

Being Evil vs. Doing Evil



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Adolf Hitler murdered millions of people. So did Josef Stalin and Mao Zedong. Bill Clinton murdered thousands of Iraqi children through economic sanctions. George Bush murdered thousands of Iraqis and Afghans through invasion. Barack Obama has murdered many through continued occupation and aerial drone strikes. Osama bin Laden murdered thousands. Are these men *evil*? I don’t think so.

Being Evil

Humans are each born with their own unique set of traits. Some are destined to be tall, some short. Some with light skin, others with dark. Some will be especially bright while most will be just bright enough. These and much more are the myriad characteristics that make a human. All of them are set as a matter of genetic programming. They are what we will be, what we are as individual organisms.

That’s not to say that we can’t change what we are. We are not genetically destined to be overweight or underweight, so we can control quite a bit of that. Likewise the amount of muscles we have, or how long or short we cut our hair. *Being* a certain way is mostly out of our control, but there are still some characteristics that we can change. I posit that being *good* or *evil* is entirely under our control, and so either is not a question of *being*, but of *doing*.

Doing Evil

Unlike the above characteristics, nobody is born *good* or *evil*. Though we like to label people this way, doing so ignores or brushes over important information about why somebody performs the actions that they do. Every baby is a clean slate. How that baby is treated by others, the experiences that he has, the knowledge that he receives, the relationships and kinds of trust that he builds over many years will determine how he thinks about others and how he reacts to situations. As he grows, the actions that he performs will probably not be viewed by himself ever as *evil*, and probably always as *good*.

Others will make their own determinations of his actions. What they can't do quickly is understand the reasons behind his actions.

The reasons behind any action are like the depths of the ocean just under the surface. On the surface we have the action; five feet below we have the immediate motivation for the action; twenty feet below we have the unmet needs that created the immediate motivation; one hundred feet below we have the recent experiences that left a need unmet; and one thousand feet below we have the lifetime experiences that set the stage for the recent experiences. Along the way we find the cross currents of experiences created by outside influences. At every depth we find more data that informs our understanding of the reasons behind a given action, be it *good* or *evil*.

Final Thoughts

Like I said, I don't consider the men above to be *evil*. I do, however, consider their actions to be extremely evil; actions that were preceded by countless depths of unmet needs, experiences, and outside influence. None of those men were destined to do evil. Each of them as a rational human had the capacity to choose within the confines of their present knowledge and understanding, but just as they chose to do what many others consider *evil*, they were just as able to choose to do *good*. Likewise, each of us can choose to look back out how we got to where we are, and choose to either keep performing the kinds of actions that we do, or to change. Though we can't change our past, we can change our future.