

As a child the chances are good that, like me, you were socialized to believe that there was such a thing as “good” and “bad” behavior and that when you did something judged as “bad” you, by extension, were a “bad” person.

But consider, for a moment, that “bad” doesn’t exist. Take, for example, the Orang Asli People of Malaysia. For them the idea of labeling a person as “bad” would be preposterous. It would be akin to punishing a plant that was not growing well. Historically, a person in that culture who was not behaving within the norms of the group was understood not as “bad” but as having forgotten his true nature. The solution was to bring that person more fully into the circle of community so that he remembered that he belonged to something greater than himself. Though we are not the Orang Asli People, I believe that it is possible to free ourselves from seeing our children’s and each other’s actions in terms of good vs. bad. Remember “good” and “bad” are simply cultural constructs—human creations without objective existence.

In my ignorance I sometimes behave in ways that are not particularly enlightened or even mature (for a person my age). Does this mean that I am “bad.” Say I am at a potluck and through lack of attentiveness I take a big helping of dessert and this results in some people at the end of the line not getting any dessert. Am I selfish? Greedy? A bad person? No. These are socially constructed labels. The reality is that on this particular occasion I was a person who took more than what society sanctions as “my proper share.”

As I see it, moment by moment, each of us is doing the best that we can, given the skills, dispositions, and level of awareness that we have available to us. If you doubt this, simply think back to a time in your life when you did something that you regret—something you were conditioned to believe was “bad.” Now, ask yourself: “Was I doing the best I could in that moment, given what I had available to me in terms of awareness and skills?” The answer to this question has to be “Yes.” Of course, now, in this moment, you may see that you could have behaved in a more enlightened fashion, but back then you were doing the best you knew how. Your actions were the result of a lack of awareness, not badness. The same is true for children.

Indeed, one need only spend time in the presence of a child to realize that the proposition that humans are bad (or do things that are bad) is preposterous. Go ahead and do it. Observe a child. Suppose the child spills her milk or scratches the table or takes a toy from her playmate. Is the child bad in these instances? To be sure, a culture attached to the concepts of “good” vs. “bad” judges these acts as bad. But experiment with living within the worldview that none of these things are “bad.” Consider that the child is simply expressing her natural tendency to explore, discover, and experience the world—her natural tendency to push against limits, to test and to experiment

Imagine, next, how it would be if we were to jettison the label “good” as applied to people. For example, if I perform a “kind” act this doesn’t mean that I am “good” or even that I am “kind.” Again, it simply means that I have done something considered by somebody as kind. Period.

It is my contention that by letting go of the concepts of “good” and “bad” we will come to recognize, like the Orang Asli People, that each of us (in spite of our limitations) is unconditionally lovable just as we are. This is a necessary prerequisite for the peace and understanding that we all long for in our homes, communities and world.