

TOPIC OF THE WEEK

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Can a human be evil?

Chatgpt's Responds:

People have struggled with that question for thousands of years, because it forces us to decide **what we mean by a human being**.

There are three major ways of answering it.

1. Yes — some humans are evil

In ordinary language, we often call certain people evil because their actions seem deliberately cruel, destructive, or indifferent to suffering.

History gives many examples that many feel justify the word:

- Adolf Hitler
- Joseph Stalin

Here, “evil” names not just isolated acts but a **pattern of willing harm**.

This view assumes:

A person can become so committed to destruction that “evil” describes the person, not only the behaviour.

It satisfies moral outrage — it recognises that some harms feel beyond ordinary wrongdoing.

2. No — only actions can be evil

Many philosophers and psychologists resist calling *people* evil.

Thinkers like Hannah Arendt argued that terrible acts are often carried out by disturbingly ordinary individuals — not demons, but people who stop thinking critically or morally.

On this view:

- Humans remain morally complex.
- Actions may be evil.
- Persons remain capable of change.

Calling someone evil can even be dangerous because it turns them into something **inhuman**, which can then be used to justify further harm.

So the claim becomes:

Evil describes what people do, not what they are.

3. Humans can participate in evil

A middle position — found in many religious and existential traditions — says:

A human is **never pure evil**,
but humans can *align themselves with evil*.

The 20th-century psychologist Carl Jung spoke of the *shadow*: the capacity for cruelty, domination, or indifference that exists in everyone.

Evil, then, is not a special category of monster.
It is a **human possibility**.

That idea is unsettling because it removes distance:

The line between good and evil runs through every person.

A difficult implication

If humans *are* evil by nature, hope becomes hard to justify.
If humans are *incapable* of evil, responsibility disappears.

Most mature moral systems end up somewhere in between:

Humans are capable of evil without being reducible to it.

A question that often follows naturally is this:

Do you feel the word *evil* helps us understand human behaviour —
Or does it sometimes stop understanding by ending the conversation too quickly?

Is evil a misused word?

Yes, many thinkers would say “**evil**” is one of the most powerful and most misused words we have.

But *why* it is misused matters.

1. The word carries moral finality

When we call something *evil*, we usually mean more than:

- wrong
- harmful
- unjust
- cruel

We mean:

This stands outside what should be humanly acceptable.

The problem is that the word often **ends inquiry** instead of deepening it.

Once someone is labelled evil:

- Explanation can feel like an excuse,
- Understanding can feel like betrayal,
- Complexity disappears.

Philosopher Hannah Arendt worried about exactly this — that calling perpetrators “evil monsters” prevents us from seeing how ordinary conditions, obedience, fear, or ideology allow harm to spread.

2. It is often used emotionally rather than analytically

In everyday speech, *evil* frequently means:

- “I strongly condemn this”
- “This horrifies me”

- “This threatens what I value”

So the word becomes a **signal of moral shock**, not a careful description.

Two opposing groups may both call each other evil, which shows the word can function more as a **weapon** than a diagnosis.

3. Yet abandoning the word feels wrong

Despite misuse, many resist giving it up.

After events like genocide, torture, or deliberate cruelty toward the vulnerable, people feel that words like *mistake* or *crime* are too small.

Thinkers such as Immanuel Kant spoke of *radical evil* — acts where people knowingly treat others purely as means, not as persons.

Here, *evil* tries to name something real:

harm chosen with awareness of its wrongness.

4. The tension

So we live with a paradox:

- **Used too easily**, the word oversimplifies and dehumanises.
- **Used too cautiously**, it risks minimising profound moral horror.

The misuse is often not that the word exists —
But it is applied **too quickly, too broadly, or too comfortably to others and rarely to ourselves**.