

# Instead of Good vs. Evil: Creative vs. Destructive Acts

Many people in our post-religious world are skeptical of the categories of “good” vs. “evil.” And they should be. Most of us inherit duty-based moralities that have tradition behind them, but little enough clear reasoning. And since most inherited religious moral codes differ from modern peoples’ intuitions and inclinations, most people are even more likely to write off “good” and “evil” as outdated notions.

But we all still ask the question “how should we act?”

Labels like “good” and evil” beg so many question that they’re hard to use constructively to answer this question. Why should we not do evil? Why should we be good?

Let’s set aside “good” and “evil” for a bit. These may be valid categories, but if all we’ve gotten from them is over-simplified categories (the old “sex and drugs are bad, serving your country and working hard is good”), we need to go a layer deeper.

We need other frameworks to begin to answer the question of right behavior without resorting to “good vs. evil” cliches. There are quite a few out there – meet the philosophy of ethics, which is more than this blog post or its author can address. But we can start somewhere.

**Instead of asking “is this good or evil by my inherited code of morality,” ask yourself this: “does this action create life or destroy life?”** More specifically, ask “does this enhance or degenerate my own life and the lives most directly affected by this action\*?”

We can always know the answer to *that* question in our guts (though we often find it hard to listen)

Eating healthy food in moderation creates life – we should go for it. But overeating destroys life. Sex between consenting, mature, emotionally healthy, wise, loving and committed people is lifegiving. But sex used to manipulate others, fake reality, or exercise power is life-destroying. Telling the truth enhances life, and lying destroys it. All of this is completely non-arbitrary. It’s based in pure reality, and it’s hard to deny.

Measuring morality against a (more or less) objective metric can lead to some surprises.

Regardless of whether our inherited moral codes call it “evil” or not, drug use frequently corrupts life instead of enhancing it (traditional morality gets something right). Regardless of whether our inherited moral codes call it “good” or not, vengeance and violence destroys life instead of generating it (many traditional moralities lose out

here).

It's a shock for many of us when we realize that what might pass for "good" in our inherited moral code may also be life-destroying (or vice-versa). We have to stop and ask whether our moral code is really geared toward life. That question is worth asking. But in the meantime, we can continue to ask moment by moment if our actions are creating life in our general vicinity.\*

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\*Psychologist Jordan Peterson has a great thought on this topic to which I owe some credit for this measure of "life improvement". From Wikiquote (so not sure if this quote is entirely accurate):

*"The moral relativists ask: what do you mean by should? Here's how you should act: Act in a way so that things are good for you like they would be for someone you're taking care of. But they have to be good for you in a way that's also good for your family, and they have to be good for you and your family also in a way that's good for society (and maybe even good for the broader environment if you can manage that), so it's balanced at all those levels. And it has to be good for you, your family, and society right now, AND next week, AND next month, AND a year from now, AND ten years from now."*