways of living. Right-Handed Twin created the beautiful hills, lakes, blossoms, gentle creatures; Left-Handed Twin, the jagged cliffs and whirlpools, thorns and predators. Right-Handed Twin was always truthful, reasonable, goodhearted, and "straight-arrow";  Left-Handed Twin lied, fought, rebelled and made "crooked" choices.

 Because Right-Handed Twin created human beings, he is known as  "Our Creator," and "The Master of  Life." But Left-Handed Twin helped, and invented rituals of sorcery and healing. The world they built included both cooperation and competition, loving kindness and aggression.

 After they finished their creations, the continued to compete in other ways - by gambling, by playing lacrosse, then fighting with clubs.  One day, grasping a deer antler, Right-handed Twin finally prevailed, and killed his brother, throwing the body of Left-Handed Twin over the edge of the earth. As a result, Right-Handed Twin rules day and the Sky-World and Left-Handed Twin prevails over night and the lower world.

 Grandmother Skywoman was furious that Right-Handed Twin murdered his brother, and accused him of wrongdoing. Angry, and believing that grandmother had always favored the errant Left- Handed Twin, he cut off her head and threw it up toward the sky, where it became the Moon. Then he threw her body into the ocean, where it became all the fish of the sea.

 The Iroquois believe that both Left-Handed Twin and Right- Handed Twin are necessary for the world to be in balance. During festivals, day activities honor Right-Handed Twin, and night activities such as feasting, singing and dancing honor Left-Handed Twin. This tension and struggle for balance between the two brothers and principles of life is incorporated into Iroquois festivals and cycles of life.

*East of Eden* (1952), Chapter 34,John Steinbeck (Literature)

 A child may ask, 'What is the world's story about?' And a grown man or woman may wonder, 'What way will the world go? How does it end and, while we're at it, what's the story about?'

 I believe that there is one story in the world, and only one, that has frightened and inspired us, so that we live in a Pearl White serial of continuing thought and wonder. Humans are caught in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitions, in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too -- in a net of good and evil. I think this is the only story we have and that it occurs on all levels of feeling and intelligence. Virtue and vice were warp and woof (old terms for weaving cloth) of our first consciousness, and they will be the fabric of our last, and this despite changes we might impose on field and river and mountain, on economy and manners. There is no other story. A man, after he has brushed off the dust and chips of his life, will have left only the hard, clean questions: Was it good or was it evil? Have I done well -- or ill?

 Herodotus, in the Persian War, tells a story of how Croesus, the richest and most favored King of his time, asked Solon the Athenian, a leading question. He would not have asked it if he had he not been worried about the answer. 'Who,' he asked, 'is the luckiest person in the world?' He must have been eaten with doubt, and hungry for reassurance. Solon told him of three lucky people in old times. And Croesus more than likely did not listen; so anxious was he about himself. And when Solon did not mention him, Croesus was forced to say, 'Do you consider me lucky?' Solon did not hesitate in his answer. 'How can I tell?' he said. 'You aren't dead yet.' And this answer must have haunted Croesus dismally as his luck disappeared, and his wealth and his kingdom. And as he was being burned on a tall fire, he may have thought of it and perhaps wished he had not asked or not been answered.

 And in our time, when a man dies -- if he has had wealth and influence, power and all the vestments that arouse envy, and after the living take stock of the dead man's property and his eminence and works and monuments -- the question is still there: Was his life good or was it evil? -- which is another way of putting Croesus's question. Envies are gone, and the measuring stick is: Was he loved or was he hated? Is his death felt as a loss or does a kind of joy come of it?

 I remember clearly the deaths of three men. One was the richest man of the century, who, having clawed his way to wealth through the souls and bodies of men, spent many years trying to buy back the love he had forfeited and by that process performed great service to the world and, perhaps, had much more than balanced the evils of his rise. I was on a ship when he died. The news was posted on the bulletin board, and nearly everyone received the news with pleasure. Several said 'Thank God that son of a bitch is dead.'

 Then there was a man, smart as Satan, who, lacking some perception of human dignity and knowing all too well every aspect of human weakness and wickedness, used his special knowledge to warp men, to buy men, to bribe and threaten and seduce until he found himself in a position of great power. He clothed his motives in the names of virtue, and I wondered if he ever knew that no gift will ever buy back a man's love when you have removed his self-love. A bribed man can only hate his briber. When this man died, the nation rang with praise, and just beneath, with gladness that he was dead.

 There was a third man, who perhaps made many errors in performance, but whose effective life was devoted to making men brave and dignified and good in a time when they were poor and frightened and when there were ugly forces loose in the world to utilize their fears. This man was hated by the few. When he died, the people burst into tears in the streets and their minds wailed, 'What can we do now? How can we go on without him?'

 In uncertainty I am certain that underneath their topmost layers of frailty men want to be good and want to be loved. Indeed, most of their vices are attempted shortcuts to love. When a man comes to die, no matter what his talents and influence and genius, if he dies unloved, his life must be a failure to him, and his dying a cold horror. It seems to me that if you or I must choose between two courses of thought or action we should remember our dying so to live that our death brings no pleasure to the world.

 We have only one story. All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil. And it occurs to me that evil must constantly re-spawn, while good, while virtue, is immortal. Vice has always a new, fresh young face, while virtue is venerable as nothing else in the world is.

**The Real Meaning of 'Good' and 'Evil'**

Post published by [Steve Taylor Ph.D.](https://www.psychologytoday.com/experts/steve-taylor-phd) on Aug 26, 2013 in [Out of the Darkness](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/out-the-darkness) (Psychology)

It's a dangerous over-simplification to believe that some people are innately ‘good’ while others are innately ‘[evil](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/ethics-and-morality)’ or ‘bad.’ This misleading concept underpins the justice system of many countries - ‘bad’ people commit crimes, and since they are intrinsically ‘bad’, they should be locked away so that they can’t harm us with their ‘evil’ behavior. This concept has also fuelled many wars and conflicts in history, and even in the present day. It makes groups believe that they are fighting a just cause against an ‘evil’ enemy and that once the ‘evil’ people have been killed, peace and goodness will reign supreme.

Human [nature](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/environment) is infinitely more complex than this, of course. ‘Good’ and ‘evil’ are relative - one person’s ‘good’ is another person’s ‘evil’. They are also flexible - people can be a combination of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ qualities, and some people who behave cruelly and brutally can be rehabilitated and eventually display ‘good’ qualities such as [empathy](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/empathy) and kindness. And rather than being intrinsic, most cruel or brutal behavior is due to environmental factors, such as an abusive [childhood](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/child-development), or ‘[social learning](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/social-learning-theory)’ from a family or peers.

**The Meaning of Good and Evil**

What do we really mean when we use these simplistic terms, ‘good’ and ‘evil’?

‘Good’ means a lack of self-centeredness. It means the ability to empathize with other people, to feel compassion for them, and to put their needs before your own. It means, if necessary, sacrificing your own well-being for the sake of others’. It means benevolence, altruism and selflessness, and self-sacrifice towards a greater cause - all qualities which stem from a sense of empathy. It means being able to see beyond the superficial difference of [race](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/race-and-ethnicity), [gender](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/gender) or nationality and relate to a common human essence beneath them. All of the ‘saintly’ people in human history have these qualities in abundance. Think of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, risking their own safety and well-being for the goal of gaining equal rights and freedom for Indians and African Americans. These were human beings with an exceptional degree of empathy and compassion, which overrode any concern for their own ambitions or well-being.

‘Evil’ people are those who are unable to empathize with others. As a result, their own needs and desires are of paramount importance. They are selfish, self-absorbed and narcissistic. In fact, other people only have value for them to the extent that they can help them satisfy their own desires, or to which they can exploit them. This applies to dictators like Stalin and Hitler, and to serial killers and rapists - I would argue that their primary characteristics is an inability to empathize with others. They can’t sense other people’s emotions or their suffering, can’t see the world from other people’s perspective, have no sense of their rights. Other human beings are just objects to them, which is what makes their brutality and cruelty possible.

**Good and Evil as Flexible**

Most of us lie somewhere between the extremes of Gandhi and Hitler on the spectrum of human behavior. Sometimes we may behave badly, when egocentric impulses cause us to put our needs before the welfare of others. Sometimes we behave in a saintly fashion, when empathy and compassion impel us to put the needs of others before our own, resulting in altruism and kindness.

The real difference between this idea of ‘good and evil’ and the traditional concept is that empathy or a lack of empathy aren’t fixed. Although people with a psychopathic [personality](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/personality) appear to be unable to develop empathy, for most of us, empathy - or goodness - is a quality that can be cultivated. This is recognized by [Buddhism](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/religion), and most other [spiritual](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/spirituality) traditions. As we practice [meditation](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/meditation) or [mindfulness](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/mindfulness), and as we become less attached to [materialism](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/consumer-behavior) and status-seeking, we become more open and more connected, and so more selfless and [altruistic](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/altruism).

The ‘fluidity’ of goodness is also recognized by the process of ‘restorative justice’, which is becoming more and more widely used within European justice systems. Rather than locking ‘bad’ people away - which is unfortunately so widely practiced by the US penal system - restorative justice gives offenders the opportunity to meet their victims, to see how their crimes have affected them, which often leads to a sense of empathy for their victims - which in turn frequently leads to rehabilitation.

This is an optimistic view of nature, but I would go even further. Because the goodness in human beings emerges when we are connected - when we spread out into empathy with one another - I believe that goodness expresses something fundamental about human nature, even if it might be sometimes difficult to see. ‘Evil’ is an aberration, a form of pathology, as the psychopathic personality shows, which only emerges when we are broken off into disconnected fragments.