



ARE PEOPLE BORN GOOD?

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There are two important – indeed, fundamental – questions you have to answer in life:

The first is: Is there is a God – specifically a moral and judging Creator. The second is: Are people basically good?

Your answer to the second question will shape just about all of your moral, social, and political views – even more than whether you believe in God. That’s why a believer and an atheist who have the same views about human nature almost always have the same social and political views.

Let me give you some examples:

You’ve probably heard the phrase “Poverty causes crime.” If you believe that people are basically good, you are likely to believe that poverty or bigotry or some other outside force causes people to commit violent crime. That’s the only way you can make sense of the fact that some people commit crimes despite their basically good nature – something drove them to it. But if you don’t believe people are basically good, you are far more likely to blame the criminals themselves, not outside forces, for their actions.

One more example: in a society where it is believed that people are basically good, parents and society don’t devote great efforts toward making good people. After all, if we are born good, why do you have to teach goodness? On the other hand, those who don’t believe we are born all that good understand that parents and society have to undertake major efforts to make children into good adults.

Ok, then, are people basically good? As I will show, given humanity’s history, the answer should be obvious. Of course, human nature isn’t basically good.

Now, this doesn’t mean that people are basically bad. We are born with real potential to do good. But we are not basically good.

Take babies. Babies are lovable and innocent, but they are not good: They are entirely self-centered – as they have to be in order to survive. “I want mommy; I want milk; I want to be held; I want to be comforted, and if you do not do all these things immediately, I will ruin your life!” That’s not goodness; that’s narcissism.

We are born narcissists, preoccupied with “number one:” ourselves. And if you’ve ever worked with kids, you know how cruel, how bullying, they can be.

And don't parents have to tell their child tens of thousands times "Say thank you"? Now, why is that? If we are naturally good, wouldn't feeling and expressing gratitude come naturally?

And then there is the historical record. Evils -- huge evils affecting much of the human race -- have been the norm.

Here goes, just a few examples:

The Ottoman Turks targeted millions of Armenian Christians for death during World War I.

The German Nazi regime murdered six million Jews -- two out of every three European Jews, including more than a million children and babies.

The Soviet Communist regime slaughtered about five million Ukrainians and about 25 million other innocents.

The Chinese Communists killed about 70 million Chinese and enslaved the rest of the Chinese people.

The North Korean Communist regime has built what one can only call the world's largest concentration camp -- most of North Korea.

In post-colonial Congo in the decade between 1998 and 2008, over 5 million people were murdered, and tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of women, were raped.

Of course before that, about ten million Africans were kidnapped and made slaves in the European slave trade. And another 10 to 18 million Africans were enslaved by Arab slave traders.

And, let me ask you this, if people are basically good, why does every civilization have so many laws to control human behavior?

Knowing all this, those who believe that people are basically good have simply made a decision to believe that and ignore all the evidence.

Why do people commit evil? Because it's easy to. Because it's tempting to. And, yes, because it often accords with human nature.

That is why figuring out how to make good people is the single most important project in all of human life. But first, you have to believe it's necessary.

I'm Dennis Prager.