

8 Human Nature

Is it beyond our control?

“It is human nature to think wisely and act foolishly.”

Anatole France
(1844-1924)—French
writer, winner of
Nobel Prize for
Literature in 1921

What is it about human beings and human nature that makes us what we are? We constantly want to do the right thing, but often end up doing the very thing we don't want to do. We “think wisely and act foolishly”! The only consolation is that no one seems immune to it.

But where does this impulse come from? Why do we constantly plan the diet but never start; join the gym but only go a few times; open the savings account but keep using the credit card; buy the Christmas cards but forget to send them? Why do we have great intentions that never seem to turn into action or reality? Is our human nature beyond our control?

Questions

What are the things that I really want to do in my life, but have trouble implementing?

Do I sometimes feel as if things in my life are beyond my control?

Remember back to when you were a child and you got into trouble for doing something wrong. No matter if it was breaking a window, tipping over a glass of milk or causing that bruise on your sibling's leg, usually your first response would be to deny responsibility by saying "I didn't do it." And maybe after prompting you would admit that you did it, but still deny responsibility for your actions by saying "It's not my fault" (or "it's beyond my control") and try and pin the blame on someone else. My sister "made me do it," the dog "made me do it," the man on the television 'made me do it!'

“Human nature is so constituted, that all see and judge better in the affairs of other men than in their own.”

Terence (195 BC-159 BC)
—Ancient Roman comic playwright and dramatist of the Roman Republic

Notice the words “made me do it”? Sure, we may have done it, but we were MADE to do it. We were forced. In other words, it wasn't our fault; something greater than ourselves caused us to do it!

But isn't there some truth to that, that sometimes we really can't help ourselves in some of the things that we do? That it really is beyond our control?

But what happens when we see other people offering this excuse? Don't we get annoyed with them and think that they really could help it—that they maybe just didn't want to? We seem to be quick to excuse ourselves but fast to condemn others.

But then—then we discover something: we discover a little bit about that person's background, about their childhood, about how they were raised . . . and, suddenly, we look at things differently. This knowledge doesn't make the person any less obnoxious, or noxious, or troublesome; it doesn't make their actions any less wrong; it doesn't even justify their actions or remove, in most cases, culpability. It just helps you better understand why they are the way they are. Indeed, in some cases, considering what we know of people's backgrounds, it's a wonder they aren't worse than they are!

**Stop judging
others, and
you will not
be judged.**

Matthew 7:1

And maybe we wouldn't be so quick to judge people if we judged ourselves by the same criteria! Who knows what we would do were we in their position? We might do even worse!

Charles Manson is a name known to most Americans; he was behind the vicious murders of actress Sharon Tate and others in California in the 1970s. Manson had a cult following who carried out the massacre.

There's a story about Manson. His mother was a prostitute, and one day when he was about three she was in a bar with him and a barmaid looked over and said, "What a cute kid. What can I give you for him?" His mother said, "How about a pitcher of beer?" The deal was struck, and a pitcher of beer was exchanged for a three-year-old child. You can imagine, only with pain I'm sure, what kind of childhood Manson had, and how to such a great degree it helps explain his adult life.

Now, does this justify what Charles Manson did? Of course not! Does it excuse the murders? Of course not! Does it mean he shouldn't have been put away for life for his crimes? Of course not! But when you hear stories such as this, and endless others, it sure helps you better understand Jesus' words about not judging people, or judging their hearts. Of course, we have to judge *actions*; no society could survive if certain actions deemed "crimes" were not judged wrong and dealt with.

We could argue endlessly over whether some, and I stress *some*, of these actions are crimes (most of us find it hard to relate to the “crime” of women not covering their faces in public) but we could all agree that societies have to do a certain amount of judging in regard to actions in order to survive.

But Manson is an extreme case, right? What about humanity in general?

However sad, however sick, the story of Charles Manson’s childhood is just one, one of literally endless stories about the sordid nature of human beings. You can barely pick up a paper without reading about the awful things that humans do to each other. Rape, abuse, murder, gang problems, neighbourhood disputes and even parents selling their children as prostitutes! We should be ashamed of ourselves! But is this all the future holds for us?

The last century—the century of space flight, of splitting the atom, of the personal computer, of the human genome—was also the century of Verdun, the Marne, Auschwitz, the Killing Fields, and the Rwanda genocide. It seems this side of our nature, our human nature, is everywhere where there are human beings.

So again, what causes the nature of humans to be so conflicting? What makes us both good and evil, what makes us kind and cruel, what makes us loving and hateful?

what
makes us
both
good and
evil?

The human heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? **Question**

How could my behaviour be changed for the better?

Jeremiah 17:9

There probably has been no more sustained attack on Christianity and Christian beliefs than over its teaching about human “sinfulness,” or inherent human evil. We are told that the idea is degrading, it gives us a bad self-image, it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy (you tell someone they are inherently evil and they will be evil) and so forth. But when we look at human actions around the world, maybe the Christian concept of human sinfulness shouldn’t be so readily dismissed as irrelevant?

No one is good—not even one. No one has real understanding; no one is seeking God. All have turned away from God; all have gone wrong. No one does good, not even one. Their talk is foul, like the stench from an open grave. Their speech is filled with lies. The poison of a deadly snake drips from their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. They are quick to commit murder. Wherever they go, destruction and misery follow them. They do not know what true peace is. They have no fear of God to restrain them. Romans 3:10-18

Again, before we rush to condemn such sentiment, I would suggest turning on the evening news. I believe there, and everywhere, you'll find a lot of evidence to back up the Christian idea of human evil. But even more, look at the books we choose to read, the movies we watch and the television programmes that bring in the top ratings; so many of them focus on the brutal side of life. Movie, television and book plots that deal with murder, crime scenes, disappearances, rapes, abuse and war dominate our lives. The dark side of human nature may scare us, but it seems to entertain us even more.

But are we all that bad?

Of course not. We're not all totally bad, we're not all totally evil; sure, we're all capable of doing some good and selfless things. And there are a lot of people who have had worse abuse than Manson but have worked through their issues and now lead healthy, happy, positive lives, like Dave Pelzer (and if you haven't heard of his story, track down his books and have a read—his is a truly inspiring story).

Question

What is the worst thing that has happened to me and what was and is my response to it?

“Love is a force that connects us to every strand of the universe, an unconditional state that characterizes human nature, a form of knowledge that is always there for us if only we can open ourselves to it.”

Emily Hilburn

OK, so there are people who behave with good intent and those whose motivations are evil, that are bad, harmful or wicked. But who is to say who will win? Does good always triumph over evil like in the movies? Is this a realistic scenario? If there were no restraint on either goodness or evil; if both were left totally unchecked, which would crush out the other?

There was a movie that starred Nicholas Cage about a snuff film—those pornographic movies which end with the victim, usually a woman who has performed sexual duties, being murdered literally on camera! It's not faked, which is bad enough, but some people actually get their thrills by watching someone being murdered. In the film, there was a rich industrialist, a kind of J.P. Morgan type, who had a young woman killed in a snuff film. At one point, Cage's character, who was investigating the crime, was confronted by the industrialist's lawyer, who was complicit in the crime. And when Cage's character asked why this rich industrialist, this powerful wealthy man who had everything the world could offer, did something like this, the lawyer said, 'Because he could.'

Because he could. That's scary.

Ask yourself this question, what things would you do that you don't do now ONLY because you couldn't get away with them? What would you do if you could do absolutely whatever you wanted, whatever your innermost desires were, knowing that you would not get caught, that no one would ever know, and that you would get away with it completely?

“If you have ever seen a four-year-old trying to lord it over a two-year-old, then you know what the basic problem of human nature is—and why government keeps growing larger and ever more intrusive.”

Thomas Sowell (b.1930)—one of America's leading contemporary intellectuals

Suppose there really is a supernatural evil force out there? Suppose all the jokes and movies and gimmicks depicting an evil force are all part of this evil power's plan to make us not believe in him, to numb us to him, to make us think he's nothing but just that, a joke, a gimmick, a person created in a movie set? Is that so far-fetched? Is it possible that the good and evil we see out there, sometimes in a pitched battle, a great controversy, could really be a manifestation of a behind-the-scenes-struggle between light and darkness? Could a devil actually exist?

And if he does, wouldn't it be his greatest ploy be to make us believe he doesn't?

Questions

What do I believe about evil?

What do I believe about the existence of the devil and an evil supernatural force?

But how can we believe in the devil? Isn't this just some myth from an ancient culture?

Well, the Bible seems to make it very clear that the devil, or Satan, exists; not as a symbol of evil, not as a metaphor for our darker sides, not as a poetic or literary image—but as a real supernatural being bent on human destruction.

There was a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz. He was blameless, a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil. He had seven sons and three daughters. He owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred teams of oxen, and five hundred female donkeys, and he employed many servants. He was, in fact, the richest person in that entire area. Every year when Job's sons had birthdays, they invited their brothers and sisters to join them for a celebration. On these occasions they would get together to eat and drink. When these celebrations ended—and sometimes they lasted several days—Job would purify his children.

***Be careful!
Watch out for
attacks from
the devil, your
great enemy.
He prowls
around like a
roaring lion,
looking for
some victim
to devour.***

1 Peter 5:8

He would get up early in the morning and offer a burnt offering for each of them. For Job said to himself, Perhaps my children have sinned and have cursed God in their hearts. This was Job's regular practice. One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan the Accuser came with them. "Where have you come from?" the LORD asked Satan. And Satan answered the LORD, "I have been going back and forth across the earth, watching everything that's going on." Then the LORD asked Satan, "Have you noticed my servant Job? He is the finest man in all the earth—a man of complete integrity. He fears God and will have nothing to do with evil." Satan replied to the LORD, "Yes, Job fears God, but not without good reason! You have always protected him and his home and his property from harm. You have made him prosperous in everything he does. Look how rich he is!" Job 1:1-10

But when people keep on sinning, it shows they belong to the devil, who has been sinning since the beginning. But the Son of God came to destroy these works of the Devil.

1 John 3:8

These texts, and there are others, don't imply that Satan is just an idea, a metaphor for our darker side; these and other verses teach that the devil is a real being, a supernatural powerful being who seeks to wreak pain and suffering and havoc on humanity.

So does this mean we aren't at fault, that it's all this "Satan's" fault that we do bad things?

What is it that drives people to do some of the horrific things that they do? You don't have to see the devil himself; you can look all around and see his works. Was it just purely a chance conglomeration of atoms and molecules that turned a child into an Adolph Hitler? If you come home from work one day and find your apartment or house ransacked, burglarized, vandalized, you don't need to see the culprit face to face to know that he was there, do you?

Well, if the devil really does exist, and is doing all these bad things, and making us do bad things, what hope is there for us? How can we fight an enemy we can't even see?

***Rejoice, O heavens!
And you who live in
the heavens, rejoice!
But terror will come
on the earth and the
sea. For the devil has
come down to you in
great anger, and
he knows that he
has little time.***

Revelation 12:12

Good question, and this leads to the good news in all this. According to the Bible, Satan has already been defeated. That is, though he still wreaks havoc in our lives, his final destruction is assured, and the final and complete triumph of good over evil is guaranteed. This is, in many ways, the heart of the Christian message: that there is a great controversy out there between good and evil, between Christ and Satan, and when Jesus died for the sins of the world at the cross, He once and for all defeated Satan, and it's only a matter of time before Satan, evil, suffering, sickness and death are all gone.

The time of the devil is short. Of course, that was written almost two thousand years ago, but it tells us that one day this is going to be over, that one day this devil, this evil force that has done so much damage, will be stopped.

But in the meantime, can I really blame the devil for all my woes?

Well, I'm not going to say that we can blame all our problems on the devil On the other hand, I believe that our problems—health, financial, spiritual, moral, relational, whatever—all stem from evil, from the corrupted nature of humanity as a whole. We all suffer the pitfalls of being part of humanity. And no matter how beautiful, wealthy or famous we are, we will in the end, all die. And this all stems, I believe, from the devil.

“Out of defeat
can come the
best in human
nature. As
Christians face
storms of
adversity, they
may rise with
more beauty.
They are like
trees that grow
on mountain
ridges—
battered by
winds, yet trees
in which we find
the strongest
wood.”

Billy Graham (b.1918)
—Prominent American
preacher and author

So in a way, yes, we can blame Satan for our mistakes, but we also have the same power to choose good over evil, just as Satan did in the beginning. It's true, the devil makes us do a lot of things, but only if we let him. If we connect with Jesus, through faith, through prayer, through trusting in His promises, we are going to have a source of power and strength that even the devil can't beat and the good side of our human nature will win over the bad.

Jesus offers us a way out, a way beyond our human nature; through Him we can have the assurance that no matter what struggles we face; no matter what temptations come our way, no matter what hard moral choices we have to make; God will offer us the guidance and the power to do the right thing or at least the best thing possible given our personal and individual situation. We don't have to be enslaved by our passions, our greed, or the lower things in us that at times not only tempt us but cause us to do things that we know, in our hearts, are wrong.

We're not all Hitlers or Stalins. Evil, wrong, can be much more subtle. There are so many lives ruined by wrong choices made by people a lot less evil and a lot less powerful than Stalin or Hitler ever were.

Would you like to be a better person than you might be now? Would you like to have control over things that, it seems, have control over you? Would you like to have answers to questions that leave you baffled and with a sense of purposelessness, loss, depression?

These are all found, I believe, in a relationship with Jesus, the one who beat the devil, who assures us that the devil (and everything associated with the devil: death, evil, war, and suffering) will one day be gone. Our true human nature will be restored and the only thing that will be beyond our control will be Jesus' love for us—as it is now.

wouldn't
you like
to be
different?

Questions

What choices am I making in my life that are causing more harm than good?

What choices could I make that would bring more positive influences into my life?

My Answers

What are the things that I really want to do in my life, but have trouble implementing?

I am always starting a diet, losing weight, but I never maintain the lifestyle necessary to keep my weight under control. I really want to eat healthily, but I always seem to be too busy to organise it.

Your Answer

Do I sometimes feel as if things in my life are beyond my control?

I feel that various things that happen in my life are out of control. I try to control them, but they seem to have their own compass.

Your Answer

How could my behaviour be changed for the better?

I know that I could learn to be more tolerant of certain situations, but every time I think I have it under control, I seem to be faced with something even bigger and I become very intolerant, react and then regret it later.

Your Answer

What is the worst thing that has happened to me and what was and is my response to it?

A number of my friends have died over the last few years and that is so hard to deal with. I suppose my response has been varied due to circumstance, but I have always hurt, cried and missed them intensely.

Your Answer

What do I believe about evil?

I believe there is just as much evil in the world as good, but the good is stronger than the evil.

Your Answer

my answers

What do I believe about the existence of the devil and an evil supernatural force?

I believe that there is a good force and a God, and with all the pain and suffering in the world, there must be an evil force and a devil leading it.

Your Answer

What choices am I making in my life that are causing more harm than good?

Every time I choose to talk down to myself, every time I talk down about someone else, I believe I am causing myself and others more harm than good.

Your Answer

What choices could I make that would bring more positive influences into my life?

I believe the most positive influence in my life is my choice to follow Jesus Christ and His teachings. His life is the guide that I need to lead a better life.

Your Answer

Answers Key

Further Resources

The Great Controversy

Ellen G. White

Pacific Press Publishing Association

The Cosmic Conflict Between Christ and Satan

John M. Fowler

Pacific Press Publishing Association

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Satan's Trojan Horse: God's End-Time Victory

Norman Gulley

Review & Herald Publishing

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The Day Evil Dies

Clifford Goldstein

Review & Herald Publishing

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Touched With Our Feelings: A Historical Survey of Adventist Thought on the Human Nature of Christ

J. R. Zurcher

Review & Herald Publishing

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Overcoming Evil With Good

Joseph Stowell

Moody Press

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Breaking The Power Of Evil

Rick Joyner

Destiny Image

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10 Things Satan Doesn't Want You To Know

*Charles Swindoll, Billy Graham,
Ron Mehl, Charles Colson,
Erwin Lutzer, John Piper, Jay Carty,
Kerry D McRoberts, Charles Ryrie,
Ray Stedman, John Van Diest (Ed).*
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