There are no "bad people"

When I help friends debug their intrinsic motivation, here's a pattern I often bump into:

> *Well, if I don't actually start working soon, then I'll be a bad person.*

Or, even more worrying:

> *Well they wanted me to just buckle down and do the work, and I really didn't want to do it then, which means that either they were bad, or I was bad. And I didn't want to be the bad one bad, so I got angry at them, and...*

I confess, I do not know what it would mean for somebody to be a "bad person." I do know what it means for somebody to be bad at achieving the goals they set for themselves. I do know what it means for someone to be good at pursuing goals that I dislike. I have no idea what it would mean for a person to "be bad."

I know what it means for a person to lack skill in a specific area. I know what it means for a person to be procrastinating. I know what it means for a person to be acting under impulses that they don't endorse, such as spite or disgust. I know what it means for someone to fail to act as they wish

to act. I know what it means for someone to hurt other people, either on purpose or with a feeling of helpless resignation.

But I don't know what it would mean for a person to "be bad." That fails to parse. People don't have a hidden stone deep inside their brain that is either green or red depending on whether they are good or bad. "Badness" is not a fundamental property that a person can have. At best, "they're bad" can be shorthand for either "I don't want their goals achieved" or "they are untrained in a number of skills which would be relevant to the present situation"; but in all cases, "they are bad" must be either shorthand or nonsense.

Asking whether a person is "fundamentally good" or "fundamentally bad" is a type error. Life is not a quest where you struggle to wind up "good." That's not the sort of reality we find ourselves in.

Rather, we find ourselves embedded in a vast universe, with control over the future and a goal of making it wonderful. We find ourselves to be part of a grand deterministic pattern, and we're trying to make that pattern as beautiful as possible.

Step back and imagine history as a fixed path through the great crystal that is our universe over all time; the time-crystal that describes everything everywhere and every-when; the time-crystal where you can look not only forwards and backwards, but beforewards and afterwards.

Imagine the path of history that dances through configurations to the tune of physics. That same physics, according to which the line jigs and jags, is what implements you. In those jigs and jags is the pattern that is your mind. Some of the jigs compute your thoughts, some of the jags compute your choices, and your choices determine how the line dances in the afterwards direction past the event of your choice.

We aren't here to alter the color of the fundamental "goodness" stone buried within us; we're here to make the path through time be a good one.

Life is not a game of "wind up good at the end"; life is about steering the future.

Look not to whether you are good or bad. Look to where you are, and what you can do from there.

Living this mindset does not mean that you lack regrets. It does not free you from the burdens of your wrongdoings. I, like anyone, suffer from recalling harms that I have done to others. But instead of treating those recollections as dark judgements on my soul, I treat them as messages from my past, information about what sorts of undesirable behavior the Nate-monkey is liable to execute if I am not careful.

I sometimes find myself unable to act as I wish; unresponsive to my own cajoling. I treat these not as evidence of my fundamental brokenness, but as evidence about how and when I can intervene on the world.

While I often fail, I do not act under fear of being judged inadequate by the universe. I may *be* inadequate to the tasks I undertake, I may fail to steer the future as I wish to, but I cannot be "fundamentally bad." That sentence does not parse.

There is something freeing about this: I may succeed; I may fail; but I will not be judged by someone who roots through my mind to see whether the stone is green or red.

I will be judged only by the path that the future takes; as will we all.

By contrast, when I help friends debug their motivation, I often find them motivated by a desperate attempt to avoid "being bad."

Where I can, I encourage them not to let that be at the core of what motivates them. It's well and good, when introspecting about why what you're doing is important, to get an answer from yourself that is of the form "otherwise I'll be bad." That's a fine answer to get. But *don't let that be the end*

of things. Don't pretend that that's the final answer. *Investigate.*

Ask yourself, "what do I mean by that?" Say to yourself, "I bet that's shorthand for something." *Unpack* the feeling of would-be-bad.

If someone wants you to do the laundry, and you don't want to do the laundry, and you get angry at them because you have a sense that if there is conflict then one of you must be bad and *you* don't want to be bad—

—then pause, and investigate further.

Focus, and ask yourself what bad thing would happen if you did do the laundry, and what bad thing would happen if you didn't.

Maybe you get an answer like "if I don't do the laundry then it will strain my relationship with my friend, but if I do do the laundry then it will spend scarce energy and attention and I'm feeling really exhausted and don't want to force myself to do it."

That's great! (The answer doesn't need to be *comfortable*, it just needs to be *unpacked.* You may well reveal conflicting desires. You may well find that you were ignoring goals that you had but didn't endorse, such as preserving your own attention or energy.) This is a similar mental action to <u>unpacking a should</u>: if you find yourself compelled to do something

because otherwise you'd "be bad," then become curious, investigate, and unpack the feeling into it's component parts.

Ask yourself, "I don't know what it would mean to be bad; can you elaborate?"

Then, *listen to yourself.* Don't worry if your answers seem senseless! Often, I have watched people completely fail to figure out what is blocking them, because as soon as they get an answer from deep inside their mind, they declare that it's ridiculous, and then they struggle to dismiss it or cover it up or decry it as "irrational."

Perhaps they ask themselves what they mean by "then I'd be bad" and find something like "I apparently think that if I don't do the laundry then it's evidence that I can't do *anything,* and that means I'll lose my job and end up on the street and die cold and alone, and that's *stupid,* so..." at which point they start lecturing themselves about why their concerns are dumb, instead of declaring self-loyalty and standing by themselves. (If you find yourself doing this, I suggest taking your concerns seriously, and explaining your different beliefs earnestly, with the same respect you'd show an inquisitive child who wants to understand the world but has a few flaws in their understanding.)

You're still a monkey! You often have inconsistent, strange preferences. Parts of you often have beliefs that other parts of you don't endorse. That's *ok.* Decrying your own inconsistencies is no way to fix them: work with yourself.

So don't settle for being motivated to do something because otherwise you'd "be bad." Unpack the feeling of "being bad," and figure out what outcomes you're aiming for. Figure out what you want to *do.* Figure out how you want the future to *be.*

Because at the end of the day, a person "being bad" fails to parse. "Goodness" and "badness" are not properties of people. People can do terrible things; they can pursue horrible goals; they can watch with growing despair as they act against their own best interests; but they do not have a fundamental stone buried deep inside of them which measures their worth.

Life is not a game of "wind up good at the end." Life is about steering the future.