

# **Confronting Bad Trouble**

*Notes on Harm and Help*

By

**Eugene N. Anderson**

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# Preface

In the past 250 years, the United States and the world have progressed enormously in economic development, science, understanding people, and, not least, moral philosophy. Yet war, genocide, and crime are as pervasive as ever, and the environment is in far worse shape than even 20 years ago.

The disconnect between rising good and rising bad trouble grows greater every day. The morning news brings tales of medical breakthroughs, improvements in food production, and new proposals for peace and cooperation, along with the steady drumroll of deaths from war, crime, easily preventable disease, political corruption, and sheer cruelty.

At present, after its 250-year experiment with democracy and freedom, the United States has joined countries in abandoning these Enlightenment virtues and voting in a fascistic government echoing Hitler's Germany. Only massive and concerted political action can save the United States and many other countries from totalitarian rule involving elimination of all opposition and ultimately full-scale genocide. The United States may join Germany, Italy, Spain, the USSR, China, Cambodia, Rwanda, Nigeria, Sudan, and many other countries in enduring extremist autocracies.

The obvious immediate goal of this book is to stop that, and stimulate action to oppose the rapid descent into totalitarianism and possible mass murder. However, I have gone well beyond opposition. I want to understand why humans oscillate between loving, caring peace and crazed bloodshed. Few societies and no long-established nations have avoided these swings. We can learn from the rise to peace and order

from originally violent societies in Scandinavia and Switzerland. We can learn from the descent into hell of formerly—and now once again—peaceful societies in Germany, Rwanda, Cambodia, and other nations.

There was, once, an opposition between relatively liberal politics based on government working for the general welfare by supplying public goods, and conservative politics of small government, free markets, and fiscal responsibility. The latter has now effectively died. Conservative politics today is based on huge and often repressive governments. The free market is replaced by subsidization of favored firms and interests. Personal freedom is replaced by surveillance and repression of dissent, and operations to control people at home and abroad. This evolution has taken place not only in the United States, but in supposedly socialist societies like China and Venezuela, theocratic and religious societies in the Middle East, democratic societies in Europe, and, in short, in all types of societies worldwide.

At this writing, democracy is in danger. Autocratic regimes have taken over more and more countries, often voted in by citizens making a clear choice between freedom and harsh tyranny. The United States, once the bastion of democracy, voted for Donald Trump. His gray eminence, Elon Musk, openly and vocally supported the German neo-Nazi party and other extremist groups. Trump's acolytes indulged in fantastic conspiracy theories.

The back story is the long history of increasingly extreme lies, generated by politicians, but above all by giant corporations whose heads feel they are losing by progress and science. They set up a smoke screen of lies to protect themselves. The concept goes back to ancient times, but it received a sort of blessing when Hitler's minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, discoursed at length on the Big Lie.

In the United States, the tobacco industry and the pesticide corporations initially extended ordinary deceptive stories in vast public campaigns. The Big Lies reached intense levels when the giant fossil fuel companies began, around 1970, to deny global warming and global climate change. This was sheer self-protection. After them, companies from Big Pharma to real estate to insurance to food production all piled on, leaving the world with little hope of distinguishing honesty from lies. This has undermined trust, and allowed every sort of hateful lie—racism, religious bigotry, all the classics—to run rampant. After Elon Musk opened his social media site X to such material, Trump celebrated it as “freedom of speech,” and Mark Zuckerberg took Meta and thus Facebook down into the same channel. This book explores the reasons for this increasing disconnect.

I have followed existing research on such problems. I have found explanations to be inadequate. I thus draw on my own experience, including travel in 70 countries, conducting research on human ecology and social behavior in a dozen of them. Much of my analysis in this book is original, based on those experiences.

I was born in Washington, DC. My first political memory is of Victory in Europe Day in 1945. I was four years old. My mother’s excitement at the news was so wonderfully dramatic that I never forgot the moment. We moved to Nebraska when I was six, and to southern California when I was 14. In school I was routinely bullied—no more or less than was normal in those days, but it taught me the basics of human evil. The bullying could get serious; one mentally challenged boy I knew finally cracked under the continual attacks he received, and went on a rampage, killing several people, including a whole family of former neighbors of mine (this was after I had left Nebraska).

By 14 I learned to fight hard enough to maintain myself, after which I was bullied no more.

I wound up being an anthropologist specializing in human ecology. I carried out field work in Hong Kong, Penang, and Singapore, working on fisheries development. On those Asian waterfronts 50 to 60 years ago, I rubbed shoulders with gangsters, smugglers, refugees, pirates, drifters, and adventurous characters of all kinds. I never had a serious problem, but I was in a position to learn a great deal about tough living. I encountered some intolerance and name-calling, but mostly hospitality, help, cooperation, support, and above all friendship. The experiences were rich and intense.

I then shifted attention for several years to the Northwest Coast of North America, originally to study fisheries, but later to study, as well, alcoholism and drug abuse treatment and rehabilitation. I studied art and myth, trying to understand how traditional Indigenous cultures had coped with their environment. I worked with Indigenous people, again finding friendship and help (Anderson and Pierotti 2022), but learning also about private hells.

I then moved to research with the Maya people of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, spending a total of two years spread over three decades in that wonderful world. The Maya were friendly, supportive, and plain good decent folk. I am still enmeshed in Maya families that adopted me. In the meantime, I wandered, tried to work out my life, changed direction many times, and never came to a conclusion. I have five children, five grandchildren, and more godchildren than I can count, spread over several countries.

Yet another career change led to this book. I met my wife Barbara through her research on Cambodian refugees from genocide. She had worked with them as a public health nurse and teacher in Thailand

and California. We traveled in Cambodia in 1999, where we encountered the full panoply of monuments to war and genocide, as well as a nation where post-traumatic stress disorder was a normal condition. Deciding to work on this most desperate and horrible of issues, we produced three books and several smaller writings on genocide (Anderson and Anderson 2013, 2020, 2022; see section below on “Genocide”). We learned how to predict when and where genocide would happen. In publishing our predictive findings, we were “scooped” by veteran conflict worker Barbara Harff (2012), who found the same risk factors and predictable moments that we had. We were happy enough to be anticipated, since she had been working harder and longer on the issue; she deserved the priority. Her writings had good effect.

I continued into the depths of human bad action, with the results now before you. I have tried to lay the groundwork for a very rough model of the common ground of human malevolence. The first part of the book lays out some tentative but fairly solid groundwork for constructing such a model, and outlines the construction of it. The second part applies it, with appropriate modifications and additions, to common problems that are somewhat predictable by use of it; these are especially prejudice, genocide, and funding murderous actions. The third part details some standard cures that have been tried over time and have sometimes worked. We still need true, stable solutions.

Though this book has a long bibliography, most of the important statements in it are from my home and field experience, not from the literature. Thus, when you run into a statement unsupported by a strong of references, it comes from my field research (see also our books on genocide). Going into the endless details of where and how I came to particular conclusions would be unbearably tedious, so I let



the bald statements stand unless they run so far against conventional wisdom that they require more evidence.

I have had to be highly selective to make this book short enough to be readable. The most obvious thing I have done is to omit the long and graphic accounts of war, genocide, crime, and other violence that fill most such books. I avoid these for good reasons. They distract from the serious messages. They give a falsely lurid picture of evil, much of which is, as Hannah Arendt famously said, banal—“terribly and terrifyingly normal” (as quoted by Smeulders, 2024). They are covered in countless easily available books. Most important of all, they are as close as your daily newspaper, TV show, or media feed. They need no additional publicity.

After that, I have seen fit to focus on what seem to me particularly revealing issues, that provide special insight into human bads. These are prejudice, group hate, genocide, and the funding that supports all three. By contrast, I admit to being summary on war, which is far too complex to deal with here, and is very often defensive and thus morally ambiguous. I am similarly short on individual murder. I barely deal with indirect killing, by such means as tobacco, junk food, cuts to housing budgets, refusal to fund medical care, and the like. These are too simple in basic motive: someone wants to make money. Greed in general is discussed, but its effects are skimped. I cite enough literature to allow readers to follow up on these matters.

I have interspersed many quotes. Some are from available literature, but most are accumulated proverbs that I heard during a long lifetime, and that have stuck with me. They remain undocumented, as they must.

Most important of all is a discussion of what this book is *not*. It is not a contribution to moral philosophy or anthropology; it is strictly a

beginning attempt to lay out a basic model for human malevolent action. I am not laying out a sustained moral analysis of any kind here. (I have addressed moral philosophy more seriously in Anderson and Anderson 2022. For moral anthropology, see Fassin and Leze 2013; Mattingly and Throop 2018. They are studying moral systems from an anthropological point of view.)

I am not proposing a complete or definitive model of human bad actions, let alone anything as complex as war or hatred. I am simply trying to find common ground in human malevolent activities. This has proved to be not only possible but quite straightforward in the case of genocide, where several analyses from several approaches converged on a simple predictive model of when genocide can be expected to occur (Anderson and Anderson 2013; Harff 2012; Nyseth Brehm 2017; Staub 1989, 2011).

I am not, sadly, doing a real anthropological cross-cultural study of human bad actions. I wish I had the time. But it would take decades of research, and a publication the size of the Encyclopedia Britannica. As an anthropologist, I am acutely aware that each person, situation, and culture is different from every other one. Even so, we all need food and water, shelter and healing. Every culture has its own foodways, but must include guidelines for providing an adequate diet. We also have a life and death need for control over our lives. It is the issue of control that most often divides and embitters us.

All I can ask, with all my heart, is that readers of this work will go on to work on more thorough predictive models of when evil occurs, and how to stop it when it does.

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I am grateful to literally thousands of people I met in my long and checkered career who taught me so much about human good and evil.

## **Part I**

### **Sources of Bad Trouble**

# Chapter 1

## Two Wolves and a Declining World

*People are naturally prone to both good and evil: cooperative good will, but also fear, anger, and hate.*

### **The Two Wolves**

“My son, everyone has two wolves inside them. One is a good wolf, courageous and social, always trying to protect and help. One is a bad wolf, always trying to hurt, destroy, and harm. And you too have those wolves within you.”

“Father, that’s scary. Which wolf wins out?”

“The one you feed.”

This folktale, allegedly Native American but somewhat unclear in origin, summarizes my book. Every human is basically social, inclined to help, care, and act well toward others. Every human is capable of hatred and antisocial action. The good wolf is our rational, helping, cooperative side. The bad wolf takes over when emotions of hatred and violence overwhelm us, and we act from destructive overreactions and cruel passions.

Most of the time, we do minor and ordinary things: working for a living, taking care of the family and household, eating and sleeping. Most of these are good in that they are what we need to do to keep ourselves and those around us as well off as is reasonably possible. Sometimes we rise to heights of goodness and self-sacrifice, such as helping neighbors in a flood or fire.

This ordinary, everyday goodness is typical of all humans everywhere. Thomas Hobbes, writing during the chaotic violence of the English Civil War (1642-51), claimed that the “life of natural man” is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes 1950 [1651]:104). Hobbes was, however, not describing a real creature. He was describing the “savage” of European folklore, equivalent to the Bigfoot, Sasquatch, or Yeti of other lands. This creature never existed, nor did anything like it. All higher primates are social, the great apes especially so. Our line has been social for over 50 million years. “Natural men,” assuming Hobbes meant people in small-scale societies, are as good and bad, as social and problematic, as anyone else.

“Social” does not always mean “good.” The violence that Hobbes saw in the Civil War was highly structured and socialized. It was an integral part of the rise of the nation-state. Similar periods of social violence are older than humanity; our relatives the chimpanzees have their own small versions.

“Good,” in the present book, means anything that helps people and the world at large. Minimally, it can mean all those daily activities that are necessary and basically harmless.

“Evil” is herein defined simply as gratuitous harm. I use “bad trouble” and “bad action” as synonyms. It means harming, or planning to harm, people or animals for reasons that would never stand up to rational analysis or in a court of fair law. I am *not* using the word to mean things that are religiously condemned, let alone things that are shuddery, dismal, religiously unclean, or otherwise “evil” in the sense of Gothic novels and Charles Addams’ satirical cartoons.

Tolerance can be extended to any and all attempts at the good, though when they misfire and unexpectedly do harm they must be stopped. Tolerance of evil, on the other hand, is tolerance carried too far.

We like to think of two wolves, or an angel and a devil, in us, but the truth is that good and evil are inextricably intertwined in our daily lives. Evil leaps out when we overreact at a slight or imagined slight, when we fume over not getting our way, when we lose control of anger at a child.

Human societies in general have always had similar rates of war and murder to modern ones, if archaeology, history, and ethnography are any guide. Societies—both small-scale and large—range from extremely peaceful to extremely violent, with most societies somewhere in the middle. This applies to the simplest and to the most complex societies.

## **The Problem**

All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.

Edmund Burke

Since I was young in the 1940s and 1950s, medicine has been revolutionized. We can save lives from countless conditions that were hopeless then. We have vaccines against the dreaded polio, and against the chickenpox, measles, and mumps that I could not avoid in my youth. We have disinfectants and antibiotics that can control almost any germ. Yet life expectancy is not much longer, and declined in the United States for several years, hitting a low point in 2022 (Rabin 2022). This was partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to suicide, drug deaths, and other “deaths of despair” (Case and

Deaton 2020). We are facing new epidemics of infectious disease, because more and more people irrationally distrust vaccination.

More: we are facing our own inner demons. Troy Tassier, in *The Rich Flee and the Poor Take the Bus* (2024), shows that while we now have masks, vaccines, sanitation, epidemiologists, public health experts, and all the blessings of science, our responses to the COVID-19 epidemic were about the same as responses to epidemics since ancient Greece. Panic, denial, and leaving the poor to die, as the Trump administration and many other governments did worldwide, are standard throughout history.

Diplomacy, understanding of conflict resolution, and ideologies of peace have all advanced. Yet, war is as common as ever, and practiced with the most advanced technology we can create—often far in advance of the technology used to help people. Nations are willing and eager to spend thousands of dollars on a drone to knock out one “enemy” leader. International medical aid and famine relief get a tiny fraction of the funding spent on militaries.

We have since made enormous progress economically, but the distribution is now worse than ever, so poverty continues. Progress has benefited largely the rich. The poor have often been displaced from productive farms to indigence in the cities, perhaps making more money nominally, but living far less well (Davis 2017, and my own studies). They find they must pay for what they got free by subsistence activities before. They lose security, safety, and the ability to rely on their own enterprise. The cheery claims that incomes have increased in most of the world in the last few decades ignore this enormously important fact.

The world was facing mass famine in the 1950s, as food production lagged and population growth skyrocketed. Since then, agriculture



has been transformed by countless amazing technical innovations. Education and availability of birth control have ended the population boom except in remote areas. Food scholarship, awareness of food and nutrition, and understanding of foodways are far ahead of the situation in the 1950s. We could easily feed the world. In fact, the food that is wasted worldwide is enough to eliminate world hunger. Yet there are as many hungry people as ever. Famine still occurs widely. Governments do not take action. Many actively want the victims to die (Devereux 2007; Howard-Hasmann 2016).

Since the 1950s, moral philosophy has leaped forward. John Rawls, Christine Korsgaard, Peter Singer, Jonathan Haidt, and countless more have made us far more aware of moral problems and what we can do about them. Yet, by common consent, civility and morality in politics in the US are at their lowest ebb in history. Nor are they doing well worldwide. Normally, common sense, morality, and peer pressure once kept civil society going. They are no longer adequate.

Since 1950, psychological science has changed profoundly. Psychotherapy has changed so much that one can almost say it went from fond hope to full science. Yet we have 500,000 homeless persons in the United States, most of them psychologically challenged and untreated. Some 10% to 20% of the population of the United States encounter mental health problems. Treatment is widely unavailable. Instead, the homeless receive censure, victim-blaming, and humiliation.

We have eliminated slavery from most of the world, reduced torture, and created local pockets of peace. We have made treaties and funded the United Nations. Yet slavery still exists, worldwide.

After World War II, genocide was recognized. Societies around the world moved to condemn it. Yet, genocides are as common and

violent as ever. Genocide—deliberate mass murder of innocent people by their own government—is one extreme of evil, yet it continues unchecked in several countries, with full American backing in key cases.

In 1945, we of the free world believed we had eliminated fascism. In the 1950s, resurgent fascism in the form of McCarthyism had a devastating effect on the US. (People now forget that McCarthy's support was heavily derived from people who supported Hitler in the 1930s.) Other fascist movements grew in other countries. McCarthyism soon died, and we hoped freedom had prevailed.

Today, a far more deadly fascist movement exists worldwide. By 2025, dozens of countries were under totalitarian regimes of one sort or another. The European Union in parliamentary elections in 2024 voted in a number of outright fascists, and a larger number of far-right nationalists. Germany, after almost 80 years, elected a neo-Nazi government in Thuringia in 2024. Italy elected a far-right Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni. At a time when global climate change is adding to pollution, loss of farmland, and deforestation, all the right-wing politicians were anti-environment as well as intolerant and prejudiced. The future of the EU is dark.

In the United States, the MAGA pro-Trump movement is continuous with the pro-Hitler and pro-McCarthy movements. Some of the same people are still active, and many of their descendants are leading the cause. The Coors (Bellant 1990), Koch (Mayer 2016), Regnery (Mathias 2021), and Trump (Neuborne 2019) families all have histories going back to support for Hitler.

Worldwide, the liberal ideas of the Enlightenment are being massively rejected. In the United States, support for such liberal causes as gun control has gone down. Bias against minorities is at least as bad as ever

(Mastroianni and Dana 2022). Attitudes across the board are back to those of the 1920s. The right-wing *Project 2025* (Dans and Groves 2024) actually revived many of the economic, social, and cultural positions of the 1920s that led directly to the Great Depression, from deregulating primary-production and financial firms to minimalist medical, family, and justice policies. Worse, this project revives many of Hitler's ideas on economy, society, and religion from the 1930s, and even explicitly returns us to the very conditions that the Founding Fathers rebelled against in 1776—including established Christian religion, and rule by men (males) rather than by law.

Also serious is a worldwide decline of the free press. Journalism is at a low ebb. Newspapers are closing constantly. Local papers barely exist. The number of pages and the quality of reporting in major surviving ones goes constantly down. We are less and less informed about the more and more serious events in the world. Full censorship is common worldwide. China and other nations have perfected surveillance; it is possible to pick up almost any banned word or phrase put online.

In 1950, Israel had just been created, taking over much of Palestine, and beginning a process of driving out Palestinians. Even so, Jews and non-Jews very often had the highest hopes: Israel would bring freedom, democracy, tolerance, and high ideals to the Middle East. Since then, the opposite has happened. Israel has become more and more like a typical Middle Eastern state: theocratic, intolerant, murderous.

In 1950, the Soviet Union was threatening nuclear war against the world. The USSR collapsed in 1989, and the world hoped for the triumph of the good. Today, Russia is warring against Ukraine and threatening nuclear war again. India was and is torn by hatred between Hindus and Muslims. It was only the largest of a vast number

of colonies that were liberated in and after 1948. Hopes that they would thrive, flourish, and become democratic were widespread. Some have done so. Tyrannical governments and growth that benefits only predatory elites are far more common.

Political science and practice have made vast strides. Yet conflicts go on. Many or most are the *same* old time-worn conflicts. New ones arise while the old ones go unresolved.

This is true also in economics. Economic science has progressed. We can cheaply solve the world's major problems: famine, epidemics, economic depressions. We do not make the effort. Deregulation of giant firms, and consequent cartels, cheating, and bad practice, has returned us to the economic chaos of the 1890s and 1920s. Wages are driven down to the point at which ordinary working people must resort to charity. The results in those decades were the horrific depressions of the 1890s and 1930s. The same will occur in the near future, if we continue to fail to apply the lessons we learned in those times.

The situation in regard to the environment is even worse (Sutton and Anderson 2024). Science has found out what is wrong and what to do, but we face ever-swifter degradation of the environment. The threats to fresh water from pollution and overdraft were obvious by 1950. They are far worse now. Forests were rapidly disappearing. They now disappear faster than ever. All tropical forests will be gone before 2100, at current rates of cut. Fisheries (other than aquaculture) are rapidly winding down. It now costs more to catch fish than the fish are worth, but governments continue subsidizing the hunt for this source of quality protein (Heffernan 2024). Fish reserves and catch limits show what could be done. There is no excuse for wiping out the world's fisheries. But there is almost no hope of significant wild-caught fisheries surviving another 40 years.

Urbanization and desertification are claiming vast acreages of farmland, especially of the best land. So far, expansion at the expense of forests and grasslands has made up for this, but the land thus won was needed for its original purposes.

In the 1950s, giant firms polluted the air, water, and land without penalty or restraint. Laws passed in the 1960s and 1970s did much to stop this. Today the problem is worse than ever, after courts and politicians have done everything possible to help giant polluting firms. The major environmental laws of the 1960s and 1970s are no longer adequate. Instead of being strengthened, they are threatened with repeal, or simply ignored.

In all these matters, the problem is not lack of knowledge. We could stop this. We have no lack of ability to fix the specific ills, or lack of talent to do it.

The problem is human cruelty. The rulers of the world, and far too many of their subjects, see the suffering but simply do not care. Scholars of evil, such as Simon Baron-Cohen (2011), see lack of empathy as the core problem. The sheer extent of evil over time is beyond description. Enormously long books have recorded an endless rank of mass murders, rapes, lootings, wars, genocides, and deliberate famines, all against a background of constant injustice, oppression, and cruelty.

The present book is in dialogue with earlier attempts to deal with human evil, in the sense I use the word: gratuitous harm. Among these are Simon Baron-Cohen's *Zero Degrees of Empathy* (2011); Bartlett's *The Pathology of Man: A Study of Human Evil* (2005); Roy Baumeister's *Evil: Inside Human Cruelty and Violence* (1996); Aaron Beck's *Prisoners of Hate* (1999); Ben Kiernan's *Blood and Soil* (2007); and Martin Shaw's and Erwin Staub's studies of genocide (Shaw 2013; Staub 1989, 2003). All

these books recount stories of humans being gratuitously cruel to other humans. Often, it appears that there is no reason beyond the sheer pleasure of hurting them. I have sought deeper, and find that humans, at least most humans, are not that evil; there are underlying forces behind malevolence. We need to do more to seek these out.

Cruelty has escalated in the last 30 years, causing at least one writer, Edward Luce, to title his book *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (Luce 2017). Enlightenment values—the classic “liberty, equality, and fraternity” as well as rational decision-making, science, learning, and the arts—are openly and vocally rejected by many countries today, including the United States under its current administration. Any morning paper or TV news adds to the tale of worsening violence and political cruelty.

Claims that things were worse in the past, such as Steven Pinker’s book *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011) do not hold up. They exaggerate the deaths in the past. They notoriously cherry-pick the most murderous and warlike of small-scale societies, ignoring the peaceable ones (Fry 2013). They also undercount modern mass murder. They avoid dealing with the millions of deaths caused by deliberate huckstering of tobacco and dangerous drugs. They avoid dealing with deliberate mass starvation (Howard-Hasmann 2016) and the full toll of genocide and war, which always cause many deaths beyond the recorded casualty figures. Claims that things were better in the past also fail. War, mass murder, deliberate famine, and looting fill the pages of history. Tranquil regimes, which occur throughout history and prehistory, show what could be done; the rest of the world shows what is not done.

Why do the politics of fear and hate so often outsell messages of well-being and progress? The answers to this question are complex and deep.

Philip Zimbardo assigned his Stanford students to play jailer and prisoner. Within a week, things got out of hand, with the jailers abusing the prisoners to a dangerous level. The experiment had to be stopped, and ethical standards now forbid repetitions. However, much more mild but similar studies show the same results: people in positions of power, especially over “guilty” or “unworthy” victims, will routinely abuse their power in horrific ways (Zimbardo 2008). Critiques of the study—it was not perfect by any means—led to further research, which found that Zimbardo’s results were all too typical. Many of the critics hoped to find him wrong. The restudies found the reality to be often worse.

Not only jails and prisons, but even children’s homes, residential schools, and eldercare facilities, are in the news every day for brutal and cruel treatment of inmates. Irish homes for unwed mothers are a classic example of institutions that should be good but were snake pits; they were abolished in 1970 (Wesson 2022). “In the United States, people living in long-term care facilities make up less than 1 percent of the country’s population, yet this same population accounted for at least 35 percent of COVID-19 deaths. About 8 percent of people—one out of every twelve—in long-term care facilities in the United States died from COVID-19 in the first year of the pandemic” (Tassier 2024:107-08). This was due to neglect and indifference, not inability to fix the situation.

Common decency, civility, kindness, and help are still universally present and admired. Most people are good most of the time. Why, then, do societies crash into war and genocide so easily and so often?

Proposals for an ideal world continue to appear. They are persuasive and convincing. Such utopian books appear every year or so, going back to Thomas More’s original *Utopia* in 1516. None ever fulfills its intent.

Most have forgotten James Madison: “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary...the great difficulty lies in this, you must first enable the government to control the governed, and in the next place oblige it to control itself” (Madison, *Federalist*, #51, in Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *The Federalist*, many editions; this quote from Hamilton et al. 1961). Men are difficult to manage.

Madison’s cure—distributed and balanced power—is brilliantly argued in that article, enough to have convinced the Founding Fathers. Up to the present, it actually saved the United States from meltdown. It still appears to be the best single way for governments to cope. Unfortunately, it is no longer adequate. Madison’s point—that humans are a contentious, refractory, and often angry lot—remains as problematical as it was in his time. Most dangerous is the common situation in which enemies of government take over, turning an institution at least theoretically dedicated to peace into a murder machine. Madison dreaded political parties, for this very reason. They soon arose, and we live with them, but they make trouble when contention gets out of hand.

Every generation thinks the one rising anew, its successor generation, is morally declining. A fascinating recent article by Adam Mastroianni and Daniel Gilbert (2023) cites literature from ancient Egypt onward. There is no evidence that our, or the next, generations are any worse, but what is clear is that less than ideal people have seized power in too many countries, regions, and corporations. The basic message of 2024 is *all the good we have done in the last 250 years have failed to change anything basic in human society, and humanity is now at total existential risk from the forces of evil.*



## The Wolves Are Equal

“Were one to go round the world with the intention of giving a good supper to the righteous and a sound drubbing to the wicked, he would frequently be embarrassed in his choice, and would find that the merits of most men [and women] scarcely amount to the value of either.”

David Hume (1992:34)

Experience, history, and psychology reveal the basic truth of the two wolves: almost everyone is a mix of good and evil tendencies. Specifically, the vast majority of humans are usually cooperative and friendly within their own social groups; wary but friendly and outgoing with strangers; and hostile to rivals, especially rival groups. They are also easily angered by slights or imagined slights within their own groups, but often take out the resulting aggressions on the rivals. This observation is the basis for the rest of the present book.

There is a bell curve distribution: a few saints, a few totally evil sinners (psychopaths, hyperaggressive persons, sadists), and a vast majority in between. There is not much bunching up around the average. We are nice most of the time, but often complaining and sour, often angry at our families and friends, occasionally violent, and all too easily aroused to mass violence.

The relative triumph of the bad wolf does not usually mean that good people suddenly become evil. It means that social pressure—the commonest “food” of the wolves—can make a person shift about 10% along the spectrum. Good people become compromised. Swings who normally act for good begin to act for bad as they shift from 55% to 45% good in their intentions and ideologies. Evil people shift from being schoolyard bullies and mild abusers to being torturers in prison camps and genociders in conflict. Shifts greater than about 10% may

occur in extreme dictatorships, but otherwise they often involve some mental problem, up to and including the onset of schizophrenia. Conversely, powerful mentoring by precept and example can make bad people better, often very much better. Conversion stories, not only religious but also quite secular (Kruglansky et al. 2019), imply that the good wolf can be triumphant, turning serious offenders into good citizens. This may be fairly rare, but it is certainly a hopeful comment on the human species.

Thus, as Kurt Gray reminds us in *Outraged* (2025:216), people love to label “villains” and “victims,” but life is not so simple. Many a victim becomes a villain as a result of the victimization. Many a villain is victimized. Above all, most of us are sometimes one, sometimes the other.

Judging from behaviors such as religious activity and voting patterns worldwide, one can rely on about 10% of the public being basically very good, 10% very bad, 20% generally good and 20% generally less so, and 40% of us in the middle. A character in one of Kurt Vonnegut’s novels has it right: “She was asked what she had learned from the Holocaust, and she said she learned that 10 percent of any population is cruel, no matter what, and that 10% is merciful, no matter what, and the remaining 80 percent could be moved in either direction.” (From Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library posting, <https://www.facebook.com/VonnegutLibrary/posts/10154234615650209>, retrieved March 30, 2020.)

This is most clear in free democracies with varied populations and ideologies. A reliable 50% will vote for candidates that promise cruelty and oppression to whatever groups are unpopular, while 50% will vote for candidates who advocate peace and tolerance. The balance of Trump vs. Biden and later Trump vs. Harris in the United

States is similar to the Bolsonaro vote in Brazil, the first (and most free) set of votes for Orban in Hungary, and many others.

Sociologists have found that people will believe the most outrageous lies if it matters in choosing a candidate to vote for. This apparently was critical to Trump's victory in 2024 (Cohen and Schwalbe 2024)—not to say the Democrats were totally factual, but Trump was more outrageous. It is notable that the Republicans really offered little.

Large, heterogeneous societies show rather rare murder, constant low-level violence (physically punishing children, bullying, and the like), and wild outbreaks of mass murder every 10 to 100 years, when wars or genocides happen. At such times, people often change from the most peaceable and gentle of souls to crazed killers who not only slay but torture, rape, and humiliate to the maximum extent possible. It is only a few small, homogeneous societies that can be always peaceful or always violent. The others are remarkably faithful to the pattern.

We are also highly emotional animals. Emotion is deeper than cognition, and often more imperative (Zajonc 1980). Sheer fear is impossible to ignore, and difficult to fight down. Anger can easily get out of control.

There is a famous saying that “laws are passed by the 90% to restrain the 10%.” This is true for laws against wanton murder and robbery. The figures, of course, are vague, but at least not far from what the records of crime and serious abuse show. About 90% of us are willing to live by minimal common-sense rules, but 10% are irredeemable because of major mental or background issues.

This is true, however, only for the most serious laws. More humdrum, everyday laws are passed by a much smaller percentage, to restrain

the 100%. These are general safety rules of driving, public health, using dangerous chemicals, and so forth. They are needed in a densely-packed, diverse society where order requires such picky but vital matters as 15 mph school zones, nutrient-labeled foods, masks in surgery, and disclosure clauses for house sales. Common sense underlies them, but they must be exactly specified to keep the traffic flowing and the economy functioning.

The human norm is sociability. The few exceptions are clearly not normal people; we call them psychopaths or sociopaths. Many such people show evident damage to the brain, and most have rough and harsh backgrounds.

On the other hand, totally good people are rare enough to be called “saints,” and many of the saints of the church do not bear very close inspection. Individuals who are always proactively helpful, kind, and generous do exist, but not in great numbers. This is at least partly because they get so little recognition in contrast to the grand rogues—the mass murderers, psychopathic political leaders, warmongers, and their ilk.

Compared to other animals, we are relatively peaceful as individuals, but far more murderous at the group level. Few animals kill as groups, and those few kill only a few neighbors. We kill hundreds of millions in senseless wars and genocides, and do it with a level of torture, sadism, and systematic cruelty not remotely approached by any other species. (See Alvarez and Bachman 2016; Collins 2008).

Finally, to clear away the brush: “Human nature” may not exist at all. What we think and do is largely the result of cultural traditions and current contexts. I will argue below that we are typical mammals in basic drives and desires, but cultures so heavily influence our behaviors and choices that we cannot expect uniformity.

Among the things we have learned from anthropology and psychology, we can say conclusively that humans are not creatures of rational self-interest. We deploy rationality for emotional goals and to achieve pan-mammalian ends. We are not innately selfish or greedy, but cultural and local influences often make us so. We are violence-prone, but can control it, and usually do. We did not evolve as bloody-minded hunters, but as omnivorous foragers, peacefully seeking vegetable foods most of the time. And the hunter societies are no more warlike than the vegetable-dependent ones—less warlike, if anything.

Also, anthropology teaches us that in all things, people go with their culture: first with the ideas and values they were raised with, then with what seems “cool” and “new” within that universe.

Thomas Hobbes wrote when little was known about the world at large. Explorers had noted the peaceful and democratic nature of many “uncivilized” groups around the world by his time, but he had not read them. Hobbes, like Xunzi, Kautilya, and Machiavelli, was apparently an idealist at heart, deeply disappointed by what he saw of humanity, and hoping against hope that “reason” would save us when basic decency was not doing the job.

Sigmund Freud was another excessively cynical thinker, convinced that our true inner nature is the violent, sexualized, antisocial Id. Contrary to Freud and many thinkers of his time, we are not the product of crudely repressed dark forces barely submerged by social convention. Nor do we live for war and loot. Contrary to some anthropologists and postmodernists, we do have inborn predispositions—but they can go either way, toward help or harm, depending on circumstances, and they are shared with all mammals.

In fact, we are neither Hobbesian savages nor Rousseau’s peaceful, virtuous ones. (Incidentally, Rousseau never said we were “noble

savages,” contrary to a persistent myth. His “savage” was the chimpanzee, which he knew was a quite violent animal. See Rousseau n.d., pp. 78-80.) We oscillate between violence and peace, depending on social contexts. Those who have seen humans as innately good, kind, and even illuminated by the Divine Light include humanity’s greatest teachers, but they cannot explain the long and horrible record of human evil. Vague resorts to “sin” and “filthy lucre” are not enough.

Our drives have animal roots, but the ways we go about satisfying them are many and various, and the drives lead us in both social and antisocial directions. On these issues, there is a huge literature. In philosophy, it is identified with the more ordinary philosophers, neither saints nor rogues—people like Montaigne, Locke, Hume, and Kant. In modern psychology and anthropology, which has finally come to a good consensus, details remain to be resolved, but again there are reasonably ordinary minds that have dealt realistically with the problem, seeing humanity as a mix (see e.g. Anderson and Anderson 2020, 2022; Bandura 1982; Baumeister 1996; Beck 1999; Boyd and Richerson 2005; Henrich 2016; Richerson and Boyd 2005; Tomasello 2016).

## Good and Evil Defined and Refined

“Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”

David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, p. 462.

In the present book, good includes anything that people do to help others, or to help themselves without costing anyone else. This very wide definition can include truly selfish behavior so long as it hurts no one. It might be better to have everyone help everyone else all the