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There Are No "Good" or "Bad" People - Areo

Alan Jern

8-10 minutes

After Kobe Bryant's shocking death, many people publicly expressed their grief over the loss of someone they loved, respected—even idolized. But others used the moment to remind the world of a rape Bryant allegedly committed in 2003. At the core of these polarized responses is a tendency to categorize people as *good* or *bad*. Bad people are undeserving of praise, no matter what good they may have done.

This is not supported by psychological science. There are no good or bad people. Instead, the vast majority of us are simply people who do some good things and some bad. A better understanding of this can help you adopt a more constructive and compassionate attitude toward people who do bad things.

Although we tend to casually refer to ourselves as introverts and extraverts, personality psychologists treat personality traits as continuous dimensions. Sociability is a spectrum and most people fall somewhere in the middle. Moral character is no different. These differences in moral character result in differences in behavior. For example, a study of over 1000 people in the US workforce, by a group of researchers led by Taya Cohen, found

that people with lower moral character committed far more unethical workplace behaviors, such as leaving work early and pilfering office supplies. The personality traits the researchers used to distinguish high and low moral character included things like empathy, proneness to guilt, conscientiousness and the tendency to consider future consequences.

But even the people with higher moral character committed *some* unethical behaviors, and people with both high and low moral character committed many kind and compassionate acts toward their coworkers. Just as self-identified introverts are sometimes outgoing, characteristically *good* people sometimes do bad things and characteristically *bad* people sometimes do good things. Most people haven't been accused of anything as heinous as rape, but we've all hurt people in much milder ways.

This point was illustrated by a 1990 study by Roy Baumeister, Arlene Stillwell and Sara Wotman. The researchers compared the perspectives of people who had made someone else angry with those of people who had been angered by someone else by asking people to recall a time when someone made them angry (or a time when they made someone else angry) and write about it. Crucially, every subject wrote about both kinds of incidents. As Baumeister and Kathleen Vohs commented in 2004:

None of the findings of this study can be taken as showing that victims and perpetrators are different kinds of people, because they were exactly the same people. Thus, any differences we found must be attributed to the roles of victim and perpetrator and not to any personality differences between victims and perpetrators.

All the subjects were able to produce both types of stories, which is consistent with the notion that everyone has done bad things. Interestingly, the two types of stories differed in revealing ways. Victims were more likely to mention the lasting negative consequences of the incident, whereas perpetrators were more likely to see the incident as an isolated event from which both people had moved on. Victims were also more likely to view the perpetrators' actions as incomprehensible, while perpetrators were far more likely to view their actions as justified.

This study sheds light on why people tend to characterize those who do bad things as *bad people*, even though we're all guilty of doing bad things ourselves sometimes. The results suggest that both victims and perpetrators perceive events in biased ways. Victims tend to inflate the magnitude of the harm inflicted on them partly because they (understandably) can't know the motives and factors that drove their perpetrators to act. Perpetrators minimize the harm they caused because they have a strong incentive to do so and because they can't fully appreciate the emotional effects of their actions without reading their victims' minds.

We're all sometimes victims and sometimes perpetrators. But, when we're victims, the perpetrators seem worse because of these biases. When we're the perpetrators, we don't judge ourselves as harshly.

The study also showed that perpetrators were much more likely to mention external mitigating factors that caused their actions. Perpetrators had every reason to rationalize what they were doing, but evidence suggests that external factors *can* sometimes influence our behavior in surprising ways, and we commonly underestimate that influence.

An experiment published in 2012, by Francesca Gino and Adam Galinsky, provides an everyday illustration of these surprising external influences. In a group of 82 college students, the researchers found that the subjects were more likely to cheat on a task that paid money if they saw another student, who was born in the same month and year as them, cheat and get away with it than if the other student didn't share their birth month. In other words, even feeling some totally arbitrary affinity with a stranger caused people to behave more unethically than they otherwise would.

This example illustrates that our ethical behavior is the product of more than our principles. It's also influenced by external factors, many of which we aren't fully aware. This is one important reason why generally good people sometimes do bad things, and generally bad people do good things.

If it's misguided to lump people into *good* and *bad*, how should we respond when people do bad things? First, we should recognize that except for unrepentant psychopaths, most people are complex and generally strive to be good. With that in mind, we should be open to the possibility that people can learn and change, and we should offer earnestly remorseful offenders a path to redemption.

When people do hurtful or offensive things, they should be criticized. But not everyone deserves to have their entire character called into question over a single incident. Not everyone who makes a racially insensitive comment is a racist; not everyone who makes a sexist joke is a sexist. That doesn't mean that we should simply ignore these things. But rather than engaging in moral grandstanding by declaring people *racist* and *sexist* online, in order to score social points (an activity typical of cancel culture), it's more constructive to try to help offenders understand why what

they did was hurtful. The fact that somebody did something bad doesn't mean she's a bad person. Why not give her the knowledge and opportunity to do better next time?

With figures with complicated legacies, like Kobe Bryant, why should we resort to facile judgments that they are heroes or monsters? They're people, just like the rest of us, who have done good and bad (or even horrible) things. They deserve to be praised for their accomplishments and benevolence and condemned for their crimes and cruelty.

We should apply these lessons to ourselves, too. When you hurt others, the best thing you can do is sincerely apologize and try to do better next time. You can't undo the bad things you've done in the past, but there are always opportunities to do more good things in the future.

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Alan Jern is a cognitive scientist and associate professor of psychology at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology. He writes about psychology and TV at OverthinkingTV.com.