


“A chillingly accurate portrayal of evil—the decent person’s
guide to indecency.” —Jonathan Kellerman



the sociopath next door



1 in **25** ordinary Americans secretly has no
conscience and can do anything at all without
feeling guilty. *Who is the devil you know?*

martha stout, ph.d.

Who is the devil *you* know?

Is it your lying, cheating ex-husband?

Your sadistic high school gym teacher?

Your boss, who loves to humiliate people in meetings? The colleague who stole your idea and passed it off as her own?

In the pages of *The Sociopath Next Door*, you will realize that your ex was not just misunderstood. He's a sociopath. And your boss, teacher, and colleague? They may be sociopaths too.

We are accustomed to think of sociopaths as violent criminals, but in *The Sociopath Next Door*, Harvard psychologist Martha Stout reveals that a shocking 4 percent of ordinary people—one in twenty-five—have an often undetected mental disorder, the chief symptom of which is that that person possesses no conscience. He or she has no ability whatsoever to feel shame, guilt, or remorse. One in twenty-five everyday Americans, therefore, is secretly a sociopath. They could be your colleague, your neighbor, even family. And they can do literally anything at all and feel absolutely no guilt.

How do we recognize the remorseless? One of their chief characteristics is a kind of glow or charisma that makes sociopaths more charming or interesting than the other people around them. They're more spontaneous, more intense, more complex, or even sexier than everyone else, making them tricky to identify and leaving us

(continued on back flap)

easily seduced. Fundamentally, sociopaths are different because they cannot love. Sociopaths learn early on to show sham emotion, but underneath they are indifferent to others' suffering. They live to dominate and thrill to win.

The fact is, we all almost certainly know at least one or more sociopaths already. Part of the urgency in reading *The Sociopath Next Door* is the moment when we suddenly recognize that someone we know—someone we worked for, or were involved with, or voted for—is a sociopath. But what do we do with that knowledge? To arm us against the sociopath, Dr. Stout teaches us to question authority, suspect flattery, and beware the pity play. Above all, she writes, when a sociopath is beckoning, do not join the game.

It is the ruthless versus the rest of us, and *The Sociopath Next Door* will show you how to recognize and defeat the devil you know.



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ONE

the seventh sense

Virtue is not the absence of vices or the avoidance of moral dangers; virtue is a vivid and separate thing, like pain or a particular smell.

—G. K. Chesterton

This morning, Joe, a thirty-year-old attorney, is running five minutes late for an extremely important meeting that, with or without him, will start promptly at eight o'clock. He needs to keep up a good impression with the more senior members of his firm, which means just about everybody, and he would like to have the first word with these wealthy clients, whose concerns include Joe's budding specialty of estate planning. He has been preparing his agenda for days because he feels there is a lot at stake, and he very much wants to be in the conference room at the start of the meeting.

Unfortunately, the furnace in Joe's town house suddenly stopped making heat in the middle of the night. Freezing and pacing, afraid the pipes would burst, he had to wait for the emergency repairman from the fuel company before he could leave for work this morning. When the man showed up, Joe let him in and then, desperate to get to the meeting, abandoned him in the town house to fix the furnace, hoping the fellow would prove reasonably honest. At last, Joe was

able to race to his Audi and set off for the office, but with only twenty-five minutes left to make a thirty-minute drive. He resolved to bend the rules a little and make up the time.

Now Joe is speeding along a familiar route to work, clenching his teeth and swearing under his breath at the slow drivers, at all the drivers really. He reinterprets a couple of red lights, passes a line of traffic by using the breakdown lane, and clings frantically to the hope that he can somehow make it to the office by 8:00. When he hits three green lights in a row, he thinks that he may just succeed. With his right hand, he reaches over to touch the overnight bag in the passenger's seat, to reassure himself that he remembered to bring it. In addition to everything else, he has to catch a 10:15 plane to New York this morning, a trip for the firm, and there will certainly not be time after the meeting to go back home for his things. His hand contacts the cushiony leather of the bag—it is there and packed.

And at this very moment, Joe remembers. He forgot to feed Reebok. Reebok is Joe's three-year-old blond Labrador retriever, so named because, before he got too busy at the firm, Joe used to take early-morning runs with his enthusiastic new pet. When work took over and the morning routine changed, Joe fenced in the small backyard and installed a doggy door in the basement, allowing the dog solo access to the outside. At this point, runs together in the park are weekends only. But exercise or not, Reebok consumes several pounds of Science Diet every week, along with a huge assortment of leftover human food and at least one full box of jumbo bone treats. The young dog's appetite is stupendous, and he seems to live quite happily for two pleasures alone—his time with Joe, and his food.

Joe got Reebok as a puppy, because when Joe was a boy, his father would not let him have a pet, and he had vowed to himself that when he was grown up and successful, he would have a dog, a big one. At first, Reebok had been not very different from the Audi,

another acquisition, a marker of Joe's independence and material prosperity. But soon Joe had fallen in love with the animal himself. How could he not? Reebok adored Joe unconditionally, and from puppy-hood had followed him around the house as if Joe were the center of all that was good in the universe. As his puppy grew to doghood, Joe realized that this creature had as distinct and individual a personality as any human being, and that his liquid brown eyes contained at least as much soul. Now, whenever Joe looks into those eyes, Reebok wrinkles his soft beige brow into several folded-carpet furrows and stares back. In this way, the sweet, ungainly dog appears preternaturally thoughtful, as if he can read Joe's mind and is concerned.

Sometimes when there is a business trip, like today, Joe is gone from home for a day and a half, or even a little longer, and each time he comes back, Reebok greets him at the door with bounding joy and instantaneous forgiveness. Before he takes one of these trips, Joe always leaves large mixing bowls full of food and water for Reebok to consume in his absence, which Reebok does easily. But this time, between the furnace problem and his panic about the 8:00 meeting, Joe forgot. The dog has no food and maybe even no water, and no way to get any until tomorrow evening, when Joe returns from his trip.

Maybe I can call someone to help out, Joe thinks desperately. But no. He is between girlfriends at present, and so no one has a key to his house.

The impossibility of his situation begins to dawn on him, and he grips the steering wheel even harder. He absolutely must make this meeting, and he can be there on time if he just keeps going. But what about Reebok? He will not starve to death in a day and a half, Joe knows, but he will be miserable—and the water—how long does it take an animal to die of dehydration? Joe has no idea. Still driving as fast as the traffic will bear, he tries to think about his options. The available choices tumble over one another in a rush. He can attend

the 8:00 meeting and then go home and feed the dog, but that will make him miss his 10:15 flight, and the trip is even more important than the meeting. He can go to the meeting and leave in the middle. No, that would be seen as offensive. He can try to get a later flight, but then he will be very late for his appointment in New York, may even miss it entirely, which could cost him his job. He can ignore the dog until tomorrow. He can turn around now, miss the 8:00 meeting at the firm, take care of the dog, and still make it to the airport for his 10:15 flight.

Like a man in pain, Joe moans loudly and slumps in his seat. Just a few blocks from work, he pulls the car into a spot marked CONSTRUCTION ONLY, dials the office on his cell phone, and tells a secretary to inform those at the morning meeting that he will not be attending. He turns the car around and goes home to feed Reebok.

What Is Conscience?

Amazingly, from a certain point of view, the human being we are calling Joe decides to be absent from an important meeting with some wealthy clients, an event he has spent several days planning for, and where his personal interests quite clearly reside. At first, he does everything he can to get to the meeting on time, risking all the possessions in his town house to a repairman he has never met before, and his own physical safety in his car. And then, at the very last minute, he turns around and goes home to feed a dog, a guileless, wordless creature who could not even so much as reprove Joe for ignoring him. Joe sacrifices a high-stakes desire of his own in favor of an action that no one will witness (except maybe the repairman), a choice that will not enrich him by even one penny. What could possibly cause a young, ambitious lawyer to do such a thing?

Most readers will smile a little when Joe turns his car around. We feel pleased with him for going back to feed his dog. But why are we pleased? Is Joe acting out of *conscience*? Is this what we mean when we make an approving remark about someone's behavior, such as "His *conscience* stopped him"?

What is this invisible, inescapable, frustratingly incorruptible part of us we call "conscience," anyway?

The question is a complicated one, even as it pertains to the simple vignette about Joe and Reebok, because, surprisingly, there are a number of motivations other than conscience that, separately or together, might cause Joe—might cause any of us—to make an apparently self-sacrificing choice. For example, perhaps Joe simply cannot stomach the thought of returning from his New York trip to find a Labrador retriever dehydrated and dead on his kitchen floor. Not knowing how long a dog can survive without water, he is unwilling to take the risk, but his aversion to the horrifying scenario is not exactly conscience. It is something more like revulsion or fear.

Or maybe Joe is motivated by what the neighbors will think if they hear Reebok howling in hunger, or, worse, if they learn the dog has died, alone and trapped, while Joe was on a business trip. How will he ever explain himself to his friends and acquaintances? This worry is not really Joe's conscience, either, but rather his anticipation of serious embarrassment and social rejection. If this is why Joe goes back home to feed his dog, he is hardly the first human being to make a decision based on the dread of what others will think of him, rather than on what he might do if he were sure his actions would remain a complete secret. The opinions of other people keep us all in line, arguably better than anything else.

Or maybe this is all a matter of the way Joe sees himself. Perhaps Joe does not want to view himself, in his own mind's eye, as the kind of wretch who would commit animal abuse, and his self-image as a decent person is crucial enough to him that, when he has no other alternative, he will forgo an important meeting in the service of

preserving that image. This is an especially plausible explanation for Joe's behavior. The preservation of self-image is a motivator of some notoriety. In literature and often in historical accounts of human action, dedication to one's own self-regard is referred to as "honor." Lives have been forfeited, wars have been fought over "honor." It is an ancient concern. And in the modern field of psychology, how we view ourselves translates to the newer concept of "self-esteem," a subject about which more psychology books have been written than perhaps any other single topic.

Maybe Joe is willing to relinquish a few career points today in order to feel okay when he looks at himself in the mirror tomorrow, in order to remain "honorable" in his own eyes. This would be laudable and very human—but it is not conscience.

The intriguing truth of the matter is that much of what we do that looks like conscience is motivated by some other thing altogether—fear, social pressure, pride, even simple habit. And where Joe is concerned, a number of readers will strongly favor an explanation other than conscience because some of his behaviors are already questionable. He routinely leaves his young dog alone for many hours at a time, sometimes for nearly two days. This very morning, though he is skipping his meeting and going home to feed the dog, he still intends to make that 10:15 flight and be gone until the following evening. Reebok will have no one to be with, and nowhere to go except a small fenced-in backyard. Consigning a dog to such a situation is not very nice—it reflects, at best, a certain lack of empathy on Joe's part for the animal's social needs.

Still, truth to tell, being nice would not necessarily be conscience, either. For brief periods, any reasonably clever sociopath can act with saintlike niceness for his own manipulative purposes. And people who do possess conscience are often unkind despite themselves, out of ignorance or, as in Joe's case perhaps, inadequate empathy, or just run-of-the-mill psychological denial.

Nice behavior, prudent action, thoughts about how other people

will react to us, honorable conduct in the interest of our self-regard—like conscience, all of these have a positive effect on the world at least most of the time, and any or all of them might get the dog fed sometimes, but none can be defined as the individual's conscience. This is because conscience is not a behavior at all, not something that we do or even something that we think or mull over. Conscience is something that we *feel*. In other words, conscience is neither behavioral nor cognitive. Conscience exists primarily in the realm of "affect," better known as *emotion*.

To clarify this distinction, let us take another look at Joe. He is not always nice to his dog, but does he have a conscience? What evidence would cause, say, a psychologist to decide that, when Joe passed up his meeting and went home to rescue Reebok, he was acting out of conscience rather than because of what other people would think, or to preserve his own self-image, or maybe from the noteworthy financial consideration that, three years before, he had paid twelve hundred dollars for a purebred Labrador puppy guaranteed against hip dysplasia and heart disease?

As a psychologist, I am persuaded most by a feature of the story we have not even addressed until now—the fact that Joe feels affection for Reebok. He is *emotionally attached* to his dog. Reebok follows Joe around the house, and Joe likes it. Joe gazes into Reebok's eyes. Reebok has changed Joe from a trophy pet owner to a smitten pet owner. And on account of this attachment, I believe that when Joe gave up his morning plan and went home to take care of his dog, he may possibly have been acting out of conscience. If we could give Joe a truth serum and ask him what was going on inside him at the moment he decided to turn the car around, and he were to say something like, "I just couldn't stand it that Reebok was going to be there hungry and thirsty all that time," then I would be reasonably convinced that Joe was conscience-driven in this situation.

I would be basing my evaluation of Joe on the psychology of

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