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

How are saintly people different from 'evil' ones? What does 'good' really mean?

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)

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.