

Free will and morality in east of eden novel

Philosophy



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East of Eden: Reasoning With Perspectives

There is no such thing as Good or Evil. Although society may deem certain acts unacceptable, all choices are simply based on reasoning and perspective. What is good to one person is bad to another. For example, if you purposefully take someone's life but only to save yourself and another from the same fate, does that make you a bad person? The novel, "East of Eden" written by John Steinbeck holds many underlying themes within its pages. The novel takes place in Salinas, California and mainly follows Adam Trask as he encounters characters such as Cathy, who he eventually marries, that demonstrate how power and timshel relate. The themes I will be focusing on are the question of Good vs. Evil and how our moral compass and free will ("Timshel") may change based on situation and environment. Free choice allows us as individuals to break away from a "predetermined" path while still holding onto and embracing our foundation of morals that can only be corrupted through power.

In order to create structure and a working liberal system, independent societies label some things as good and other things as evil. Our society dictates what we can and cannot do in order to keep individuals safe and make things as equal as possible regarding freedom of expression and values. These labels also allow us to question the limits of good and evil because they are always shifting based on societal needs and evolution. We are told to always do the 'right' or 'good' thing which can be confusing when all choices are based on situation and environment. If "good means a lack of self-centeredness" and "bad means [the inability] to empathize with others", don't we all show both at varying levels? No one person can be

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completely good or completely evil. We each have our own morals that keep us safe and allow us to distinguish ourselves from others. We can see this in the way we judge cultures that are different than our own. When we hear something about another culture that does not fit our definition of “ good” then we automatically assume that it is wrong, without considering that specific society’s values and morals. Good and evil are internal and perspective. They change from culture to culture, town to town, person to person and should not be judged outside of their environments. Everyone has reason and purpose behind their actions and it’s the reason that should be judged, not the action itself. This allows us to instead, look at another’s morals in comparison to the act that they are committing. Putting it into a perspective that may be more favorable than our own initial reaction.

The character that most clearly demonstrates the theme of power, choice and control in Steinbeck’s novel is Cathy Ames. Cathy is the wife of Adam Trask and a destructive and manipulative person. She has little compassion for anyone and is constantly grasping for control over all situations.

However, on the surface she appears as a gentle, beautiful and charming person. Cathy is controlled by power, and in her greed for it she hurts others, even her own husband, who she shoots in the arm before running away to join a whorehouse. This causes the reader to question what is really in control. Has power corrupted her? Is she predetermined to take this path? Or is she choosing to do these things because she simply enjoys to? It also relates to the topic of good and evil in how Steinbeck describes her.

“ I believe there are monsters born in the world to human parents... And just as there are physical monsters, can there not be mental or psychic monsters

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born? The face and body may be perfect, but if a twisted gene or a malformed egg can produce physical monsters, may not the same process produce a malformed soul?"

This quotation seems to imply that good and evil are predetermined, as it states a certain gene may have formed in a way that caused some sort of deference in the way that their brain thinks, much like how some children are born with deformities of their bodies. Studies have shown that this true. Psychopaths and sociopaths are scientifically proven to have differences in the way that their brains function and develop. But, if this is a deformity that Cathy has then we shouldn't judge her on the same standard that we do the rest of the characters in the book. The same way we wouldn't judge a test taken by a student with autism the same we would a student without. There is a disadvantage that needs to be considered, especially knowing that she has encountered traumatic events that may have been even more damaging to her psyche. These events combined with a possible mental setback may be leading causes for her greed for control.

" Power corrupts". We've all heard this before, because it's true. However, I am going to add on to this and say that " Power" without responsibility is the main cause of corruption. Without being responsible for the life you are in control of, people feel free to do what they may never do if they were. Take for example, the Lucifer experiment:

" He tested 1, 000 ordinary people [and in each pairing] one of them would be a learner, [and] one would be a teacher... Their job as teacher is to give [the learner some] material to learn. [If he] gets it right, reward. [If he] gets

it wrong, [the teacher] presses a button on a shock box..." Who will be responsible if something happens to him?" The experimenters asked. " Don't worry, I will be responsible. Continue, teacher." [The testers would say.] And the experimental question is; who would go all the way to 450 volts?... Milgram asks 40 psychiatrists, what percent of American citizens would go to the end? The psychiatrists said " only one percent, because that's sadistic behavior, and we know that only one percent of Americans are sadistic". [However] they could not have been more wrong. Two thirds [went] all the way to 450 volts."

This does not mean that 1/3rd of the people tested were inherently evil, they were all simply corrupted by the sudden gain of power and lack of responsibility. If they had been told that they would be responsible for the lives they were hurting than they would have stopped at much lower volts. This experiment demonstrates how our free will has little to do with our morals and can be easily controlled by power. Similarly there is power in uniformity and ambiguity because it strips you of all identity, changing individual morals into more of a group thinking that can be easily controlled and dangerous.

" In some cultures... they paint themselves like " Lord of the Flies." In some, they wear masks. In many, soldiers are anonymous in uniform. So this anthropologist, John Watson, found 23 cultures that had two bits of data... If they don't change their appearance, only one of eight kills, tortures or mutilates... If they change their appearance...90 percent kill, torture, and mutilate. And that's the power of anonymity."

The fact that you are no longer looked at as an individual gives freedom to act without recognition and leads people to do very bad things. Though the individual may have free will there is a safety that comes from wearing a mask that allows them the freedom to do as they please, which may not be their choice, but whoever is leading them.

There is no predetermined path that we as individuals must follow because free choice allows us to create our own. There may be certain factors that change the way we choose such as; power, ambiguity, and physical/mental differences. But our morals are governed by us alone. Good and evil are just concepts used to create unity which is different from ambiguity. We can have unity while still having our own ideas by accepting others' ways of being and seeing them as situational rather than individual. Timshel is a gift that we all are given, and being able to use it in ways that benefit ourselves and others is what we should strive for.