

Why You (Yes, You!) Should Make the Choice to be a Good Person



Send him mail.

"Insight for the Young and Unrestrained" is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

It's easy for a child to conceptualize the whole of reality as merely a playground for his own whims and that he is somehow created unique and special above the rest. Many people carry on with this self-absorbed thought experiment their whole lives. It is almost scary to wonder how many adults running the planet today do not fully acknowledge the autonomy and worth of other adults. It does, however, explain much about the present political state of the nations of the world.

The practice of viewing oneself as above and beyond other people also makes it very easy to justify acting in immoral ways towards each other, or more simply put, be a "bad" person. It's not a difficult equation to figure. Feeling psychologically sound with cheating other people through trickery or violence of any sort opens up many potential short-term gains for the immoral man or woman. Children naturally seek to experiment with where the boundary lies for the level of self-serving acts of petty theft and dishonesty they can get away with. It is unfortunate that many (if not most) adults never fully outgrow this juvenile trait.

I used to have a very difficult time caring about other people. To this day, my favorite stories revolve around fictional characters who seem isolated from the rest of the human race emotionally and intellectually (think Sherlock Holmes or Tony Stark). I seemed for a long period of time to lack a proper ability to empathize with others, or even to accept that everyone else really had their own independent awareness, intelligence, feelings, and priorities.

I've at times wondered if there was something wrong with me, or if this was the kind of thing everyone went through yet mysteriously no one talked about. I struggled for years in teenagehood coming to terms with where my own ethical interaction limits lay- wondering if I was the kind of person who would be okay with killing another person and carrying on

as if nothing had happened, or why major emotional traumas and human relationships did not seem to affect me the way they did others.

With the exception of a profound driving need to connect intimately with the opposite sex (perhaps it was this that ultimately was my salvation), I feared I would become the kind of person who lacked all real contact and cohesive interaction with my own kind. I honestly worried that I would, out of sheer boredom and apathy, one day go on to become a person who did terrible and outlandish things, each more sensationalized than the last, if only to maintain my interest in the world while I was here. Writing this now, I realize how strange this must sound to “normal” people. It’s not exactly the kind of thing I’ve shared frequently, or ever.

Then there are the people who were raised to be good upstanding citizens and treat each other with kindness and respect in all encounters. These are people who typically come from strong family backgrounds, a decent standard of living, and more often than not a traditional code of ethics passed down in one religious form or another. I used to envy these people, until I realized that it would never have been much of an option for me due to my nature to rebel. I suppose I still do wonder how different I would be and how much differently I would view the world if those had been the circumstances for my upbringing.

I can say with certainty because of my own experience that the development of ethics is not confined to one’s upbringing. The true merit of being a good person comes from making the choice to be such. For me, that choice came about as the result of the pain of witnessing a world which was intolerably cruel to its own offspring. The choice for morality came as an inescapable conclusion at the tailend of a long line of rational deduction from my inputs upon the world. I didn’t have to be a good person, but it’s all the more meaningful that I chose to become one anyway.

As I grew up, I eventually made the shift from a short-term momentary way of living to a long-term sustainable model of growth. The person who lives entirely in the moment, lives only for today, has no reason to contemplate the consequences of his actions or build a larger working model of reality. This person is likely to live his or her entire life hand-to-mouth, paycheck to paycheck, one relationship to the next. This person might rip off his own friends or anyone else unfortunate enough to be associated with him if he thinks he can get away with it.

A person with a long-term cumulative model of reality will approach their interactions with the world from a principled paradigm. Lying, cheating, stealing, and violence are wrong because they do not allow for the formation of sustainable relationships or accumulated progress. They are simply counter to the aims of a perspektived person who lives for today, tomorrow, and the unforeseeable future.

Because most people are not “good” (as I arbitrarily define the term) people, becoming one generally means going against the accepted grain. It might mean short-term losses in self-indulgent opportunities, or the weaning of old friends and associates. It might mean making hard decisions or even learning to live your life over again. All these apparent losses are investment costs. An investment requires the foresight to make an initial sacrifice which blossoms over time into something much larger than how it started.

The choice to be a good person, like all other choices, is ultimately made out of self-interest. Morality means a better life for you and everyone you interact with. Extrapolated to a global scale, it means optimized economies, higher standards of living, world peace, and the nearly total end of social problems as we know them. It means a sustainable future for humanity as each and every one of us eventually makes the choice to become “one improved unit” of the system called society.

Reason, not doctrine, is the basis for my morality. I choose to be good because it is the right thing to do, to live the kind of life and create the kind of world I want. Be good because it’s a good idea. Isn’t that enough? Isn’t that so much more noble and amazing than a life of chaotic self-indulgence or blind obedience to orders? Pain and ceaseless questioning brought me out of the shadows and into a more reliable understanding of how to act. I stay in the light because it works.