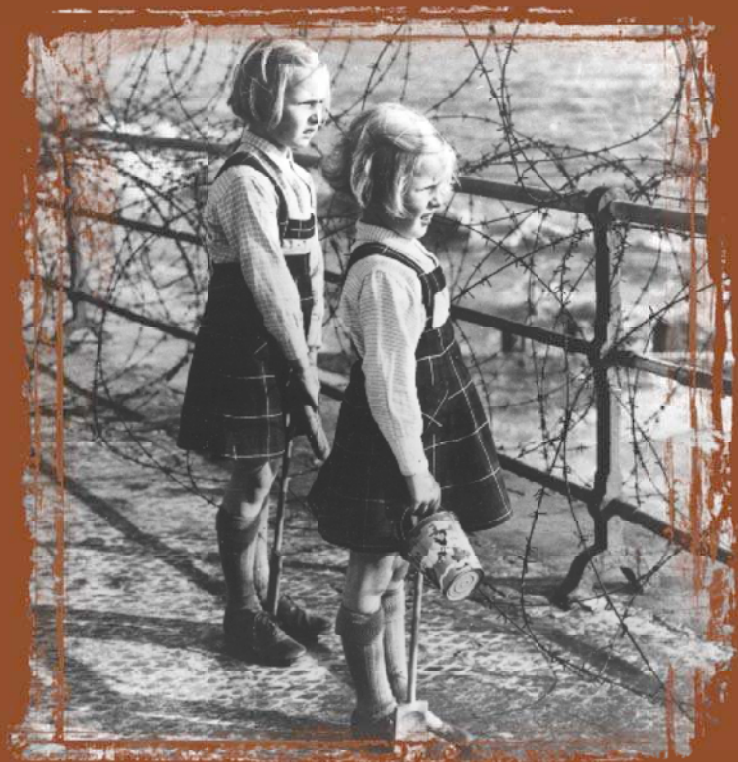


# DESTINED FOR EVIL?

The Twentieth-Century Responses



Edited by Predrag Cicovacki

Destined for Evil?

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Edited by Predrag Cicovacki



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# CONTENTS

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|                                   |    |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Acknowledgments                   | ix |
| Introduction: The Anatomy of Evil | 1  |
| <i>Predrag Cicovacki</i>          |    |

## PART I: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON EVIL

|    |                                                        |    |
|----|--------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 1. | Two Thousand Years and No New God                      | 19 |
|    | <i>Gil Bailie</i>                                      |    |
| 2. | Identifying Good and Evil                              | 45 |
|    | <i>Nicholas Wolterstorff</i>                           |    |
| 3. | Kant and Radical Evil                                  | 59 |
|    | <i>Emil L. Fackenheim</i>                              |    |
| 4. | Uprooting Evil and the Building of Ethical Communities | 75 |
|    | <i>Sharon Anderson-Gold</i>                            |    |
| 5. | The Reality of Radical Evil                            | 81 |
|    | <i>Jeffrey B. Russell</i>                              |    |
| 6. | Roads to Hell                                          | 91 |
|    | <i>Susan Neiman</i>                                    |    |

## PART II: CONFRONTING EVIL IN OUR DIVIDED WORLD: ON GENOCIDE, SELF-DESTRUCTION, AND WAR

|    |                                         |     |
|----|-----------------------------------------|-----|
| 7. | The Banality of Evil: Failing to Think  | 113 |
|    | <i>Hannah Arendt</i>                    |     |
| 8. | Ordinary People and Extraordinary Vices | 119 |
|    | <i>Tzvetan Todorov</i>                  |     |

|     |                                                                                            |     |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 9.  | Are Wars Inevitable?<br><i>Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud</i>                           | 133 |
| 10. | From Relative to Absolute Evil<br><i>Svetozar Stojanović</i>                               | 147 |
| 11. | Killing in Vietnam: What Have We Done<br>to Our Soldiers?<br><i>Lt. Col. Dave Grossman</i> | 155 |
| 12. | Thou Shalt Not Kill<br><i>Hermann Hesse</i>                                                | 165 |

### PART III: FACING THE DARKNESS WITHIN: ON OUR SPIRITUAL CRISIS

|     |                                                                                                      |     |
|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 13. | Searching for Self-Knowledge and<br>Divine Wholeness<br><i>Carl Gustav Jung</i>                      | 171 |
| 14. | Love and Cruelty: A Blue Spot in the<br>Middle of the Hurricane<br><i>Philip Paul Hallie</i>         | 177 |
| 15. | Goodness at the Heart of Being<br><i>Rabbi Michael Lerner</i>                                        | 183 |
| 16. | We Are Prodigals in a Distant Land:<br>An Essay on Thomas Merton<br><i>John P. Collins</i>           | 197 |
| 17. | Recovering Paradise: Thomas Merton on<br>the Self and the Problem of Evil<br><i>Thomas Del Prete</i> | 205 |
| 18. | Exposing the Deceitful Heart:<br>A Monk's Public "Inner Work"<br><i>Jonathan Montaldo</i>            | 213 |

### PART IV: PORTRAYALS OF EVIL IN ART

|     |                                                                                 |     |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 19. | Lamentations and Losses: From New York to Kabul<br><i>Daniel Berrigan, S.J.</i> | 223 |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

|     |                                                                                                             |     |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 20. | Evil as Mystery: Primal Speech and Contemporary Poetry<br><i>Michael True</i>                               | 241 |
| 21. | The Trial of Man and The Trial of God:<br>Job and Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor<br><i>Predrag Cicovacki</i> | 249 |
| 22. | The Resurrection of Hell<br><i>Leo Tolstoy</i>                                                              | 261 |
| 23. | The Gulag Archipelago (A Fragment)<br><i>Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn</i>                                      | 273 |
| 24. | Helen's Exile<br><i>Albert Camus</i>                                                                        | 277 |
|     | Index                                                                                                       | 281 |



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Beside the works originally presented at the symposium and included here, this collection also contains a number of essays previously published. For permission to use the selections printed in this book, the editor is grateful to the publishers.



# INTRODUCTION

## THE ANATOMY OF EVIL

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Predrag Cicovacki

Am I my brother's keeper?

—*Genesis, 4:8*

This collection brings together a variety of responses to the ancient question of whether we are—individually and collectively—destined for evil. The history of the previous century brought this question into the open more poignantly than perhaps any other before. Not surprisingly, then, what you will find here is a wide spectrum of opinions concerning the mystery of evil formulated throughout the twentieth century and at the very threshold of this new one, which inherited all of its open wounds and nightmarish memories. The pieces included here come from diverse fields: philosophy, religious studies, psychology, history, political science, and art; they also assume a variety of forms: essays, treatises, stories, correspondence, and there is even one interview. The reader should not expect that the pieces collected here offer proven recipes of how to eliminate evil from the world; they rather present a compelling testimony of human struggles with an aspect of our lives we cannot afford to ignore.

This first stimulus for this collection came from a symposium on evil, held at the College of the Holy Cross, in Worcester, Massachusetts, on April 11–13, 2002.<sup>1</sup> The symposium was ambitiously called “The Anatomy of Evil,” and in my letter of invitation to the participants I tried to clarify the idea behind organizing such a symposium through the following paragraph:

The twentieth century has cast a dark shadow of doubt over any residual hope that persons of good will might place in the moral progress of the human species. The World Wars, the

Nazi concentration camps, the Soviet Gulag, the Chinese “Great Leap Forward,” and many other less spectacular but no less horrific examples of ideological, ethnic, and religious slaughter force us to come to terms with the problem of evil. The killing of tens of millions of innocent people, the literal dehumanization that occurred in the camps, and the possibility of omnicide, i.e., the complete destruction of all life on this planet, demand our reflective self-examination. Where does evil come from? What is the source of the impulses that lead human beings to commit such deeds? How do we respond to evil? What is the role of religion in opposing, or perhaps sometimes inspiring, evil? We must ask the question one so often hears: “Is belief in God still possible after Auschwitz?” How must God be conceived if His existence is compatible with Auschwitz? Perhaps even more fundamentally, we have to ask: How must reality itself be conceived if evil is not only a threatening possibility, but an omnipresent reality?

As the essays included here testify, the participants reacted more to this paragraph than to the title of the symposium. While they easily identified the evils I listed as genuine and terrifying, none of them set about providing a comprehensive anatomy of evil. But why is it so difficult even to attempt an anatomy of evil? And in what would such an account consist?

Allow me to address these questions by making a slight detour. In his book *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Isaiah Berlin describes what he calls “a three-legged stool” which supports the central tradition of western political thought. The first leg is the assumption that to all genuine questions there can be only one correct answer, all other answers being incorrect; if there are no correct answers to them, then the questions can’t be genuine. The second leg is that, at least in principle, it must be possible to find a method by which correct answers can be found; there must be a procedure for establishing what is right. The third presumption of this approach, and Berlin believes the most important, is the tenet that, at the very least, all correct answers must be compatible with one another; at best, these true answers will logically interact with one another to build a single, systematic, and interconnected whole. Building such a whole is connected with “an age-old dream” that there is a final solution to all human ills. Finding all the right answers to the questions that puzzle us the most must be an indispensable step toward the resolute overcoming of these faults.

Berlin clarifies the idea behind this age-old dream:

[I]t can be achieved; by revolution or peaceful means it will surely come; and then all, or the vast majority, of men will be virtuous and happy, wise and good and free; if such a position can be attained, and once attained will last for ever,

what sane man could wish to return to the miseries of man's wanderings in the desert? If this is possible, then surely no price is too heavy to pay for it; no amount of oppression, cruelty, repression, coercion will be too high, if this, and this alone, is the price for the ultimate salvation of all men?<sup>2</sup>

After various attempts at such a "final solution" throughout the twentieth century, even the mere mention of such an idea now sends shivers through our spines, as it certainly did in Berlin's case. Countless millions of people, frequently with the full awareness of their innocence, have been force-marched through the gates of death for the sake of one "final solution" or another. The world has never seen premeditated murder committed on so immense a scale, and perpetuated with so much indifference. Those who have not witnessed acts of this kind have a very hard time believing that such things could have happened. And, as Elie Wiesel testified in his novel *Night*, "Even those who believed couldn't comprehend. Of course they couldn't. Nobody could. The experience of the camp defies comprehension."<sup>3</sup>

Immense evils certainly defy comprehension and make an anatomy of evil difficult, if not impossible. Nevertheless, Wiesel should have said that nobody could comprehend right away. A certain distance not only allows but invites, even requires, reflection. As Wiesel himself realized after many years of shocked silence, he had to speak, to preserve the memory of the victims and issue a warning to future generations.

We must speak of evil, even when language doesn't seem to cooperate with such an endeavor. More than with regard to any other aspect of human life, when it comes to evil, silence is the sign of complicity. But what could we meaningfully and rationally say about it? Is an anatomy of evil even thinkable?

If an anatomy of any subject has to rest on what Berlin identified as the three-legged stool of western political thought, then the verdict of the articles included in this collection would be negative. The problem is not that we can't attempt a rigorous rational examination of various aspects and manifestations of evil; this has been done before and some of the essays included here continue with this approach. The difficulty is that, no matter how comprehensive and rigorous our examination may be, we continually end up feeling that we have neither understood the enigma of evil in its entirety nor penetrated to its core. Perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that the riddle of evil defies comprehension. After all, could we find a world filled with evil intelligible?

If we are still hopeful of a positive outcome, we should probably first consider the ancient and most frequently asked question: Whence evil? Job, who desperately tried to penetrate God's mystifying intentions, was the first

great character in western literature to be dazzled and bewildered by this mystery. Let us be less ambitious than Job, for—as Susan Neiman pointed out in her impressive essay “Roads to Hell”—it is not clear that we can even make sense of our own intentions. When we, accordingly, limit our focus to human behavior, it is possible to discern various sources of evil. They can, for instance, be divided into two main categories: internal and external. The list of internal sources runs the gamut from emotions such as greed, hatred, and jealousy to states of excessive narcissism, weak will, and laziness. However numerous and omnipresent such internal factors may be, we are nevertheless prone to look for external sources of evil first; we are always ready to blame someone or something else. Among external sources of evil we can distinguish between individual and institutional varieties. Evils derived from individual sources are ultimately the same as those we have identified as being internal: they are part of the internal makeup of some other person (or group) who commits evil deeds. The institutional sources of evil are more complex, and perhaps also more mystifying. Here we can talk not only about well-documented evils of inquisitions, wars, and endless abuses of individual rights, but also about subtler and not so easily perceptible, although neither unrelated nor less damaging evils, such as brainwashing, consumerism, and pollution.

The human sources of evil can also be separated depending on whether evil is intentional (active), or unintentional (passive). Within the first category we can further differentiate between radical, revengeful, instrumental, and doctrinal evil. Radical evil is evil done for the sake of evil, out of pure malice. One person intentionally harms another and derives pleasure from doing so. No attempt to justify the deed is offered or intended. Revengeful evil consists in our reaction to what is perceived as an unjust offense. There is a clear intention of hurting the other side, but this intention is justified (rightly or not) by what that other side has done to us. In cases of instrumental evil, an evil deed is planned and performed because it is estimated that the goodness of the outcome will outweigh the evil of the means. Instrumental evil can be either acquisitive or preventive: sometimes we commit an act of instrumental evil to gain a desired object, other times merely to prevent what we (rightly or wrongly) perceive as a threat to ourselves. Instrumental evil is not limited to individuals, but is as often committed by smaller or larger groups, frequently with strong institutional backing. Doctrinal evil almost always involves larger segments of society or its entire population. In contrast to its instrumental counterpart, where the conception of good and evil is already firmly established, in cases of doctrinal evil a series of acts is committed in the name of some newly declared highest good, some newly attempted “final solution.” It is then believed that the old order has to be overthrown for the new one to establish itself. The twentieth century served as the battlefield of such

numerous doctrinal “isms” in the names of which various revisionary groups were willing to sacrifice millions of innocent people for the realization of their “noble” goals.

Passive or unintentional evil could also be further classified in various ways. We can distinguish between accidental evil (where an evil act is committed because of a lack of attention, or because of confusion, misperception or ignorance), evil based on indifference (which in turn may be due to laziness, but also to ideological brainwashing, or, in other typical cases, to a prolonged exposure to evil that leads to numbness), and evil based on complicity (which is frequently the result of the lack of courage or determination). Let us just add that various forms and manifestations of passive evil are by no means limited to isolated individuals. As our complacent indifference to apocalyptic threat of nuclear omnicide testifies, it is no less common to find examples of collective compliance and apathy.

Although these classifications are quite detailed, there are two puzzling things about them. One is the absence of any unifying element in these different sources of evil; although we can agree in identifying their manifestations as acts of evil, it is hard to say what they have in common. The second inadequacy is that, despite such classifications being pretty detailed, they still don’t take into account many relevant aspects of evil.<sup>4</sup> For instance, they leave untouched the issue of evil’s imaginativeness and inventiveness. Evil can be dull, but—as we all know—it can be attractive and fascinating as well. This understanding of evil was prominent from the middle ages until the end of the nineteenth century, and the literature of this period has many incomparable examples that explore our fascination with criminality. The background aspect of this understanding of evil is a growing awareness both of the arbitrariness and injustice of most societal norms, and of how many of these are imposed only to protect the narrow interests of the ruling minority, under the veil of absolute validity and untouchable authority. Violation of any norms that protect the chosen few is deemed criminal and punished mercilessly.

Yet despite this threat of severe punishment, a romantic criminal rebels against injustice and tries to correct it on his own terms. What we all appreciate about such a criminal is not the evil act of vengeance itself, but his imagination and intelligence, his mockery of those in power and of their arbitrary norms. Great works of literature depict such a criminal as fully alive; we cannot but enjoy his nerve and admire the courage with which he faces the consequences of his actions.

The history of the twentieth century has made it difficult to romanticize any aspect of evil. This was the century that witnessed the blossoming of graveyards, the blatant display of dismembered bodies, and shameless celebrations of victories over communities subjected to genocide. Its chronicles call for lamentation, rather than triumphal cheers. We thus

understandably have little patience for a romantic rebel, and agree with Freud's diagnosis that "two traits are essential in a criminal: boundless egoism and a strong destructive impulse. Common to both of these, and a necessary condition for their expression, is absence of love, lack of an emotional appreciation of (human) objects."<sup>5</sup>

The beginning of the twentieth century already marks a shift toward different kinds of "heroes." The struggle of witty and brave romantic rebels against unjust individuals or unfair social order fades away, to be gradually replaced by a depressing contrast between increasingly powerless citizens and the overwhelming might of institutions. One such typical literary hero is Gregor Samsa, a character from Kafka's brilliant story "Metamorphosis." Samsa is someone who is oppressed and implicated by the system to the point that he sees himself more as a petty bureaucrat than as a genuine human being. When Mr. Samsa wakes up one fine morning in the form of an insect, what worries him most is not that he has lost his humanity but that he may be late for work. In this case, just as so many times before and after, an artist was able to capture to spirit of his age and its immanent dangers better than philosophers, political theorists, or social scientists. Gregor Samsa is something of a prototype of Adolf Eichmann, whom Hannah Arendt so masterfully analyzed in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. While his *Führer* was a malicious, ruthless, and demonic monster, the implementation of his "final solution" essentially depended on the complicity of a great number of soulless and mostly indifferent individuals like Eichmann. He was by no means stupid or even unintelligent, insisted Arendt, merely thoughtless. Eichmann was looking for personal advancement, without further motives. In contrast to those fascinating criminals of earlier times, the Eichmann-type of disciplined thugs are more dead than alive.<sup>6</sup>

What these new prototypes of evil indicate—and what essays by Gil Bailie, Hannah Arendt, Susan Neiman, Svetozar Stojanović, Philip Paul Hallie, and Michael True clearly articulate—are significant changes in the overall conceptual framework with which we approach the enigma of evil. If, before the Holocaust, evil could for the most part be identified with moral evil and defined in terms of malevolent intentions, it couldn't be so afterwards. If, before Hiroshima, we could meaningfully differentiate among great crimes against humanity in terms of the kind or number of their victims, such discriminations lose much of their justification when all of humanity can be victimized and annihilated within a few days or even hours. If, before WWII, the distinction between a victimizer and a victim was clear and definitive, it has ceased to be so today. It's not only that wars can't separate combatants and non-combatants any more, or that the threat of a nuclear disaster will cling above our heads eternally; what may be even worse is that our so-called "peaceful" economy of global exploitation and planetary pollution blurs the distinction between victimizers and

victims to the point of indifference. We produce more to make our lives more comfortable, but in the process of production we create false needs and addict ourselves to mindless consumerism. We produce more to make our lives and the lives of our children better, but in the process of production we poison the environment in which we live. In plain language, all of this amounts to a suicidal use of our creative energy to push ourselves closer and closer toward total omnicide. Our culture is in love with violence, destruction, and death, and its murderous tendencies cannot be reversed either soon or easily, if at all.<sup>7</sup>

This is certainly the message of most of the included essays. If it was said in the ancient times “the world lieth in evil,” the overwhelming presence of evil has become even more disturbing. As Michael True put it nicely in his essay, nothing in Dante’s *Inferno* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* approaches the horror of what we have experienced over the past century, or may yet experience. Lucky an age, adds Susan Neiman, that thinks of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake as its worst nightmare. As Father Berrigan phrased it, something has gone terribly wrong with our humanity. This is why, if an anatomy of evil that would be its own theoretical purpose is possible, the authors represented here don’t find it relevant. They don’t even attempt a definition of evil; it is sufficient that we agree about what we consider to be the most terrifying and clearly identifiable examples of this power. This is also why they almost entirely avoid discussing what were previously considered the key issues concerning the problem of evil: theodicy and teleology, the distinction between metaphysical, natural, and moral evil and the question of whether the ultimate responsibility for evil is on the shoulders of God or man. Whether or not God has his share of responsibility, man certainly is not let off the hook. And it is precisely this aspect of evil that the presented essays deal with: What is it that makes man, whether individually and collectively, so capable of generating the evil that so pervades our world? Are we so deeply and irreversibly immersed in evil that it has become both our natural element and our destiny?

When Kant compared our humanity to crooked timber, he thought that even the most optimistic among us would have a hard time denying that greed, jealousy, and hatred appear to be part of human nature. It similarly appears that there is in us an intense vengeance impulse, a desire for revenge that is triggered when we are offended, or merely threatened. Kant’s message was that nothing straight could be built out of such crooked timber, but he himself had second thoughts. In his other moral and political writings he admitted that, even if our horrifying condition is due to something like the biblical Fall, and not to the historical development of the human race (as Rousseau almost persuaded him), we have no right to forget equally strong but opposing impulses and emotions present in us:

compassion, sympathy, altruism and love are as much a part of human nature as selfishness, narcissism, indifference, and hatred. We are reminded of this outlook by Emil Fackenheim, Sharon Anderson-Gold, Jeffrey Burton Russell, Rabbi Michael Lerner, Philip Paul Hallie, John Collins, Thomas Del Prete, Jonathan Montaldo, and Hermann Hesse. Rather than paint the entire canvas in gloomy colors, we must remember that human beings are internally torn in different and frequently irreconcilable directions. Moreover, whatever theological, ontological, sociological, psychological, and biological factors influence our behavior, they can't entirely eliminate the possibility of human freedom and free action. Evil is real and can't be denied. But neither can human freedom, and with it the possibility to make ourselves and the world in which we live together better.

These are the crucial assumptions implicit in most, if not all of the included essays. Since their relationship is nowhere argued explicitly and in detail, I would like to develop this theme further. Human nature is neither fully determined nor totally undetermined; it is more correct to say that it is underdetermined. There are clearly multiple influences within which we are free to mold our lives and try to turn them straight, or crooked. But as long as there is a trace of freedom left in us, we must approach our lives with an attitude that they are entrusted to us. We neither possess nor control existence, but are rather invited to share life together with other human beings and all other living creatures.<sup>8</sup> Our initial conditions are far from being equally favorable, nor is the outcome of our self-building expected to be completely satisfactory, either to ourselves or others. But whether because of our Creator, or perhaps by the mere fact of our sharing in the miracle of existence, everyone seems to be given a chance; each one of us can discover a task.<sup>9</sup>

This view demands some modifications of the usual account of the nature of evil, especially in the dominant Augustinian tradition. Augustine insisted on the identification of being and goodness: being, or presence, is good, and non-being, or nothingness, is not. But why assume that this formula will always be valid? It is hard to accept that being is good by definition, for existence can be a real hell and death may look like the only salvation from the nightmares of life.

This observation squares well with our experience of life, but not with our expectations of it. For, like Augustine, everyone hopes to be healthy, appreciated, loved, happy. . . . It is possible to think of evil as deprivation, and many of our authors mention this Augustinian view. And it is also possible to understand evil not as the direct deprivation of health, appreciation, love, happiness and similar goods, but in terms of the obstacles presented to accomplishing them. Evil is then understood not as absence, but as presence of obstacles. More precisely, evil is treated as an excess of obstacles that make it difficult or impossible to live up to our own

expectations. Such obstacles can be external or internal, natural or unnatural, intentional or non-intentional, individual or institutional. Whatever their origin and scope, they make it difficult, sometimes impossible, to continue with our lives in the way we intend, either by preserving the *status quo*, or by advancing our current role.<sup>10</sup>

If we understand evil as an excess of obstacles, this sheds quite a different light on the place of intentions in this context. We have already seen that an evil-doer need not have malicious intentions. As Arendt argued, the absence of malice did not change our assessment of Eichmann's deeds: they were undoubtedly evil. The intentions that are most important in an account of evil are the intentions of the victims. An earthquake on Mars, which doesn't affect our affairs, wouldn't be deemed devastating and evil. An earthquake at any place where human beings live is evil, because it interferes with the intentions of people to live there and to live in a certain way. If this is so, it is the victim's point of view that matters more than an evil-doer's perspective. Moreover, the question concerning the sources of evil may be far less relevant than the issue of how evil affects us.<sup>11</sup>

This approach to evil—not viewing it as deprivation of good but as an obstacle on our way of realizing good—may also help us understand why we fear death so much, and frequently consider it to be the greatest evil: death appears to be the biggest and ultimate obstacle, a hurdle we can't overcome. Of course, we can believe in life after death; but even so, we must admit that something stops, that something is interrupted and interfered with at the point of death. What is interrupted and interfered with is the individual's freedom to pursue certain things and avoid others.

But perhaps it is not death we should fear the most. Although the biblical account of the Fall is usually taken to be the archetypal case of evil, the Old Testament has another tale that is more clearly, if not also more fatefully, important for any anatomy of evil: Cain's murder of his brother. Far more decisively than natural death, murder is the ultimate interference with another person's will and intention. But it is also more than that: murder is an elimination of the only possibility that any person has for growth. If my life is indeed a task, the only human way to fulfill this task is through meaningful relationships with other human beings and reality as a whole. To be really human, I need that other, in a dialogue with whom I can find the truth about myself, of where I stand and where I am headed. Who I am and how I carry on the task assigned to me is determined through my relationships with others.

In his essay "Identifying Good and Evil," Nicholas Wolterstorff presents and defends an Augustinian understanding of evil. Wolterstorff reconstructs how Augustine turned from what could be called a Stoic stance of self-absorbed and isolated heroism toward what Wolterstorff takes to be the heart of Augustine's approach: his love of God. Like Thomas Merton, Wolterstorff

insists that this love is in no sense similar to any secluded relationship with the deity. Contrary to the Stoic approach, it is a relationship of openness, of loving and caring, of taking risks and exposing oneself to the possibility of getting hurt. If not in name, then in deed, this love of God is love of everything that God created, especially other human beings. Other contributors also see love as the only genuine antidote to evil. This is why Cain's murder is a more appropriate symbol of evil than the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Murder stands in opposition to everything that love symbolizes: a caring and giving attitude to others and the opening of ourselves to others by putting them before our own interests and needs. When necessary, loving also means sacrificing our own lives to protect the lives of those we love. This could be one of the noblest tasks of all.

Murder—physical and spiritual, of others as well as of ourselves—is the ultimate symbol of evil. What we find most appalling in the recent history is the countless murders committed without shame and with impunity. Wars, revolutions, and now terrorist attacks are so gruesome and anti-human because they involve premeditated murder of other human beings. No less appalling is the mindless indifference of those millions of people who were involved in butchering their fellow human beings.

History had brought Eichmann and Hitler together, it had involved them in the same horrible crime, but we shouldn't be seduced into not seeing a chasm between them: if one evil is called banal, the other has to be called radical. If in his banality and thoughtlessness Eichmann didn't have a sense of direction, this couldn't be said about Hitler. The problem with Hitler was just the opposite: he had the definite sense of direction, it's just that it was a wrong one. It is as if Eichmann and Hitler walked on opposite banks of the same river.<sup>12</sup>

If our passionate interest in the mystery of evil—theoretical no less than practical—boils down to the question of whether, as individuals and as a race, we are destined for evil, we may be a step closer toward a better understanding of this question. If murder is the symbol of evil, can we refuse to be involved in murdering others and ourselves? Are we still capable of jumping off, or maybe slowing down or even stopping the carousel of violence that we so successfully perpetuate in all imaginable forms? If evil consists in either a lack of direction or in following the wrong path, can we still find the right way?

I must confess that when I was deciding on the title of the symposium—*The Anatomy of Evil*—I was thinking as an intellectual who was looking forward to a learned exchange with other intellectuals. Listening to the presented essays, I was humbled and came to see the "problem" of evil in a very different light.<sup>13</sup> I don't know if the questions raised above have one correct answer, nor am I familiar with a proper method by means of which such correct answers can be found. What I came to realize is that,

even if such a method and ultimately correct answers can't be found, this wouldn't make these questions less genuine. For these are not abstract questions, invented by a speculative mind detached from the stream of life. On the contrary, they are inscribed all over our planet by the tears and blood of suffering humanity. These are the questions that not only confuse and bewilder our intellects but cut like a razor through every fiber of our humanity.

I also don't know whether correct answers to these questions would constitute one single, systematic and interconnected whole, and even less can I claim that such answers would lead to the final solution of the problem of evil. All I can claim is that these questions imposed themselves on me, after listening and reading the essays included in this collection. The essays don't speak in a single voice, nor do they suggest one unified conclusion. But a prominent and promising line of thought informs this collection explicitly and implicitly.

Gil Bailie's "Two Thousand Years and No New God" sets the framework for the entire discussion. Although non-western approaches to the enigma of evil certainly deserve every attention, they are unfortunately not represented here. The context of the discussion is confined within the perimeter of western culture and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Bailie's title is a quote from Nietzsche, who lamented the fact that no new god has emerged in the last two thousand years. Jesus had been crucified, God had been murdered, but no new deity has emerged to carry the torch and guide us through the dark chaotic world. Once understood and not accepted unanimously, the scapegoating mechanism loses its effectiveness. The biblical reference to "eyes that can't see and ears that can't hear" doesn't apply to our modern predicament. Today's post-modern Titans and Nietzschean supermen are neither blind nor deaf; they are arrogant and shameless. They step over the corpses of innocent victims without regret or lament.

Two thousand years and no new god. And every time man has tried to establish himself as god, the consequences have—predictably—been disastrous. No other arena of human experience has been as bloody as the political one. "There is nothing sacred in politics," Nicholas Berdyaev summed it up, "and much that is criminal."<sup>14</sup>

Two thousand years and no new god. This lack of knowledge concerning the highest good and our proper object of devotion is the true condition of humanity of our time. It can account for both Eichmann's astonishing lack of orientation and Hitler's pull in the wrong direction.

Where do we find a proper authority that could lead us in the right direction? Could any of our institutions play such a role? Albert Einstein and Sharon Anderson-Gold believe so. But before we understand why almost all other authors place their hopes elsewhere, a historical reminder is in order.

Two centuries ago, for Kant and many philosophers preceding and following him, the state and its institutions are regarded as an indispensable prerequisite of any—individual, national, or cosmopolitan—moral improvement of humanity. The age of Enlightenment assumed that all moral improvement must spread from the top downward; from the state and the classes that most directly benefit from it to the masses of the underprivileged.

By the end of the nineteenth century, and even more so in the twentieth century, this view is rarely held. Tolstoy already regarded the state as the cause of the greatest evils: it caused corruption and hypocrisy among the ruling classes and generated the gruesome and brutal oppression of the underprivileged. He already diagnosed what was going to become one of the most burdensome problems for the future generations: the main instrument of state oppression is an armed force, and the stock excuse for maintaining an enormously expensive and large armed force is the existence of other highly armed rival states. Sooner or later, the inevitable outcome of piling up more and more weapons will be the mindless and calculated mass-murder of people that is war.<sup>15</sup>

Tolstoy was vehement in arguing that institutions don't serve justice, nor could they restore it; they merely cover up old injustices and create new ones. In his virtually unknown story included in this collection—"The Resurrection of Hell," the story he wrote after reading Dostoevsky's legend of the Grand Inquisitor from *The Brothers Karamazov*—Tolstoy portrayed our faith in institutions as the triumph of the devil. But his views concerning the darkness within were no less pessimistic. Like Thomas Merton, Tolstoy was no stranger to the temptations of the false self and the deceitful heart. Hell is not found in others, as Sartre claimed, but in my own insatiable ego. The greatest and most formidable enemies are not "out there," but within our own hearts and minds.

Two thousand years and no new god. Nietzsche lamented the fact and wondered what "sacred charade" we needed to invent to cover our crimes. How could we twist our language to introduce new deities? Even Nietzsche believed that the cycle of evil, injustice, and violence is the greatest danger and challenge facing the world today. After the deadly procession of the twentieth-century supermen, the "solution" he proposed could hardly seem appealing to us. The solution Nietzsche did not want to consider was that, if there is no new god, we might reconsider turning to the old one.

Susan Neiman pointed out that the problem of evil is not a religious one, for "you don't have to be a believer to find the problem of evil a threat: not to faith . . . but to reason." The problem doesn't have to be dressed in the language of religion, but it remains the same. As Jung pointed out several decades ago, we don't seem to have an appropriate myth—rational or irrational—that would give us a sense of direction and help us with the cycle of evil, injustice, and violence. If the old myths are

not dead, they become mute and don't provide new spiritual energy. Is the fault to be found in the myths themselves, as they are set down in Scripture, or is the blame solely in us, who have suppressed them and not developed them further? Many of our authors clearly favor the second option. But how can we keep these myths alive and allow them to rejuvenate us?

In his beautiful essay that concludes this collection, Albert Camus contrasted our time with that of the ancients in the following way: "For the Greeks, values pre-existed all action, of which they definitely set the limits. Modern philosophy places its values at the end of action." The problem concerns not only modern philosophy but the entire modern way of life. We follow the lead of our Titans in the hope of achieving heaven on earth, only to realize—after destruction of gigantic proportions—that all their attempts are doomed to failure. Our values don't define our actions, nor are we willing to recognize any limits. We are not only consequentialists and utilitarians, we are pragmatists and opportunists without real moral commitments.

But how could we even think about interfering with our accustomed carousel of evil, injustice, and violence without making prior and definite commitments? If murder is bad, we had better say so and behave accordingly. What is evil should be called by its proper name: Murder is evil and let us desist from spewing forth shameless oxymorons, such as "just war" and "capital punishment," in seeking to disguise or mitigate what is simply evil. To Cain's rhetorical question concerning whether he is expected to be his brother's keeper, let us give a non-rhetorical and committed affirmative answer: Indeed, we are all supposed to be our brothers' keepers.

The answer to the question of whether we are destined to evil depends on our ability to live up to this affirmative answer to Cain's question. It depends on our ability to awake out of the seduction of the God of war and vengeance, of rage and violence, and turn toward the God of love and care, compassion and altruism. Easier said than done, for caring for our brothers means humbling our own narcissistic egos, restricting our own boundless desire to possess and dominate. Easier said than done, for let us not forget the biggest challenge that the God of love presents to us: When the choice is between being wronged or doing wrong, between being killed or killing others, could we consciously and willingly choose to find ourselves at the receiving end?

## Notes

1. The essays presented at the symposium on evil are those by Gil Bailie, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Susan Neiman, Sharon Anderson-Gold, Svetozar Stojanović, Rabbi Michael Lerner, John P. Collins, Thomas Del Prete, Jonathan Montaldo, Father

Daniel Berrigan, and Michael True. For the sources of all other contributions, see the acknowledgments.

2. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991); the long quote is from page 47 and the three conditions are described on pages 24–25. In this, and many other of his works, Berlin criticizes this central tradition of western political thought.

3. From Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), p. 79.

4. For some other useful classifications of different kinds of evil, see Amélie Oksenberg Rorty's "Introduction" to *The Many Faces of Evil: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (New York: Routledge, 2001), xi–xvii.

5. "Dostoevsky and Parricide," quoted from *Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 5, ed. Ernest Jones (New York: Basic Books, 1959), p. 222.

6. Another prototype important for understanding evil in the twentieth century is anticipated by Robert Louis Stevenson's novelette *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, written about 1886. For a good discussion of this prototype for the problem of evil, see chapter 7 of John A. Sanford's book *Evil: The Shadow Side of Reality* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981), pp. 85–111.

7. Rabbi Michael Lerner warns us that "More shocking than crime per se is the degree to which violence pervades our communities. Violence offends us in particular because it violates our understanding that every human being is precious and holy and of ultimate value. Violence is denial of that holiness; it is a willingness to treat human beings as though they were mere objects to be manipulated at someone's whim"; *The Politics of Meaning: Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1997), pp. 141–42.

8. This idea is developed by Martin Buber; see his unjustly neglected book *Good and Evil*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), especially pp. 141–43.

9. We should say that *almost* everyone is given a chance, for—as Michael True reminds us in his essay—we have no right to forget those twenty-four thousand children who are every day dying of starvation and hunger-related diseases.

10. This understanding of evil is not accidental. It relies on the original meaning of Satan, or *diabolos* in Greek, which literally means "to throw across." As Sanford explain in his book *Evil* (see page 37), Satan appears in the Gospels as a spirit opposed to God, who throws every obstacle he can in the way of man's path to a healthy relationship with God; Satan strives to turn man away from God by inciting him to sin and rebellion.

According to this understanding, evil doesn't seem to originate from being itself, but from life; more specifically, it seems to originate from human life. Good life and not mere life is what matters. Although this understanding goes against the usual interpretation of Augustine's view, Nicholas Wolterstorff develops an Augustinian conception that identifies goodness and evil in terms of enhancing or impairing a person's flourishing.

11. The first of these points is emphasized by Gil Bailie, the second by Susan Neiman.

12. I could never quite understand Arendt's later denial of the possibility of radical evil. I don't see why, besides thoughtless evil, she would also not admit the

existence of premeditated radical evil. See, for instance, her letter to Gershom Scholem of July 24, 1963; reprinted in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin, 2000), pp. 391–96, especially p. 396. In insisting on two kinds of evil, Martin Buber's seems more adequate to me. See his *Good and Evil*, part III, especially pp. 139–40.

13. I must also confess that, in choosing the name for the symposium, I was seduced by the easiness with which Erich Fromm analyzed various forms of aggression in his masterful book *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Henry Holt, 1973). I had forgotten the deep association the word “anatomy” has with dissecting and dismembering bodies. As Dudley Young explains it, “Some sense of the ambiguities surrounding the surgical hand can be gathered by looking at Rembrandt's famous *Anatomy Lessons* of 1632 and 1656. In both cases one's first impression is of horror: these bodies are being tortured. Is this impression altogether mistaken? Both bodies belonged to executed criminals, as was frequently the case in those days. Furthermore, the dissections commemorated by these paintings were an annual event in Amsterdam, performed in a theater before a paying audience, and this ‘ritual’ was followed by a feast. What, one wonders, was the public paying to see? And what was the feast celebrating? Some new extension to ‘the long arm of the law’? Perhaps”; *Origins of the Sacred: The Ecstasies of Love and War* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), p. 19.

What I wonder after reading a passage like this is: How can we dissect evil? Is it not rather the case that evil is dissecting us? What we are really facing is not an anatomy of evil, but a reductive manipulation of our own humanity.

14. Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Beginning & The End*, trans. R. M. French (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 150. Berdyaev presents his original and penetrating understanding of evil not only in chapter 5 of this book, but in many other works as well. See, for instance, his book *Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952).

15. My comments in this and the previous paragraph are inspired by W. B. Gallie's book *Philosophers of Peace and War: Kant, Clausewitz, Marx, Engels and Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).



# PART I

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON EVIL

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## TWO THOUSAND YEARS AND NO NEW GOD

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Gil Bailie

Riots broke out in Los Angeles following the not-guilty verdict in the case of the police officers who were shown beating Rodney King, a black motorist, in a 1991 video. During the riots, another beating was videotaped, one that was the mirror image of the King beating, except for the fact that the attackers were not police officers. Two black men, Henry Watson and Damian Williams were arrested and tried for beating a white truck driver, Reginald Denny. Williams was acquitted of attempted murder and convicted of a lesser crime of felony mayhem. His lawyer argued that at the time of the beating Williams had been under the spell of a mob, and that as a result he was incapable of forming an intention to kill. Williams testified that the mob violence had a quasi-religious effect on him: "I was just caught up in the rapture," he said, "as white men have, no doubt, been caught up in the 'rapture' of lynching."<sup>1</sup>

"A resurgence in religious violence has caught the post-cold war world off guard," writes Michael Sells of other forms of violence into which all too many people in various parts of the world have descended. Writing long before the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center (and Pentagon), Professor Sells offered a brief litany, which included an earlier attack on the World Trade Center. "From the subways of Tokyo to the ruins of a mosque in India, from the World Trade Center and the federal building in Oklahoma City to a Jerusalem rally for the Israeli prime minister, religious militants have transgressed the boundaries of civil society in pursuit of their aims." This catalogue appeared in the introduction to Sells' book—*The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*—which focused on the violence that had engulfed the former Yugoslavia after the collapse of

the Soviet Union. Like other well-informed observers, Sells was quick to dismiss the comforting idea that these violent outbreaks were the result of "age-old antagonisms." They represent something far more troubling than that, he insisted. "Herein lies the irony," writes Sells, "the more obscene the crime, the less visible it is. The human capacity for acknowledging religiously based evil is particularly tenuous."<sup>2</sup>

Whether in Los Angeles or Bosnia, when order breaks down and violent passions erupt, the more passionate and violent they are the less likely they can be adequately explained in political, economic, psychological and sociological terms, though it is precisely in these terms that most explanatory efforts will be made. It's been said that if cultural anthropologists could write, a lot of journalists would have to find other work. The truth of this taunt lies in the fact that the most troubling events of our time simply cannot be adequately accounted for by those who harbor Enlightenment era intellectual biases and the interpretive reflexes they foster. Underlying today's most important events are anthropological dynamics that cannot be properly assessed by the Enlightenment epistemology, precisely because of the Enlightenment's marginalization of the religious data without reference to which our anthropological situation cannot be understood. Nowhere is the shortcoming of contemporary analysis more glaring than in dealing with the problem of evil in our world. The very word *evil* seems to stick in the throat of most of our rationalist commentators. Like the even more suspect word *sin*, it seems to harkened back to a benighted age of superstition.

Far from being a bizarre aberration in human affairs, collective violence, with its mesmerizing and socially galvanizing power, was the context in which human culture first formed. Thanks to the groundbreaking work of René Girard, we can now appreciate the role of violence in bringing human culture as we know it into existence. Mob violence gave rise to the first intense forms of human social solidarity, a solidarity that our most ancient ancestors experienced religiously, and which they gradually learned to extend over time: a) by ritually reenacting the violence that accompanied their original social fusion, using surrogate human or animal victims; b) by hallowing the violence that produced the community's *esprit de corps* in myths that lionized its perpetrators and dehumanized its victims; and c) by erecting taboos against spontaneous, non-ritual outbreaks of violence. It is not within the purview of this presentation to analyze in more detail these rudimentary features of archaic culture and the mimetic phenomena that spontaneously produced them.<sup>3</sup> Rather, our narrower focus will begin by considering the sort of evil that generates a self-camouflaging aura of mythic and religious justifications, and, in return for "eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear," provides the victimizing community with a social solidarity, a sense of righteousness, and an elementary form of ritual religiosity.

Human culture began with such scapegoating events—using the term scapegoating here, not as it was originally used in the Leviticus account of ancient Israel's atonement ritual, but as it is used (and even overused) in so much of today's moral discourse. (The biblical term "scapegoating" emerged and was subsequently applied to such morally offensive events only as part of the gradual historical process by which the true nature of these events comes to be recognized for what it is.) Be that as it may, today's world-wide cultural crisis cannot be understood without appreciating the pivotal role in human affairs played by violence which we now call *scapegoating*. Girard has insisted on the importance of understanding how indebted human culture is to this sort of violence, if only to realize how perilous is the situation in which we now live: namely, a paradoxical situation in which violence is growing more menacing at the same time that it is losing its sacred status and moral legitimacy. Writes Girard: "If the modern mind fails to recognize the strongly functional nature of the scapegoat operation and all its sacrificial surrogates, the most basic phenomena of human culture will remain misunderstood and unresolved."<sup>4</sup>

Today, our failure to recognize the strongly functional nature of the scapegoat operation and all its sacrificial surrogates leaves us vulnerable to forces we cannot fathom, forces which, more likely than not, we will try to ward off with measures guaranteed to exasperate the peril. The fact that we are as aware as we are of the prevalence of scapegoating means that the once mystifying power of mob violence has weakened, that our moral acuties enjoy a degree of immunity to the delusions born of violence. But the sobering fact that we look back on the most violent century in human history is reminder enough of the residual power of the deep-seated social and psychological reflexes that lead to violence, which biblical faiths have not been afraid to label as sin, and which Girard has analyzed anthropologically. The weakening power of what Girard calls "sacred violence"—violence that is so socially transformative and so psychologically transfiguring that its perpetrators regard it as a religious duty and privilege—the weakening of "sacred violence" has been accompanied by the unleashing of forms of violence which "sacred violence" once existed to ward off.

Just as sin destroys the consciousness of sin, so evil obliterates the truth about evil, but how it does so depends on the prevailing historical and cultural circumstances. For millennia, evil perpetuated itself by enveloping its perpetrators in an intoxicating moral fog which made it possible for them to regard their viciousness and brutality as virtue itself. Sinful humans have forever fallen periodically into the vat of their own sinfulness, becoming the perpetrators of evil, the true moral meaning of which they could not fathom. It is in reference to this kind of evil that the familiar biblical refrain about "eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear" has its greatest

meaning. It is precisely on behalf of those made blind and deaf by the contagious power of collective evil that Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." This is the evil that destroys, at least for a time, both the moral and the epistemological lucidity of its perpetrators. Today, however, we face another kind of evil, namely, evil perpetrated by those whose eyes and ears have been, to a degree at least, opened. It is evil whose moral horrors can no longer be altogether obliterated by the mythic justifications of which evil itself has heretofore been capable; it is evil carried out by those no longer blind to what they are doing.

If sin destroys the consciousness of sin, then the emergence of the concept of sin is itself a great breakthrough, signifying, as it does, that sin has become conscious, that a moral acuity has survived the moral narcotic that sin secretes. Similarly, the fact that we have the words *scapegoat* and *scapegoating* in our vocabulary means that the scapegoating mechanisms are imperiled, for these mechanisms only function with their full force when those caught up in them remain blind to what they are doing. Today, the words *scapegoat* and *scapegoating* are used and misused and exploited thousands of times a day in every imaginable context. That almost everyone in western culture now knows enough about scapegoating to try to exploit the concept in a self-serving way may be mildly irritating or comical, but what makes these antics possible is one of the most important breakthroughs in human history: the weakening power of the self-exonerating myths which scapegoating violence was once able to generate. That the weakening of this ability has coincided with countless outbreaks of scapegoating violence is no accident. When violence was still able to generate true unanimity (what Girard has termed "unanimity-minus-one"), fostering thereby religious delusions as to the sacred status of the violence, a relatively small act of violence produced a great deal of social peace, albeit only the highly dubious "peace that the world understands." This is part of what Girard calls "the strongly functional nature of the scapegoat operation and all its sacrificial surrogates." Sacrificial or scapegoating violence has socially rejuvenating efficacy only as long as its participants believe in the myths that lend moral and religious legitimacy to their violence, precisely the myths that are shattered by the word *scapegoating*, used not in the ritual context in which it appears in the Jewish Bible, but as it comes to be used in those cultures that fell under the influence of the Christian Gospel. These are the issues that lie beneath the surface today, and our attempts to reckon with evil in our world will only bear fruit to the degree that we take account of them.

The story of the crucifixion is the decisive exposé of the scapegoating mechanism on which fallen human culture has always depended. It is the truth about these things that has been hidden "since the foundation of the world." The Passion story is a variation of the same story told in countless

myths, tragedies, and narratives ancient and modern: the story of a crisis-ridden people, given all too readily to adulation and accusation (the alternation between “Palm Sunday” adulation and “Good Friday” accusation being notoriously fickle and breathtakingly swift), and who eventually turn on one figure they come to regard as the epitome of the danger by which they feel imperiled, and whom they execute or expel in the name of all that is holy and good. The universality of this story, of which nineteenth-century ethnologists became aware, caused those antipathetic to Christianity to dismiss the Gospel as yet another myth like all the rest. This possibility convinced Christians troubled by its implications that “science” and “religion” were incompatible, and they took measures to insulate themselves from the disturbing anthropological data. It was Girard who took the challenge represented by the homology between myth and Gospel seriously, and, in addressing it, he made the single most important anthropological discovery of our time, namely, he recognized the “strongly functional nature of the scapegoat operation and all its sacrificial surrogates.” The mechanism of the surrogate victim is redemptive twice over: by promoting unanimity it quells violence on all fronts, and by preventing an outbreak of bloodshed within the community it keeps the truth about men from becoming known.<sup>5</sup>

But the truth nevertheless *did* become known, that is precisely the point. The greatest single revelation of this truth, and the one without which all the inchoate intimations of it would have gone unthematized, is the truth that stands revealed on Golgotha. There we discover in the most powerful ways possible that the victim is innocent and the righteous mob, so sure of the sacredness of the violence it espouses, is mad.

The evangelist Luke gives us an account of the passion that has especially compelling anthropological implications. He describes the death of Jesus with these words: “When the centurion saw what had taken place, he gave praise to God and said, ‘Truly, this was an innocent man’” (Luke 23:47). Of all there present, the centurion is clearly the least likely to recognize the truth for which he is the first exponent, namely, the innocence of the victim. As a Roman soldier, the centurion is in the service of the occupying power, and as one assigned to overseeing the execution of condemned criminals, he doubtless has a strong stomach: his empathy for victims is massively more recessive than would be that, say, of a faithful Jew who had read the Psalms, or Jeremiah, or Deutero-Isaiah. Be that as it may, it is from his mouth that Luke lets fall the decisive announcement of the innocence of the victim. This announcement is decisive precisely because the social benefits of the scapegoating mechanism—the renewal of social bonds among the righteous persecutors, the rejuvenation of the cultural myths and so on—cannot survive the recognition of the innocence of the victim. Luke chooses to locate that recognition in the centurion in the first

instance in order to emphasize, in his characteristic way, the universality of its significance. It is Luke's way of showing that, though the recognition of the innocence of the victim is much more likely to occur to those who have been exposed to the Jewish religious tradition, in which an empathy for victims *as victims* has a *history*, nevertheless, one needn't be exposed to this tradition; one need only be enculturated into any culture, inasmuch as all cultures rely on this mechanism in one way or another, and what the centurion has seen is simply that mechanism with all its markers reversed. In this sense at least, he has undergone a *conversion*.

The frenzy into which a scapegoating mob descends predisposes its participants to believe the accusations against the victim that triggered the social avalanche and brought about the final polarization, the unanimity-minus-one situation. The innocence of even the most faultless victim can easily be occluded by the delusional power of this mob phenomenon. (An anthropological approach suggests that for the mesmerizing power of this mechanism to be broken as decisively as it was at Golgotha, the innocence of the accused would have to be greater than could be expected from even the most morally upright human being, that only an *ontological*, as contrasted to a mere *moral* innocence would have been capable of causing the persecutors, like the centurion, and the onlookers, like the angry Jews, to experience, at some level, the moral reality of what had taken place.)

It is important to understand that the "innocence" of the victim can be structural rather than merely moral or juridical. Someone lynched for stealing a horse may well have stolen the horse, but by lynching him his community, without realizing it of course, will be exploiting his moral failure, using it to transmute their own moral failures, first into righteous indignation and then into sacred (or quasi-sacred) violence. The victim of such things, his moral culpability for what he did notwithstanding, will enjoy—in the eyes of a Christian—a structural innocence. Understanding this should help to prevent a widespread moral mistake, the essence, perhaps, of "political correctness," namely, that the designation of "scapegoat" implies no moral approval of whatever he or she may have done (if anything) in attracting the wrath of the mob. Unless this is made clear, there is a tendency to transmute the "empathy for victims" into a moral valorization of whatever behavior on the part of the victim has aroused the crowd's ire. Having said that, however, it must also be said that what the lynched man in the above analogy has in common with the Crucified Christ will be more defining of the situation than whatever moral abyss might separate them. And so the revelation of the innocence of the victim at the heart of the New Testament has profound moral and cultural implications far beyond the few cases in which more or less pure innocence is involved. The revelation of the cross shoves a stick in the spokes of the very mechanism humanity has

used since the dawn of culture for “taking away (in its own sinful way) the sins of the world,” by transferring them to their scapegoats.

When it comes to understanding the practical consequences of Christianity’s debilitating effect on the myths and rituals of sacred violence, literary texts are often of more value than the analyses of the social sciences, perhaps because the former are to a degree less likely to fall captive to political ideology and intellectual fashions (which for the most part boast of an empathy for the victims of their ideological opponents while remaining cheerfully blind to their own victims). One literary text that is especially useful in bringing to light the ongoing historical struggle between the logic of sacrificial violence and the Logos of forgiveness and love is Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. For our purposes, the play is of added interest inasmuch as we will shortly turn to some reflections on the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, and Nietzsche saw Hamlet as too lacking in the will-to-power, too irresolute, his will no doubt made flaccid by its subjection to Christianity and its incessant evocation of “pity.”

Hamlet’s father was murdered and his throne usurped by his uncle, Claudius, who forthwith married the widow of king, Prince Hamlet’s mother. All this the prince learned from the ghost of his father who appeared to him. The “sacred” duty to avenge the death of one’s murdered clansman, especially one’s own father, is deeply rooted in the system of reciprocal violence—*lex talionis*, the law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—that goes back no doubt to very early stages of cultural life. As one of the most tenacious forms of sacred violence, it persists long after other forms have begun to lose their respectability. Shakespeare has given Hamlet as powerful a justification for violence as the early seventeenth century could imagine. All the more astonishing, therefore, is Hamlet’s inability to kill the usurper king, an inability that baffles Hamlet as much as anybody. He wants to kill Claudius; he has sworn to do so, and he cannot bring himself to kill him. Why? Hamlet is disgusted with his bewildering paralysis. He, too, anticipates Nietzsche: “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all . . .” (III, i). If he cannot kill, he can at least curse:

. . . Bloody, bawdy, villain!  
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!  
O, Vengeance!  
Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,  
That I, the son of a dear father murdered,  
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,  
Must (like a whore) unpack my heart with words . . . (II, ii)

All Hamlet can do is talk. He cannot avenge his father, and he cannot understand why he hesitates. There is no better gloss on this text than that

provided by Nietzsche himself in a passage from *The Gay Science*. He writes:

The thoughtless man thinks that the Will is the only thing that operates, that willing is something simple, manifestly given, underived, and comprehensible in itself. He is convinced that when he does anything, for example, when he delivers a blow, it is *he* who strikes, and he has struck because he *willed* to strike. . . . Of the mechanism of the occurrence, and of the manifold subtle operations that must be performed in order that the blow may result, and likewise the incapacity of the Will in itself to effect even the smallest part of those operations—he knows nothing . . . volition is in fact such a cleverly practiced mechanical process that it almost escapes the observing eye.<sup>6</sup>

For all its centrality in his thought, ironically, Nietzsche knew that what he called the will-to-power was not ultimately volitional, that it involves a submission to another will, the one, I would submit, to which Damian Williams found himself submitting and about which he said: “I was just caught up in the rapture.” The metaphor Nietzsche uses to illustrate his point illustrates it almost too well. It helps insure that what almost escapes the observing eye will not altogether escape it. It is the *will to strike a blow* with which Nietzsche is concerned, and with the mechanism that gives rise to that will, precisely the deed before which Hamlet stands paralyzed. Make no mistake, the mechanism Nietzsche is talking about is not the autonomic nervous system. The “manifold subtle operations” of which he speaks are *social* operations, that is to say, mimetic ones. “Will,” wrote Nietzsche, “can of course operate only on ‘will’ and not on ‘matter’.”<sup>7</sup> Will (or in Girardian terms, desire) is always indebted to another will on which it is modeled, and in tension with a counter-will by which it is scandalized. In the worst situations, the will on which one’s own will is modeled and the counter-will against which one’s own will is asserted are the same will.

Though never thematized in his work, Nietzsche has an intuitive understanding of the power of mimetic influence in human affairs and how the mimetic effect of one will on another is vastly magnified under conditions of social crisis. “Everything is in the highest degree involuntary,” he writes, “but takes place as in a tempest of a feeling of freedom, of absoluteness, of power, of divinity.”<sup>8</sup> He saw—with less than perfect clarity to be sure—that the will of the superman is no less mimetically engendered than the depraved hoots and hollers of the mob. He, too, must be set to work by the throbbing dithyramb and the theatrical appearance of the Dionysian pied piper.

Hamlet may be only dimly aware of the fact that volition is “a cleverly practiced mechanical process,” but Shakespeare is perfectly aware of it, and understanding what the bard is doing in this play requires that we never mistake Hamlet’s bewilderment for that of his creator. No one knows better than Shakespeare how dependent we humans are on the mimetic influence of others, how, to use Girard’s terminology, desire—whether for possessions, social prestige, power, or vengeance—is always awakened by someone else’s desire for these things. Lacking the will to vengeance, Hamlet coaxes the players into playing a scene that perfectly mirrors his own situation, the story of the vengeance of Pyrrhus, Achilles’ son, on Priam, the old king of Troy.

Player: For lo! his sword,  
Which was declining on the milky head  
Of reverend Priam, seemed i’ the air to stick.  
So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,  
And, like a neutral to his will and matter,  
Did nothing.  
But, as we often see, against some storm,  
A silence in the heavens, the rack stand still,  
The bold winds speechless, and the orb below  
As hush as death—anon the dreadful thunder  
Doth rend the region; so, after Pyrrhus’ pause,  
Aroused vengeance sets him new awork;  
And never did the Cyclops’ hammers fall  
On Mars’s armor, forged for proof eterne,  
With less remorse than Pyrrhus’ bleeding sword  
Now falls on Priam. (II, ii)

Experts tell us that there is at least as much empirical evidence for the link between violence on television and in popular films and violence in our streets, especially among the young, than there is between tobacco and lung cancer. But the linkage didn’t begin with the technology of today’s mass culture. Hamlet relies on exactly the same power of mimetic influence. He might as well have put a violent video game into his VCR, which he surely would have, had he had one.

But it still doesn’t work, nothing does. Later in the play, seeing Fortinbras willing to risk all “to gain a little patch of ground” worth nothing, Hamlet is painfully reminded of his own hesitation:

How all occasions do inform against me  
And spur my dull revenge! . . .  
I do not know  
Why yet I live to say “This thing’s to do,”  
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means  
To do’t. Examples gross as earth exhort me. (IV, iv)

Hamlet still can't perform what he feels it his sacred duty to do: kill Claudius. Why? Hamlet never understands, but Shakespeare does, and he leaves evidence all over the place. Where does Hamlet have a chance to kill Claudius? In the chapel, of course. There is nothing arbitrary about this. Shakespeare has taken pains to see that Hamlet's one and only real opportunity to kill Claudius occurs in the most obviously Christian setting. This is to give dramatic expression to contest that is taking place in Hamlet's heart between the old pagan imperative of sacred vengeance and the Christian imperative of forgiveness. Hamlet believes, and would have the audience believe, that he doesn't take advantage of this opportunity to kill Claudius because he has happened upon Claudius repenting of his sins. If he kills him now, Hamlet reasons, he will go to heaven; he wants him to go to hell. That's as Hamlet sees it, but Shakespeare knows better. Bracketed between two unmistakable references to the religious and moral revolution, the play is exploring what was and is the central drama of Western history, namely the confrontation between the pagan imperative in favor of sacred violence and the Christian revelation of humanity's fallenness, and its need for conversion, repentance, and forgiveness.

At the beginning of the play, the ghost of Hamlet's father appears, striking fear in the hearts of Marcellus, Horatio, and Bernardo. The ghost of the fallen king is the personification of the pagan imperative, inasmuch as he thunders that imperative into the ear of Prince Hamlet his son. Revenge is his sacred duty. Exactly as the cock crows, the specter vanishes, and Shakespeare draws special attention to that coincidence. Lest some might think it fanciful to make connection between this crowing cock and the New Testament in which it plays such a central symbolic role, Shakespeare removes all doubt. It is Marcellus who makes it impossible for us to overlook the Christian connotations of stage direction: "the cock crows." Marcellus says:

It faded on the crowing of the cock.  
Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes  
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,  
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;  
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,  
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,  
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,  
So hallowed and so gracious is the time. [I, i]

This explicit association of the disappearance of the representative of the old logic of sacred violence with the Christian meaning of the cock crowing adds something that is especially helpful in reckoning the Gospel's historical effect. The Christian Gospel is such a sign of contradiction, so counterintuitive that for a long time, the Gospel ethic in favor of victims

can still be set aside, especially during times of crisis. It shows its tenacity, however, by returning in due course to haunt the consciences of those caught up in crisis or their moral heirs. During this phase of the culture's encounter with the Gospel, one could say that the bird of dawning singeth only in the morning, that is to say, only after the violence had swept the mob along and run its course. If and when the bird of dawning singeth *all night long*, we have the problem that Shakespeare explores in Hamlet, which just happens to be the problem, *mutatis mutandis*, which so often preoccupies Nietzsche, and for which his *Übermensch* (superman) was his solution.

Shakespeare gives us more than one glimpse of what this superman looked like at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Laertes may be tame in comparison to many other of Shakespeare's other *Übermensch*-like characters, but he serves especially well to bring out the underlying struggle that helped shaped the Nietzschean superman as well as his predecessors and descendants. As so often, Shakespeare gives us a parallel plot as a foil for the main drama, and in this parallel plot Laertes has exactly the same moral dilemma that Hamlet has. His father has been murdered (by Hamlet), and he knows who did it. With this Shakespeare removes any possibility that attentive audience members will miss the main point. All they have to do is compare Laertes to Hamlet. Toward the end of the play, Claudius toys with Laertes' vengeance, doing for it what the players were unable to do for Hamlet's. Once Laertes has been goaded into passion by Claudius, the king presses him.

King: What would you undertake  
 To show yourself your father's son in deed  
 More than in words?  
 Laertes: To cut his throat i' the church!  
 King: No place indeed should murder sanctuarize . . .  
 Revenge should have no bounds . . .

It was in the "church" that Hamlet had his opportunity to perform his act of sacred violence, and he couldn't do it. Laertes, driven by an identical pagan imperative, is ready and willing to "cut his throat i' the church." The "Church" is the place where sacred violence is, or should be, recognizable for what it is: murder. The "Church" is the synecdoche for Christianity and its historical effect, precisely the effect that Nietzsche was so determined to eliminate.

What often goes unnoticed in Luke's account of the moment Christ dies is the theological significance of the centurion's exclamation. Luke tells us that in drawing his breath to announce the innocent of the victims, the centurion "gave praise to God." The anthropological meaning of the

centurion's declaration is intimately connected to the theological meaning which he (and Saint Luke) attach to it by announcing it only after praising God, precisely the biblical God. It is, after all, this God who is being revealed on the cross. When this scapegoating mechanism works, on the other hand, it is because, at least for a fleeting moment, its "god"—or ideological demigod—serves to erase the moral reality of the violence. This is not the God, however, to whom the centurion gives praise. The praise he gives, on the contrary, is proof that the god-making delusions essential to the cultural survival of pagan religion have been shattered, and this revelation remains the world's most powerfully desacralizing force, meaning by desacralization the undermining of the myths and rituals of sacred violence. The anthropological effects of this shattering are immediately apparent in the next verse from Luke: "And when all the crowds who had gathered for the spectacle saw what had happened, they turned away beating their breasts" (Luke 23:48).

The spectacle on Golgotha is the same spectacle that has been gathering humans together "since the foundation of the world," but here, finally and decisively, the foundations are shaken, the crowd disperses in confusion. In the immediate aftermath of the revelation of the cross—the innocence of the victim announced by the centurion—Luke gives us a glimpse of its anthropological effects: cultural dissolution. It is in light of the exposé that cripples the mechanism for rejuvenating conventional culture that the warning issued by the Lucan Jesus—"Whoever does not gather with me scatters" (Luke 1:23)—takes on its most important anthropological meaning. Friedrich Nietzsche, about whom more will be said below, imagined that it might still be possible to effect this gathering otherwise, by remythologizing European culture around Dionysian, not Christian, principles.

We must not allow the massive anthropological implications of this revelation to eclipse the theological revolution that occurs at its heart, the centurion's prefatory prayer is warning against that. The gods of the victimizers have been robbed of their power, and a prayer of praise arises from the heart of a pagan soldier, a prayer to the same God who heard the cry of Abel's blood, and who hears the cry of the poor and oppressed, and who gives himself in love on the Cross. This is the theological revelation at the heart of the Gospel, and its anthropological, cultural, and historical ramifications are so pervasive that even those who benefit most from them often fail to see their boundless scope and universal significance.

Nietzsche, however, saw them, and his reaction to what he saw reverberates in a characteristically aphoristic lament made, appropriately enough, in a late work entitled *The Antichrist*: "almost two thousand years and no new god."<sup>9</sup> For all his madness, Nietzsche here glimpses an important anthropological effect of the Christian revelation, and he recoils from it.

The word Nietzsche uses to characterize what he loathes most about the cultural effect of Christianity is, as we have said, the word *pity*. He fails to see the specificity of the moral impulse he repudiates. It isn't pity; it is empathy for victims *as victims* that the Gospel awakens, and it is that empathy that has had a mounting effect on cultural life during the last "two thousand years," Nietzsche's obvious allusion to Christianity. Nietzsche is under no illusions as to why no new gods have emerged; he knows full well it is because of Christianity, and the titanic task he has undertaken is to set aside this tradition *tout court* in order that humanity might return—his famous "eternal recurrence"—to the greatness of classical cultures, those cultures hospitable to the emergence (out of violence) of new gods.

"As soon as man ceases to be in contact with great mystical or religious forces," writes Henri de Lubac, "does he not inevitably come under the yoke of a harsher and blinder force, which leads him to perdition? It is what Vico called the age of 'deliberate barbarism', and that is the age in which we live."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Giambattista Vico's cyclical theory of history, so reminiscent of Oriental notions of time and culture, find more than an echo in Nietzsche's notion of the eternal return, a flat rejection of biblical historical consciousness. Barbarism was for Vico what Dionysian madness was to Nietzsche, the necessary and unavoidable prelude to the greatness that would mysteriously issue forth from the violence in the form of a new epoch and a new god.

Nietzsche sets his face against the empathy for victims aroused by Christianity, and his task is to find a way to override or outflank precisely this empathy, this "pity." The way he finally proposes, quite logically, is pitilessness. Nietzsche addresses his homilies about the *Übermensch* and his hymns about the generative power of Dionysian chaos to those who he knows will come after him, urging them not to flinch. The task from which they are not to flinch is never explicitly defined, but it will coincide with humanity's reacquisition of its ancient god-making and *Reich*-founding powers. Seen anthropologically, and precisely through the anthropological lens represented by the work of Girard, this represents the unique problem of evil in our time: evil no longer self-concealing, no longer carried out by those able to inoculate themselves to the moral horror of what they are doing, but evil presided over by those who, terrifyingly, know what they are doing. Nietzsche might not call these things evil—except to beckon his acolytes "beyond good and evil"—for he was as averse to this staple of Judeo-Christian moral thought as he was to the word "sin." The supermen (and superwomen) to whom he issues his call are those who know that to be delivered from banality they must not shed tears over the victims lost in the Dionysian god-making procedures.

Nietzsche must be given credit for recognizing what nineteenth-century Christians were unable to recognize: that it was Christianity that was

desacralizing the world, but even before Girard provided substantial anthropological and theoretical substantiation, perceptive thinkers began to see the effect of the Gospel in this regard. "One of the signs of a mature spirit," wrote the Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac, "is without doubt to renounce false forms of transcendence."<sup>11</sup>

One must 'reject the gods' . . . 'all the gods'. That is precisely what the disciples of Jesus taught us to do from the beginning. If they were taken for atheists, it was not because they were making the banal claim to have discovered *another god*—who would simply have been one among many: but because they proclaimed him who is *totally different from the gods*, and who frees us from their tyranny. They denied everything that the men around them took for the divine—everything that man, at every epoch, tends to deify in order to adore himself and tyrannize over himself, in and through his gods.<sup>12</sup>

"The Gospel," de Lubac insisted, "is the only 'twilight of the gods'."<sup>13</sup>

Girard has shown us what the god-making laboratory looks like. It looks like Golgotha, but one that ends, not with the realization of the victim's innocence and the dispersal of the confounded mob, but with the mob's celebration of its victory in a holy cause. Archaic myths are replete with precisely this variation on the story that the New Testament tells from the point of view of its victim, each of them amounting for the birth or rebirth of a "god"—the idol in whose service the community feels it has performed a sacred duty. The efficacy of such rituals, of course, depends on how thoroughly intoxicated by the violence its perpetrators are and that depends on the degree to which the truth about the victim emerges. This is not to say that those exposed will not succumb to the logic of sacred violence, for the power of the social contagion it sets in motion remains enormous. It means, rather, that, to the degree that they have been exposed to the truth of the victim, people will be both less completely caught up in the madness of scapegoating violence and that they will awaken from its spell with a moral hangover more readily than will those not exposed to this truth.

The crudeness of his analysis notwithstanding, Nietzsche recognized the problem that Christianity represented for those, like himself, who were nostalgic for what they regarded as the great tragic civilizations that predated Christianity. The death of (the Christian) God was not enough, a new god would have to arise, and his name was Dionysus. But being a pagan is one thing; being a neo-pagan quite another. Post-Christianity is a lot easier to dream about than it is to actually put into practice. The challenge facing Nietzsche, of which he is partially aware, is to shake off the

deeply embedded Christian influences (those that survive even in his own most adamantly anti-Christian invective), and to substitute for them a form of enculturation that will eliminate the experience of guilt, or at least convince those who experience it of the nobility of accepting the guilt as part of their *amor fati*. The ministers and priests of Dionysus would have to be supermen inhabiting the Parnassian heights beyond good and evil precisely because, since the truth of the victim could not be entirely obliterated, those who presided over the violence and believed in its necessity would have to do so without the benefit of the moral oblivion once enjoyed by their ancestors. The Nietzschean supermen would have to carry out their ritual duties even while recognizing how fundamentally arbitrary was their violence and therefore how relatively “innocent” their victims.

The New Testament insists that the revelation it contains will overtake humanity gradually, altering as it does the human moral and cultural situation, and in his own way Nietzsche is fully aware of this. His famous death of God is really a footnote to his far less famous lament over the cursed inability of the world under Christian influence to give birth to new gods. Almost a century before a Christian, René Girard, made the relationship between the rise of Christianity and the decline of pagan god-making procedures anthropologically intelligible, Nietzsche bemoaned that relationship, vowing to throw off the Christian influence in his determination to restore the tragic greatness of pagan antiquity.

There would be no need for the steely-eyed Nietzschean superman if the faces of the victims could be as obliterated as they were before the biblical truth about victims began to overtake the mythic efforts to ward off that truth. The result of this collision of two religiously formidable tectonic plates, the pagan and the biblical, is that humans caught up in the scapegoating to which all sin inevitably leads will be torn between a biblical truth calling for contrition and conversion and a pagan imperative demanding loyalty to the bloody business at hand. Dream as he did of the priesthood of the *Übermensch*, Nietzsche sensed that neither the unflinching superman nor the Dionysian frenzy in all its deliriousness could prevent humanity from awakening from its delusions with a moral hangover:

How shall we console ourselves, murderers that we are, among the murderers? . . . Who will cleanse us of this blood? What expiations, what sacred charade shall we be forced to invent? The greatness of this deed is too great for us. Shall we not have to become gods ourselves simply in order to seem worthy of it?<sup>14</sup>

Nietzsche's soaring rhetoric—infectious as it proved to be—was not enough to keep the dark Schopenhauerian pessimism which had so

fascinated him at one point from reasserting itself in the form of a fatalism—a nihilism Nietzsche could only try to salvage by turning it into his organizing principle. As the “madman” suggests in the passage just quoted, the question is: what sacred charades would those determined to repudiate Christianity’s empathy for victims have to invent? Let’s take a glance at a few sacred charades.

Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* takes place of course set in a pagan setting, but the issues with which it deals are those specific to Shakespeare’s Europe at the beginning of the seventeenth century, issues related to those explored in *Hamlet*. In assassinating the god-like Caesar, and hoping to sacralize in the process a new republican order, Brutus and his co-conspirators must have recourse to the god-making procedures. Brutus mulls over the task, brooding on how to perform a sacred charade, how to stage the assassination so as to endow it with the kind of moral legitimacy that the Christian empathy for victims tended to undermine. Speaking to Cassius, Brutus says:

Our course will seem too bloody, Caius Cassius,  
To cut the head off and then hack the limbs,  
Like wrath in death and envy afterwards;  
For Antony is but a limb of Caesar.  
Let’s be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius.  
We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar,  
And in the spirit of men there is no blood.  
O, that we then could come by Caesar’s spirit,  
And not dismember Caesar! But, alas,  
Caesar must bleed for it. And, gentle friends,  
Let’s kill him boldly, but not wrathfully;  
Let’s carve him as a dish for the gods,  
Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds.  
And let our hearts, as subtle masters do,  
Stir up their servants to an act of rage,  
And after seem to chide ’em. This shall make  
Our purpose necessary, and not envious;  
Which so appearing to the common eyes,  
We shall be call’d purgers, not murderers. (II, i)

When the vulgar truth about violence has intruded itself and this level of conscious contrivance is required in order to lend it the aura of sacrality, even the most exquisitely choreographed sacred charades will do little more than postpone the moral awakening, while making its inevitable arrival even more morally devastating. More morally devastating precisely because the perpetrators of the violence do not have honest ignorance as an excuse. The more carefully they perform the sacred charades the more

morally culpable they are, and the more certainly that culpability will force its way back into their consciousness.

Attempts to bring new gods into being needn't be as vulgar as Nietzsche's invocation of Dionysus. Anytime efforts are made to lend religious legitimacy to violence, sacralization is being attempted. The religious transfiguration of violence, however attenuated, depends on sacred charades, charades to which our honestly ignorant ancestors were oblivious, but to which we are not. These efforts fail in direct proportion to their proximity to the revelation that undermines their mythic justifications, namely, the revelation of the cross. Whenever the sacralizing effort includes an attempt to apply a Christian patina to the violence, a moral dissonance is set up that is sure to hasten the demise of, and intensify the eventual moral revulsion for, the violence in question.

H. G. Wells is more of a colorful journalist than he is an historian, but in his popularized survey of history he gives an account of the French Revolution that serves to illustrate the kind of sacred charade which Robespierre hastily attempted in his desperate and doomed effort to turn the reign of terror into political legitimacy. Of the crisis for which some "closure" was desperately needed, Wells writes:

Nothing could have better pleased the fierce heart of the Paris slums. The Revolutionary Tribunal went to work, and a steady slaughtering began. . . . The invention of the guillotine was opportune to this mood. The queen was guillotined, and most of Robespierre's antagonists were guillotined; atheists who argued that there was no Supreme Being were guillotined; Danton was guillotined because he thought there was too much guillotine; day by day, week by week, this infernal new machine chopped off heads and more heads and more. The reign of Robespierre lived, it seemed, on blood, and needed more and more, as an opium-taker needs more and more opium.<sup>15</sup>

The metaphor of violence as opium addiction, which required the spilling of more and more blood, surely will not be lost on anyone pondering the twentieth (and the beginning of the twenty-first) century. Religiously flat-footed Jacobins thought it time to bring about in fine French fashion the death of God which Nietzsche would declare a hundred years later.

There was a proposal from one extremist group to abolish God among other institutions altogether, and to substitute the worship of Reason. There was, indeed, a Feast of Reason in the cathedral of Notre Dame, with a pretty actress as the Goddess of Reason. But against this Robespierre set his face. . . . So he guillotined Hébert, who had celebrated the Feast of Reason, and all his party.<sup>16</sup>

Robespierre seems instinctively to have realized that the violence would have to be sacralized, and he may have sensed as well that the mood was right. Here is what an English observer had to say about the effect of the revolutionary violence on many who witnessed it:

Every faculty of the mind was awakened, every feeling raised to the intenseness of interest, every principle and passion called into superhuman exertions. At one moment, all was hope and joy and rapture; the corruption and iniquity of ages seemed to vanish like a dream; the unclouded heavens seemed once more to ring with an exulting chorus of peace on earth and good-will to men; and the spirit of a mighty and puissant nation . . . seemed rising in native majesty to draw new inspiration from the rejoicing heavens.<sup>17</sup>

One can't help thinking of Damian Williams again: "I was just caught up in the rapture." The hope and joy and rapture that flooded the romantic soul of the English observer is the stuff of the primitive sacred. The time was ripe for a sacred charade. Robespierre, at this point little more than a tool of the mob violence, obliged as well as he could. Wells writes:

[Robespierre] induced the Convention to decree that France believed in a Supreme Being. . . . In June he celebrated a great festival, the festival of his Supreme Being. There was a procession to the Champ de Mars, which he headed, brilliantly arrayed, bearing a great bunch of flowers and wheat-ears. Figures of inflammatory material, which represented Atheism and Vice, were solemnly burnt; then, by an ingenious mechanism, and with some slight creakings, an incom-bustible statue of Wisdom rose in their place.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps we can let the reference to "some slight creakings" serve to remind us how contrived and inevitably futile was Robespierre's blatant attempt to bring into the cultural life of Christian France one of the gods whose long absence Nietzsche was later to lament. Nietzsche may have despised what seemed to him the vulgar goals of the French revolution—equality, rationality, etc.—but about Robespierre's god-making ritual he might have had a more ambivalent attitude. In any case, Martin Heidegger, one of Nietzsche's most brilliant twentieth-century heirs (a distinction he holds regardless of his criticisms of Nietzsche), told a *Der Spiegel* interviewer in darkly prophetic tones: "Only a god can save us." But this was after the ignominious collapse of the greatest god-making experiment ever to take place in the Christian West, one for which Heidegger had early been sympathetic. Which brings to mind a remark Nicholas Boyle made about how Heidegger suffered the fate of another of his admired predecessors, the German poet

Hölderlin. Hölderlin, too, writes Boyle, “had been disappointed in his age, expecting from the great Revolution of 1789 a new epiphany of the Greek gods, and being granted only Napoleon.”<sup>19</sup>

As we have said, deep-seated social and psychological reflexes predispose us to react in social crises in ways that set in motion the sacrificial rituals upon which conventional culture has always relied. Once these crises become violent, the task of ending the violence is often synonymous with the task of endowing one act of violence, or one of the parties to the violence, with moral and religious transcendence, giving it thereby the prestige, power, and authority to effectively censure all other forms of violence, thereby restoring peace and inaugurating a new cultural epoch. As the lively debate of the “just war theory” that accompanied the United States’ military response to the explicitly religious violence of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks of September 11 made clear, Christianity may declare some state-sponsored violence “just” according to an increasingly narrowing set of criteria, but there is no longer any serious possibility that it will declare violence, any violence, to be *sacred*. Christians may in good conscience be asked to fight against warriors whose religious leaders and institutions assure them that they are fighting a holy war, but fighting *against* a holy war is not the same thing as fighting a holy war. It is religiously, morally, and to a significant degree militarily, different.

Those cultures that have fallen under Gospel influence, face, to that degree, a challenge: how to give transcendent meaning to acts of violence deemed essential to national or cultural survival while carefully avoiding any explicit suggestion that the God of Christianity would be pleased by violence, a suggestion that grows increasingly less and less plausible and palatable. Those oblivious to these matters, and unaware of the anthropological revolution they represent, will often make choices necessitated by cultural and historical developments whose practicality they sense but whose deeper meaning they do not. Girard calls attention to a case in point. He writes:

Our military men love to give mythological names to their nuclear missiles, Pluto, Poseidon, Ariadne, and the like. Too bad they never resorted to Dionysus himself, but it really does not matter. Those who understand do not need such literalness and it would not make any impression on those who do not understand. The contemporary use of mythology is more profound than all the mythological games of our philosophers since the Renaissance.<sup>20</sup>

Girard’s remark is pertinent to the issue we are exploring. Increasingly in Western culture today, the use of explicit Christian justifications for violence are more likely to offend and thereby cause the violence in question to be

more critically scrutinized by Christians as well as others. Both believers and non-believers, both pacifists and just-war advocates, are offended by any overt suggestion that the God-man who was crucified wants his followers to kill people. Not even the most zealously patriotic Christians, unless woefully out of touch with its moral traditions, would want to declare that Christ wants violent followers. That the military planners have begun to name their weapons for pagan gods is simply a symptom of the need to shift from a Judeo-Christian to a classical-neopagan symbolic and rhetorical vocabulary, a need of which these planners are no doubt at best only dimly aware but one which is, for all that, all the more illuminating. Increasingly in Western societies, in order for violence to enjoy a degree of moral legitimacy it must be, or at least *appear* to be, an essentially policing function: the disarming of belligerents whose victims, or potential victims, are civilians, that is to say, “innocent.” In other words, in order for violence to retain a degree of moral privilege it must be violence aimed at defending victims. Like all other forms of victimary moral logic, this one lends itself all too easily to manipulation. The point is, however, that violence continues to lose its sacred or privileged status in those cultures under New Testament influence, and that this diminution of sacrality has far-reaching consequences.

While not reckoning the anthropological background of this loss of sacrality, nor the role of Christianity in bringing it about, Nicholas Boyle nevertheless alludes intriguingly to one of its most significant implications for our time when he writes that “world-history is the story of the state-forming varieties of religious awareness . . .”<sup>21</sup>

By “religious awareness” Boyle is certainly not speaking of creedal or doctrinal matters. His statement’s importance would be lost if we reduced it to that. The “religious awareness” of which states are the “historical” manifestation is the same religious awareness of which cultures centered around altars of blood sacrifice were the “prehistorical” manifestation. Such cultures are, in New Testament terms, kingdoms of “this world.” Whether ancient or modern, their “religious awareness” is rooted in the socially and psychologically transfiguring power of violence, and the point we are making—and it is a point for which Boyle offers important corroboration—is that today this state-forming variety of religious awareness is both waning and pathologizing (as waning rituals typically do). It is waning because it is incompatible with the Gospel revelation, and the empathy for victims it fosters, and it is pathologizing because the crisis associated with its waning arouses the social and psychological reflexes that predispose us to victimizing violence. “It is impossible to call up the forces which weaken or destroy religion,” writes Girard, “without simultaneously calling up those which restore it. They are the same forces . . .”<sup>22</sup>

Widespread rituals of animal, and occasional human sacrifices, routinely occur today in Indian, Islamic, and animist cultures, but these things

have long disappeared from “Western” or Christianized cultural settings. But the conversion of heart which makes it possible to dispense with such rituals is as rare as ever. As a result, variations on the sacrificial logic of archaic culture emerge, one after another, as humanity is gradually extricated from such things. Until recently, we in the West have been as unable to recognize the ritual nature and sacrificial logic of our sacred system as were our ancestors. In either case, the functioning sacrificial mechanism is always the source of allegiance in reference to which one can kill with moral impunity and, should one die in the process, be assured of a degree of cultural canonization for having done so. As Nicholas Boyle suggests, in our time that role has been played by the modern nation-state. So let us ponder briefly this familiar, but somewhat novel institution, one that in its present form is both distinctively “Western” and only a few hundred years old. During this time it has functioned to give identity to its citizens, and it has done so in part by functioning as a sacred system in the sense we have just described. Untold numbers of people have died in service to this system, and vastly more have killed in its name, most with moral impunity. The benefits of living in a functioning nation cannot be denied, but neither can they be used as an excuse for refusing to acknowledge this darker reality.

A nation is typically born in violence, and, like the ancient gods and the rituals of blood sacrifice periodically offered to them, it just as typically rejuvenates itself in violence. The prophets of ancient Israel regarded the gentile nations, distant ancestors of the modern nation-state, as works of idolatry, and no modern nation-state would long survive the complete demise of its own idols. In this very important sense, therefore, the birth of a nation-state is the birth of a god. Michael Gillespie brings out this connection when he writes:

Each god is an unself-conscious expression of a people's will to power. A god is thus rooted in the people's way of life and represents the goal or ideal that binds them together and sets them in opposition to their neighbors. The nation and the god are inextricably bound together, and the death of a nation's god or the introduction of new gods thus betokens the collapse of a people.<sup>23</sup>

The point is not to bemoan the form of human fallenness that is currently in historical fashion, and still less to naively insist that it be forthwith replaced by the Kingdom of God. The point is to account for the demise of the latest form of the worldly kingdom. Like the ones that preceded it, and which fell into disuse, if not disrepute, under the impact of the same revelation, the nation-state is slowly losing its most powerful galvanizing ritual, the patriotism awakened in response to the terrorist attacks in 2001

notwithstanding. That the nation-state is losing the sacrality which it was the business of that ritual to conjure up and hallow, one can turn remarks made on the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by Michael Ignatieff. Writing in *The New York Review*, Ignatieff called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the “sacred text” of what Eli Wiesel called a “world-wide secular religion.” Pondering the implications of what UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called “the yardstick by which we measure human progress,” Ignatieff spoke of “what fifty years of human rights has done to our moral instincts,” namely, he went on to say, it has weakened “the presumption in favor of state sovereignty, strengthening the presumption in favor of intervention when massacre and deportation become state policy.”<sup>24</sup>

Sovereignty, of course, is more or less a synonym for sacrality, for it depends on the state being the moral arbiter of last resort, beholden to no authority and no ethic imposed from outside. As Ignatieff clearly saw, this moral privilege began to disappear with the introduction of ideas like those that were later enshrined in the International Declaration of Human Rights. Here is where one needs to go to explore the meaning of what Boyle calls “the gradual obsolescence of nations.” Whatever the diplomatic complexities involved in the emergence of the Universal Declaration, at the anthropological level what it means is that the moral power of the nation-state is now subordinated to the moral power represented by its victims. The Gospel, “the only twilight of the gods,” is also the undoing of the idolatrous vestige of sacred violence in its contemporary political manifestation. Its power to bring down this form is suggested by one of Ignatieff’s examples of the impact of the Universal Declaration: “A Soviet leadership desperate to secure Western acquiescence in the Yalta settlement conceded the right of Eastern Europeans to have human rights organizations, without realizing that this opened the door for . . . rights movements which eventually brought the Soviet system crashing down.” If we have failed to realize the historical power and anthropological meaning of the empathy for victims awakened by Christianity, we failed even more to realize its source. “A panic-stricken refusal to glance, even furtively, in the only direction where meaning could still be found,” writes Girard, “dominates our intellectual life.”<sup>25</sup> Writes Ignatieff:

[A] lot of effort has been expended in proving that the moral foundations of the Universal Declaration are derived from the tenets of all the world’s major religions. The Universal Declaration is then reinterpreted as the summing up of the accumulated moral wisdom of the ages. . . . Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer has described it as “the essential document, the touchstone, the creed of humanity that surely sums up all other creeds directing human behavior.”<sup>26</sup>

Ignatieff is less beholden than many of his academic contemporaries to the panic-stricken refusal to glance in the right direction. "This religious syncretism is innocuous enough as historical or inspirational rhetoric," writes Ignatieff, but serious historians (he mentions Paul Gordon Lauren, author of *The Evolution of International Human Rights*) acknowledge, human rights is a conspicuous, and some would say defining, manifestation of Western culture. "This doctrine," writes Ignatieff, "didn't originate in Jeddah or Beijing, but in Amsterdam, Siena, and London." In truth, it didn't *originate* there either. It originated on Golgotha. It was long prepared for by the Jewish psalmists and prophets and historians, to whom we owe so much, and it was spread to the ends of the earth by gentiles like the centurion in Luke's passion story and by Jews like Saul of Tarsus. Today it has become the common heritage of the world. The Gospel has long been, and can now be seen to have been, the driving force in human history.

If, in pondering the meaning of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Ignatieff had the perspicacity and courage to look beyond the purring multicultural rhetoric more politically sensitive commentators felt obliged to use, *The New York Times* was less forthcoming. A few months after the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration, as the last millennium was coming to an end, the *Times* editors opined on the subject, calling the Universal Declaration "among the most important political legacies of this century."<sup>27</sup> Acknowledging that it was the manifestation of a moral force that had long been rising up in Western culture, the *Times* editors catalogued its historical antecedents:

The movement grew out of the horrors of World War II and the brutal tyrannies that darkened the rest of the 20th century. But its roots can be traced to the Greek Stoics who believed in universal natural laws, the Romans, who refined concepts on the rule of law, and the Enlightenment philosophers who believed that freedom was a natural condition, and that the purpose of government was to serve and protect citizens. In this millennium, documents like *Magna Carta* of 1215, the English Bill of Rights of 1689, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, and the American Constitution of 1787 and the Bill of Rights of 1791 advanced the universality of human rights.

This is an impressive litany, but its glaring shortcomings are typical of those still beholden to Enlightenment prejudices. There is in this catalogue not one hint of a religious influence, when, in fact, that is the real origin, not only of the Universal Declaration, but of most of its moral and political predecessors mentioned by the *Times*. Eleanor Roosevelt's decisive role in bringing the Universal Declaration into existence is widely recognized; the

role her Christian faith had in her propelling her into this work is less well-known, but to overlook it is to miss yet another opportunity to notice the gradual historical and cultural revolution that the Gospel has set in motion.

We began with Michael Sells' observation that "the human capacity for acknowledging religiously based evil is particularly tenuous." We conclude by noting that the human propensity for endowing evil with religious meaning is correspondingly tenacious, but it is no match for the Gospel revelation of the plight of the victim. In the end these ruses wear thin and the truth about victims that the Gospel arouses comes through.

## Notes

1. Wendy Kaminer, "Can a Victim Be Guilty?" *San Francisco Examiner*, January 23, 1994, p. D-5.
2. Michael A. Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 11.
3. See Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).
4. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 276.
5. Ibid.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Joyful Wisdom*, ed. and introduction Kurt F. Reinhardt (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1964), pp. 169ff.
7. *A Nietzsche Reader*, selected and trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 229.
8. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 103.
9. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, section 19.
10. Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), p. 90.
11. Ibid., p. 170.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 178.
14. *The Gay Science*, Aphorism 125.
15. H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), p. 725.
16. Ibid., pp. 725–26.
17. Quoted from Roger Lundin, *The Culture of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 54.
18. Ibid., p. 726.
19. Nicholas Boyle, *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), p. 213.

20. *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), pp. 253–54.
21. Boyle, *Who Are We Now?*, p. 89.
22. Girard, “The Founding Murder in the Philosophy of Nietzsche,” in *Violence and Truth*, ed. Paul Dumouchel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 240.
23. Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nililism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 220.
24. *The New York Review*, May 20, 1999.
25. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 261.
26. *The New York Review*, May 20, 1999.
27. “Then and Now: Reflections on the Millennium,” *The New York Times*, December 8, 1999.



## IDENTIFYING GOOD AND EVIL

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Nicholas Wolterstorff

### 1

In the rationale for this symposium found on the front of the brochure for it, you will find listed four of the great evils of the twentieth century: the World Wars, the Nazi concentration camps, the Soviet Gulag, and the Chinese “Great Leap Forward.” After listing these four, the rationale adds that in the twentieth century there have been “many other less spectacular but no less horrific examples of ideological, ethnic, and religious slaughter.” It summarizes by speaking of “the killing of millions of innocent people, the literal dehumanization that occurred in the camps, and the possibility of omnicide.”

These are, as it were, prominent limbs of the body of evil. The goal of the symposium is to uncover the *anatomy* of this body. We recognize the body and its various members. What remains for investigation is the body’s anatomy.

I have views about the anatomy. In all the examples cited, it was the over-reaching of the state in the twentieth century that was the root of the evil. The state had broken free from its tether and become a ravenous beast on the loose, perpetrating gross injustice on its own citizens and the rest of the world. I think it would be worthwhile to pursue this thought, asking why it is that states got on the loose in the way they did, and what if anything can be done in the future to decrease the likelihood of this happening again.

But instead I have decided to use this occasion to raise some pre-anatomy questions that have been occupying my mind for quite some time. Before we work at bringing to light the anatomy of evil, we have to be sure that we have correctly identified the limbs of evil’s body. Are we sure that the two World Wars, the Nazi concentration camps, the Soviet Gulag, and the Chinese “Great Leap Forward” are evils? I do not mean to ask whether

possibly they are outweighed by some good in the region; I mean to ask whether they are, in and of themselves, evil. I firmly believe that they are. But why do I believe that? What am I assuming in believing that? And what do I mean in calling them evils?

One of my books, listed under my name in the symposium brochure, is *Lament for a Son*. It's a book in which I poured out my heart in response to the death of our twenty-five year old son, Eric, in a mountain-climbing accident. When writing the book, I took for granted that Eric's early death by accident was an evil; it never occurred to me to question whether it was. But now that the question has been raised, why do I think that?

I'm not just inventing these questions so as to play the philosopher's game of questioning the obvious; there is in me, so far as I know, no secret wish to suffer the fate of Socrates. Exactly these questions were debated with great intensity in late antiquity by Augustine and the Stoics—around sixteen hundred years ago now. The Stoics would have denied that the two World Wars, the Nazi concentration camps, the Soviet Gulag, and the Chinese "Great Leap Forward" were evils; likewise they would have denied that my son's early death was an evil. In his early career, Augustine was strongly attracted to the Stoic position. Yet he never fully adopted it; and in the course of his writings, one can watch him slowly loosing himself from its spell.

I think it's only a bit of an exaggeration to say that the attitude that Christianity and the West have adopted toward evil was determined by the outcome of that debate in late antiquity. A Stoic, looking at the attitude toward evil that underlies Christian and Western civilization, would say that these are civilizations built on profoundly false assumptions. They're built on the attitudes of late Augustine. Had Augustine not broken free from the spell of Stoic argumentation, then, given the massive influence of his thought on subsequent thinkers, it's not unlikely that our attitude toward evil would have been very different from what it is—fundamentally Stoic in character. That, in turn, would have made our civilization as a whole different in unimaginable ways.

Let me say once again that it's not because I myself think those ram-pagings of the state in the twentieth century were not evils that I want to set before you the Stoic charge that our civilization is built on a mistaken identification of evil; I most certainly do believe that they were evils. Rather, by allowing the Stoics to raise the charge, and then reflecting on how it should be answered, I hope to bring to light the deep assumptions underlying our characteristic way of identifying and coping with evil. "Characteristic," I say. As we shall see, there are traces of the Stoic attitude in almost all of us. Whenever you say to yourself: "Yes, it's not good, it's too bad it happened, but I'm not going to get upset over it," you are talking like a Stoic!

## 2

Let us begin with a terminological matter. We apply the word “evil” to two quite different sorts of things. We speak of a morally wrong act as evil. “Encouraging the Holocaust was an act of great evil on Hitler’s part,” we say. But we also speak of “natural evils”: hurricanes, floods, droughts, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, all events of nature that impair and destroy human lives.

Let me articulate the idea behind this latter use of the word. Distinguish first between a person and a person’s life; and then reflect on the fact that a person’s life can be better or worse, more excellent or less excellent, more estimable, admirable, and enviable, or less so. An event or state in a person’s life that contributes to its excellence would be said by all of us to be *a good* in that person’s life; there’s a long tradition, going back into classical antiquity, which would say that an event or state in a person’s life that contributes to its dis-excellence is *an evil* in that person’s life. I speak of “this long tradition” because it’s my impression that this use of the word “evil” is somewhat less common nowadays than it used to be. Whether I’m right or wrong about that, I will be speaking as the long tradition spoke.

Let me sometimes speak of the excellence of a person’s life as that person’s *flourishing*. Using that terminology, the thing to say is this: an event or state in a person’s life is a good in that life in case it *enhances* the person’s flourishing; it’s an evil in that person’s life in case it *impairs* the person’s flourishing.

The perceptive among you will notice that there’s a bit of dis-connect between this understanding of evil, and my earlier reference to natural evils. On the understanding just articulated, things are not evil as such. Rather, things are evils *for* some particular person—specifically, for the person in whose life they occur and the excellence of whose life they impair. My breaking my leg is an evil for me, because it’s an event in my life that impairs my flourishing. It’s not an evil as such, nor is it an evil for you—because it’s not even so much as an event in your life, let alone being an event in your life that impairs your flourishing. Unless, of course, you are related to me in such a way that my breaking my leg not only impairs my flourishing but also impairs yours.

Hurricanes, floods, droughts, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions are not evils in this way. They are not events or states in the lives of persons. Unlike my breaking of my leg, even if there had been no persons around, the hurricane, the flood, the drought, the earthquake, the volcanic eruption, would have occurred. They would not, however, have been evils *for* any person, since there would have been no persons around for them to be evils for. But notice now that we would not call the volcanic eruptions that occurred in the Western United States long before this continent was

inhabited by human beings natural *evils*. They were events of nature; but they were not evils. When we speak of hurricanes, floods, and the like as evils, what we really have in mind is their effects on the human beings in the region. Strictly speaking, it's those effects that are the evils. Those effects definitely are events in the lives of persons; and they do definitely impair the flourishing of those lives.

In summary, we speak of two sorts of things as evils. We speak of cases of moral wrongdoing as evils. And we speak of events or states in a person's life which impair the excellence of that life as evils—evils *for* that person, that is to say, evils *in that person's life*. Notice that no such qualifier is to be tacked on to the claim that someone acted in an evil way. If what he did was evil, then it was evil, *period*—not evil *for* someone, himself or another.

What shall we call evil understood as impairment of a person's life? There isn't a standard term for it—none that I know of, anyway. That form of evil, which consists of moral wrongdoing, is regularly called *moral evil*—appropriately. And often you will find writers pairing off moral evil with natural evil. But it's an inept pairing. The Holocaust was not a natural evil, even though it profoundly impaired the flourishing of millions of people; it was not an event of nature. So what to call such evil, when we're focusing not on the moral evil of its perpetrators but on its effects on the victims? For want of a standard term, best to call it, perhaps, *impairment evil*. Thus, moral evil and impairment evil.

Though these two kinds of evil are distinct, they are nonetheless intricately intertwined. For one thing, the perpetration of moral evil almost always results in impairment evil. Another, less obvious connection will be more important for my subsequent discussion. When I do something morally wrong, then perforce there's an event in my life that's an impairment evil therein—namely, my act of wrongdoing.

Those of you who have reflected on the relation between virtue and happiness may well find this claim not just surprising but dubious. Was it not the lament of the psalmist, for example, that in this world of ours, the righteous suffer while the unrighteous are happy? Was not the psalmist obviously right about that?

My response is that I have not said anything—not yet, anyway—about happiness. I talked about the excellence of a person's life; and I resolved to say that the person whose life is excellent *flourishes*. Not that he's *happy*, but that he *flourishes*. Keep *flourishing* distinct from *happiness* in your mind. Whether the flourishing life will also be a happy life depends heavily on what you mean by "happiness."

Here is my contention: when I act in a morally wrong way, I impair the excellence of my life; I impair my flourishing. My life, on account of that event of wrongdoing on my part, is less estimable, less admirable, less

enviable and approbation-worthy. That seems to me obviously true. Whether it's less happy is, as I said, a different matter. In any case it's less excellent. Moral evil, in its very nature, is impairment evil in the life of the person who perpetrated the moral evil.

The focus of the Stoic argument was on impairment evil—though, as we shall see, moral evil definitely enters the picture.

### 3

Let me say in advance of my presentation of the Stoic line of argument that on this occasion I will forego the scholar's practice of giving supporting citations, wrestling with alternative interpretations, and so forth. I could, at every point, do that. But on this occasion it's a certain line of thought itself, rather than its accuracy as an interpretation of the Stoics, that is my concern.

What makes for an excellent, an admirable, an enviable, an estimable life? That was the central question to which the Stoics addressed themselves. The answer that they consistently and emphatically gave is that to be enviable, a life must be free of emotional disturbance, free of emotional upset—free of the negative moral emotions of grief, regret, envy, anger, fear, worry, and the like. Freedom from emotional disturbance will not be sufficient for an enviable life. Though a person in a coma is free from emotional disturbance, her life is scarcely admirable. The Stoics held that for a person's life to be enviable, the person must be experiencing joy or satisfaction of a certain sort. But in their writings, they pay a lot more attention to the absence of disturbance than to the presence of joy; it's my impression that they thought that if one eliminates disturbance, the relevant sort of joy will pretty much come of its own accord.

The word the Stoics typically used to describe what they regarded as the enviable life was "tranquillity"; to be enviable, a life must be tranquil. Sometimes they called it "rest." I trust, or hope, that in my speaking of rest you will hear echoes of Augustine. At the end of the opening paragraph of his *Confessions*, Augustine famously said: "Our souls are restless, Lord, until they find their rest in thee." Augustine shared with the Stoics the goal of tranquillity.

Serenity, rest, tranquillity, freedom from emotional disturbance, negative emotions; that's what will characterize the excellent, the enviable life, said the Stoic; that's what's required for flourishing. I dare say that the claim evokes sympathetic resonance in every one of us. A life of grief, worry, and fear is not an enviable life.

There will be different ways of trying to achieve this goal of tranquillity. I suppose that if you have enough money easily available, one way to

achieve tranquillity is to keep sufficient alcohol in your blood to maintain a state of semi-stupor. The Stoic strategy was as far from that as anything could be. Theirs was a normative strategy, befitting the fact that it was really a normative understanding of tranquillity that they were working with. The drunkard's tranquillity is not an admirable tranquillity. The truly admirable tranquillity is that achieved by so restructuring one's emotional life that one is no longer disturbed by the sort of thing that isn't worthy of disturbance, and then by so directing one's volition that one eliminates from one's life all examples of the sort of thing that is worthy of disturbance.

What sort of thing is worthy of getting upset over? What sort of thing is disturbance-worthy? Can we say, in a general way? The Stoics thought we could. If there's nothing you can do about it, or if it's *unlikely* that there's anything you can do about it, then it makes no sense to get upset over it. So reshape your judgments of worth so that, when faced with such things, you can honestly say that it's not worth getting upset over. No point in getting upset over the fact that your hair is turning gray and your skin beginning to wrinkle as you age. It's not worth it.

When I said, earlier, that all of us sometimes think and talk like Stoics, it was this part of Stoic thought that I referred to. We all do say to ourselves on occasion: "There's nothing I can do about it, so I'm not going to get upset over it." We hope that our making this resolve will sooner or later result in our judgments of value being so reshaped that we are in fact no longer upset over what's happening. In short, this part of Stoic thought also evokes sympathetic resonance in us.

The Stoics carried the argument a step farther, however, to a place where you and I begin to feel uncomfortable. It's easy to see why they did. If there's nothing you can do about it, or if it's unlikely that there's anything you can do about it, then it's just not worth your getting upset over it; so reorganize your judgments of worth so that you are no longer upset over it. That's what we have heard the Stoics saying thus far. But what about the case in which, though it's *likely* that you will achieve your goal, nonetheless there's a *chance* that you won't, and there's nothing you can do to eliminate that chance, small though it be? Well, the fact that such a case harbors an ineliminable *potential* for emotional disturbance implies that, if you are truly committed to achieving a tranquil life, you're not even going to set for yourself such goals as these. If there's a chance of failure and you can't eliminate that chance, then don't go for it. The lives of all of us are full of upset because of our desire for things that we assumed were likely to come about but didn't.

Here's the point: if it's not *fully* in your control, then it's not worth getting upset over should it not come about. It does not have that kind of worth for you, that kind of value. It's not disturbance-worthy for you. So shape up your judgments of worth.

Is the death of my son worth my getting upset over? Well, is there anything I can do so as to undo his death? Of course not. Was there ever anything I could have done so as to undo it? Of course not. So why, asks the Stoic, get upset over it? What's the point? Why punish yourself in this way? Was there something I could have done to insure in advance that my son would not die an early death? Of course not. So why, says the Stoic, did you ever judge his continued life of such worth that, should it be cut off, you would be cast into grief? What's the point?

My guess is that most of you will now have the sense of having been led from plausible premises by a plausible line of argument to a very strange destination, repulsive even. If so, the question to ask yourself is whether perhaps you have been living a life of inconsistency, in contrast to the ruthlessly consistent life of the Stoic. Doesn't consistency require that if you start with the Stoic, you end with the Stoic?

We've been talking about what's not in our control. Let's now turn our attention in the other direction and ask what is in our control. Your own intentions, your own volitions are in your control, said the Stoic; in particular, whether or not those intentions are good is in your control. Neither you nor I is Master of the causal order of the universe; we're no more than cogs in the cosmic machine. By act of will we initiate some bodily motion; from there on, we're at the mercy of external causality. And it's the experience of all of us that even our best laid plans sometimes go awry. We just don't know enough to be able to anticipate in any detail the effects of our actions—to which I would add, as the Stoics did not, that causality covers only some of what happens. In addition to causality, there's both chance and free agency. Be that as it may, however, it's the experience of all of us that we can never be entirely sure of the consequences of our enacted intentions.

By contrast, those intentions themselves are firmly in our own hands. It's we who form intentions. It's we who enact them. It's up to us whether they're good or bad. The goodness or badness of our will is up to us; it's not at the mercy of the causal order of the universe. What's in one's own hands is one's own virtue, said the Stoics. One's lack of virtue, accordingly, is something worthy of getting upset over. One's *own* virtue; not anybody else's. The other person's virtue is not in one's control; only one's own virtue is. My virtue, and only my virtue, is worthy of my getting upset over the lack thereof. With respect to one's own virtue, the right way to achieve tranquillity is not to reshape one's emotional life so that one no longer gets upset over one's lack of virtue, but to shape one's volitional life so that one no longer lacks virtue.

The person who has succeeded in this two-pronged strategy for achieving tranquillity, emotional reformation in the one direction, volitional reformation and resolution in the other, is what the Stoics called a *sage*.

There remain two points to add to my presentation of the Stoic perspective; the one makes for greater plausibility at a certain point, the other adds a softening touch to the whole. Let me take them in that order.

Invest yourself only in the moral goodness of your own enacted intentions, says the Stoic—in the enacted intentions *per se*, not in their consequences. For whereas the intentions and their moral quality are in your control, their consequences are not. Since they're not fully in your control, the consequences are not disturbance-worthy.

When we look closely at this Stoic line of thought, don't we spy something incoherent in it? If I form an intention to bring something about and then enact that intention, do I not perforce desire a certain causal outcome? And will I not be disappointed if that outcome does not come about? If I make plans for attending some meeting, and then, when I am ready to leave, find that I have misplaced my car keys, am I not perforce *somewhat* upset? Enacting an intention includes desiring to bring something about; if, for whatever reason, that doesn't come about, then one's desire is frustrated. And frustrated desire, in the nature of the case, is an emotional disturbance.

The Stoic's response to this objection is, to my mind, fascinating. We should always act, he says, with what he calls "reservation." To all our enacted intentions we should attach the qualifier, *deo volente, God willing*.

What transpires in the universe is in the control of the divine Logos. To save ourselves from disappointment, we must act in accord with the divine plan. But we don't know what that divine plan is, not in any detail and in advance, anyway. Afterwards, yes; should my intended attendance not come about, that shows that it was not in the divine plan. So if my full intention was to attend the meeting, period, then the fact that I can't get there will upset me. But if my full intention was not that one, but was instead the intention to attend the meeting *God willing*, then my intention has not failed, and the desire that accompanies the intention has not been frustrated. I remain serene and tranquil.

Secondly, the softening. I prefaced my discussion of the Stoics with a brief discourse on evil; yet I have not even once used the word in my exposition of their thought. In fact the Stoics used it frequently—along with its counterpart, "good." Here's their thought. Evil for a person is what's worth that person's getting upset over; and good for a person is that whose absence *would be* worth her getting upset over. When we put this together with what preceded, it follows that a person's life might be in every respect good even when she's on the torture rack. It would be that if she had eliminated disturbance from her life, thereby achieving tranquillity, by judging everything outside her control not disturbance-worthy, and by eliminating from her life all that is disturbance-worthy, namely, bad intentions. It's a conclusion that the Stoics did not shy away from. They were even willing

to say that a person on the torture-rack could be happy—though in saying this they were clearly attaching a rather idiosyncratic meaning to the word “happiness.”

In addition to speaking of good and evil, however, the Stoics spoke of *the preferable* and *the non-preferable*, understanding these as constituting a distinctly different category of worth from good and evil. From antiquity on into our own times they have been accused of obscurity on this point, if not confusion and even contradiction. But if my interpretation of what they had in mind by “good” and “evil” is correct—namely, evil is that which is disturbance-worthy and good is that whose absence *would be* disturbance-worthy—then everything falls nicely into place. We cannot dispose of the Stoic challenge to our own way of thinking by claiming that it’s incoherent.

My son’s living until full of years is definitely preferable for me to his dying an early death; if I were choosing, that’s what I would choose. So would the Stoic. But his early death is not worth my grieving over, adds the Stoic. Though a life of mine in which my son lives until full of years is *preferable* to this actual life of mine in which he died an early death, there would not have been more of the good in my life had he lived longer. I find this view offensive; but I fail to see that it’s incoherent.

It would have been preferable for the victims of the Holocaust had the Holocaust not occurred; but their victimization was not an evil, that is, an impairment evil, in their lives—unless perchance it led to their moral decline. But then that moral decline would have been the evil; and they had it in their power to resist the decline. That’s what the Stoic would say. Deeply offensive; but not, so far as I can see, incoherent.

#### 4

Western civilization is not Stoic in its orientation. Nobody finds it questionable that the organizers of this symposium should have cited the two World Wars, the Nazi concentration camps, the Soviet Gulag, and the Chinese “Great Leap Forward,” as examples of great evil. There are, as I have indicated along the way, strands of Stoic thought in all of us; and now and then I come across someone who strikes me as actually thinking like a Stoic. Last year I had a student like that. But as a whole, no, our civilization is not Stoic. The Stoic sought to make himself invulnerable to the whims of fortune. We make ourselves vulnerable, almost recklessly so. Knowing full well that our investment in our fellow human beings and in the things of this world is likely to cause us grief, we invest nonetheless. Knowing full well that of our attempts to achieve great things will only now and then succeed, we attempt great things nonetheless.

Why? With which premise in the Stoic argument do we disagree? At what point in the Stoic argument do we split ways? You and I seldom have to deal with live Stoics; Augustine had to deal with them all the time. He did not dismiss them out of hand; quite to the contrary, he found himself powerfully attracted. Yet he felt himself compelled to part ways. I think it will prove illuminating to see where and why.

In three of the books that he wrote in the 390s, *Of True Religion*, *On Christian Doctrine*, and *Confessions*, Augustine often sounds as if about the only change he wants to make in the Stoic universe of thought is the substitution of love of God for one's own virtue. Rest, freedom from negative emotions, was as important for him as for the Stoics. But rather than so reorienting one's emotional life that one's own lack of virtue is the only thing one gets upset over, and then resolutely pursuing one's own virtue, we are to so reorient our lives that inadequate love of God is the only thing we get upset over, and then resolutely pursue the love of God. Let me once again quote that famous sentence from the opening paragraph: "Our souls are restless, Lord, until they find their rest in thee." To say it again: it sometimes sounds as if Augustine, keeping the basic structure of Stoic thought intact, simply slides one's own virtue out of its place in the system and replaces it with love of God. Love of God is the sole good; failure to love God, the sole evil. Everything else of any positive worth is a mere preferable; everything else of any negative worth is a mere non-preferable.

Let me quote a few passages. The soul that "clings to [mutable] things of beauty . . . only clings to sorrow," says Augustine in the fourth book of the *Confessions*. The "love of [such things] . . . must not be like glue to bind [one's] soul to them. For they continue on the course that is set for them and leads to their end, and if the soul loves them and wishes to be with them and find its rest in them, it is torn by desires that can destroy it. In these things there is no place to rest, because they do not last" (IV, 10). God alone "is the place of peace that cannot be disturbed; and he will not withhold himself from your love unless you withhold your love from him. . . . [So] stand with him and you shall not fall; rest in him and peace shall be yours" (IV, 11–12). "If the things of this world delight you, praise God for them but turn your love away from them and give it to their Maker, so that in the things that please you, you may not displease him" (IV, 12). You see what I mean: slide one's own virtue out of its place in the Stoic scheme, slide love of God into the vacated spot, and keep everything else the same. So it sounds.

Most definitely that is not his view, however. Even in the little bit already quoted, there's more difference than immediately strikes the eye. The Stoic did not speak of love; nowhere in my exposition of Stoic thought did I use the word. Augustine talked about love all the time.

Though I haven't made a point of it thus far, the Stoics had a highly intellectualistic view of the human being. In this, they were not at all

idiosyncratic among the ancient philosophers; “human beings are rational animals” was the standard formula. The way this intellectualistic understanding got manifested in that part of the Stoic system that we’ve been discussing is this: recall my saying that, on the Stoic view, we must reorient ourselves emotionally so that we are no longer disturbed by anything that’s not disturbance-worthy. The Stoics thought that such reorientation was to be achieved by changing one’s judgments, specifically, one’s value judgments. The way to get rid of my unseemly grief over my son’s death is to rid myself of my judgment that it’s an evil. It was the Stoic view that emotions are either identical with certain value judgments or entirely dependent thereon.

Augustine was of course profoundly influenced by the intellectualist tendencies of the ancient philosophers—of the Platonists and neo-Platonists especially. Nonetheless, there is in him a striking innovation in the understanding of what it is to be human: to be human is to love, to care, to invest yourself. Investing oneself in human beings and the world is not an option for us; it’s our nature to do so. What we can do, to a considerable extent, is choose the objects of our loves; what we cannot do is live without loving, that is, without investing ourselves in someone or something.

So yes, it can look as if Augustine is doing no more than sliding one’s own virtue out of its place in the Stoic scheme and sliding love of God into the vacated spot. But the argumentation he gives for loving God already reveals profound differences at work: only love of God is such that we can be assured it won’t be disappointed, since God and God alone cannot die or change. In God alone do our souls find rest.

This difference from Stoicism, already large, is a harbinger of even greater differences. All the passages I have quoted so far have come from the *Confessions*. But as one reads along in the *Confessions*, one not only finds passages of the sort I have already quoted, but passages of the following sort: though “everyone wants to be happy,” nonetheless “we must [not] arm ourselves against compassion. There are times when we must welcome sorrow on behalf of others” (III, 2).

What’s going on? We have heard Augustine saying that everyone wants to be happy—happiness being understood by him pretty much as the Stoics understood it: disturbance-free joy. Everyone wants happiness, rest, freedom from negative emotions such as grief, fear, worry and the like. Now he says that nonetheless there are times when we must welcome sorrow. What sense does it make? The same thought is expressed rather more elaborately in Book X. Let me quote:

Let all who are truly my brothers love in me what they know from your teaching to be worthy of their love, and let them sorrow to find in me what they know from your teaching to

be occasion for remorse. . . . [M]y true brothers are those who rejoice for me in their hearts when they find good in me and grieve for me when they find sin. They are my true brothers because whether they see good in me or evil, they love me still. To such as these I shall reveal what I am. Let them breathe a sigh of joy for what is good in me and a sigh of grief for what is bad. The good I do is done by you and by your grace; the evil is my fault; it is the punishment you send me. Let my brothers draw their breath in joy for the one and sigh with grief for the other. Let hymns of thanksgiving and cries of sorrow rise together from their hearts (X, 4).

Empathetic joy over the moral excellence of one's fellow human beings and empathetic grief over their turpitude: that's what Augustine is urging. My question is: What drove him to speak up on behalf of allowing disturbance into one's life, in spite of his evident longing for tranquillity?

From Book I of *On Christian Doctrine* the answer is unambiguously clear: Augustine found himself confronted with Christ's injunction "to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind," and then secondly, "to love thy neighbor as thyself"—an injunction which Christ himself says captures the heart of the Torah (Matthew 22:37–40). The only object of love that will not disappoint us and thereby disturb our tranquillity is God; yet we are not to love God alone. It was Christ's injunction to love thy neighbor as thyself that drove Augustine away from anything resembling Stoicism.

Loving oneself in the right way requires—so Augustine assumed—desiring one's moral and religious flourishing, the consequence of such desire being that one rejoices in success therein and grieves over failure therein. Augustine hears Christ saying that one is to love one's neighbor in that very same way. Not only is my own moral and religious condition disturbance-worthy for me; my neighbor's moral and religious condition is disturbance-worthy for me as well.

It will not have missed your attention, however, that the neighbor-love which Augustine urges in the passages quoted—and they are typical of his writings in the 390s—has a decidedly Platonic and neo-Platonic cast to it. Our love for the neighbor is to take the form of desire and longing for his or her moral and religious excellence; or as Augustine regularly puts it, it's to take the form of desire and longing for the excellence of her *soul*. In the passage quoted from Book X of the *Confessions*, the joy over himself that Augustine praises in his "true brothers" is joy over the good that he does, and the grief over himself that he praises in them is grief over the evil that he does.

Let's leap now to Augustine's very last work, *City of God*. With no hint of disapproval he declares that all of us are "anxious lest [our friends] be afflicted by famine, war, pestilence, or captivity, fearing that in slavery they

may suffer evils beyond what we can conceive" (XIX, 8). He continues as follows:

[T]he more friends we have, and the more places we have them in, the further and more widely do we fear that some evil may befall them out of all the mass of the evils of this world. . . . And when such things do happen (and the more numerous our friends the more often they happen) and the fact is brought to our knowledge, who, save one who has experienced the same thing, can understand the burning sorrow which then afflicts our hearts? Indeed, we would rather hear that our friends were dead; although this also we could not hear without pain: for if their life delighted us with the solace of friendship, how could it be that their death should not bring us grief? Anyone who forbids such grief must forbid, if he can, all friendly conversation; he must prohibit or extinguish affection; he must with ruthless disregard sever the ties of all human companionship, or else stipulate that such companionship must merely be made use of without giving rise to any delight of soul. But if this can in no way be done, how can the death of one whose life has been sweet to us not bring us bitterness? For this is why the grief of a heart which is not inhuman is like a kind of wound or ulcer, healed by the application to it of our loving words of consolation. And though healing takes place all the more quickly and easily when the soul is well conditioned, we must not suppose that there is nothing at all to heal in such a case.

The passage is purely descriptive in its rhetorical mode: we do in fact love friends for their companionship and care for their physical welfare—and we do in fact suffer the grief that all too typically ensues upon such love and care. But what is striking to anyone who comes to these passages from those earlier works is that Augustine does not express his *dis*-approval. Clearly there has been a profound alteration in his thinking.

Why? Why are we no longer enjoined to love our neighbor for her soul alone, and no longer enjoined to confine our desires to desires for her religious and moral flourishing? And why, correspondingly, has the scope of laudable emotional disturbance been so drastically expanded? To the best of my knowledge, Augustine nowhere explicitly tells us. In the passage quoted he drops a hint, however, as he does in other passages in *City of God*. In one of those early works, *Of True Religion*, he had rather defensively said about his doctrine that we should love only the souls of our fellows, "Let no one think that is inhuman." Here, in the *City of God* passage, he spoke of "a heart which is not inhuman." In short, by the time he wrote *City of God*, Augustine had come to the view that the sort of love that he described in *Of True Religion* as not inhuman, was in fact inhuman.

I think what happened is that Augustine, after steeping himself more thoroughly in Scripture, came to the conclusion that our tendency to worry over the physical and mental well-being of family and friends, our tendency to weep at funerals for the loss of companionship, and the like, is not to be ascribed to our fallenness but to our created human nature. God made us thus. To try to undo this dimension of ourselves, as the Stoics did, is to try, with what Augustine calls “ruthless disregard,” to undo the work of the Creator.

## 5

There you have it. The conviction that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, and then not just in soul but in body, is what drove Augustine away from the Stoics. He continued to long for rest; indeed, he expected to achieve it. Increasingly, as his thought matured, the theme of two eras came to the fore: this present age, and the age to come. In the age to come, we will enjoy rest for our souls. In this present age, we are to forego rest, love our neighbor, and live with the grief and worry that we know will all-too-often ensue. If we have to choose—and most of the time we do—choose love. In my *Lament for a Son*, where I was pouring out my soul rather than engaging in philosophical reflection, I put it like this: “Suffering is down at the center of things, deep down where the meaning is. Suffering is the meaning of our world. For Love is the meaning. And Love suffers. The tears of God are the meaning of history” (90).

As a result, in part, of Augustine’s enormous influence, Western civilization is built on the premise that love trumps tranquillity. I submit that that’s why we so naturally cite the two World Wars, the Nazi concentration camps, the Soviet Gulag, and the Chinese “Great Leap Forward” as examples of great evils.

Of course we’re face to face now with a great mystery: if one has to choose between a life free of negative emotions, on the one hand, and a love that suffers on the other, why would anyone choose a love that suffers? Because Torah and Christ said so. Yes, but what’s the sense behind their saying so?

I used to think and say that if my son was worth loving when alive, then he’s worth grieving over when dead. And I went on to say that the issue between the Augustinian and the Stoic pivoted on the worth one ascribes to human beings. Though I still think there’s something to that, I no longer think it’s quite right. Talking about my son being *worth* my loving him now sounds, to my ear, more like justice than like love. Love goes beyond what the recognition of worth calls for. But with that dark saying, I will have to end.

## KANT AND RADICAL EVIL

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Emil L. Fackenheim

### 1

In the year 1792 Kant administered a shock to some of his admirers. He published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* an essay which bore the ominous title *On the Radical Evil in Human Nature*. The shock was repeated in the following year, when this essay was republished, as the first and in many years the crucial part, of Kant's long-awaited work in the philosophy of religion, *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*.

Kant's *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* had appeared in 1785, and his *Critique of Practical Reason* in 1788. These two works had quickly fired the enthusiasm of the moral and religious humanists of the age. They wholeheartedly agreed with the central teaching of these works concerning man's moral freedom. Kant justified their faith that man was free to raise himself above nature to spiritual self-realization, and that in order to do so he required the help of neither nature below nor God above. The religion of these men was a humanistic religion, whose essential faith was in man's inherent goodness. If they thought of evil at all, they understood it as mere inertia, to be progressively removed by man himself. They rejected a religion which regarded evil in man as somehow essential. Thus if they were Christians, they were Christians of a very unorthodox sort. For they repudiated original sin, and the incarnation required to wipe it out.

Among the admirers of Kant were the great German poets. Schiller regarded the Kantian “determine thyself” as one of the greatest words ever spoken by man. Goethe, though less favorably inclined toward Kant, was nevertheless able to write under his influence the telling sentence: “God is the objectivation of the feeling of human dignity.”<sup>1</sup> The great German poets regarded Kant as an ally in their battle for the dignity of man.

And now Kant suddenly spoke of radical evil! Moreover, he treated it as if it were an essential part of religion! He seemed to have turned traitor to his own gospel of man’s moral freedom, and to have gone over to the enemy, to the detractors of man. True, Kant had spoken of evil before. But he had not spoken of radical evil. Evil had been merely the “incomplete development of the capacity for good.”<sup>2</sup> It was an imperfection which man himself could conquer. Indeed, he was actually in the process of conquering it.<sup>3</sup> Now Kant spoke of an evil somehow inherent in human nature itself. Little wonder that Schiller regarded the essay as “scandalous.”<sup>4</sup> And little wonder that Goethe went so far as to cast aspersions on Kant’s motives in writing it. Only some ulterior motive, he thought, could account for his defection. In a well-known letter to Herder he wrote: “Kant required a long lifetime to purify his philosophical mantle of many impurities and prejudices. And now he has wantonly tainted it with the shameful stain of radical evil, in order that Christians too might be attracted to kiss its hem.”<sup>5</sup>

Were these criticisms justified? This paper will seek to show that they were not. The essay on radical evil certainly represents a shift in doctrine. But this shift is not due to political considerations of any kind, to a desire to appease intolerant theologians or the Prussian censor.<sup>6</sup> Nor is it due to the encroachment of theological upon philosophical principles.<sup>7</sup> Kant’s religion is a philosophical religion independent of all revelation; and his “radical evil” cannot be identified with original sin. Kant’s shift to radical evil is made for a strictly philosophical reason; and this reason is, strangely enough, the need to give a full and adequate justification of moral freedom. Kant becomes gradually convinced that moral freedom can have no other meaning than the freedom to choose between good and evil. And he finds it necessary to introduce the doctrine of radical evil so as to make freedom, in this sense, intelligible.

## 2

In order to understand Kant’s doctrine of radical evil, it is necessary to understand the problems which lead to its introduction. We must therefore begin with a summary of his ethical teaching, as stated in the *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

Man, according to Kant, belongs at once to two worlds. One is the world of sense, the other the intelligible world. As a member of the former, he is subject to natural inclinations; as a member of the latter, he is subject to a universal moral law. His membership in the two worlds is revealed to man in his moral experience. He alone of all beings has a concept of a moral imperative or duty. None but he can distinguish between "I want" and "I ought."

An animal, wholly determined by its natural inclinations, knows of no such distinction. It may find itself torn between want and want, but never between want and duty. If it could speak, it might use the expression "I ought"; but it would always mean by it "I ought because I want"; the ought would be relative to a want, and thus part of it. But where desire conflicts only with desire, and never with duty or moral law, there can be no good or evil. The animal, which belongs to the world of sense only, is innocent. A man may be good or evil: but he is never innocent.

An animal, then, has no sense of moral duty; but neither has a god. A being wholly belonging to the intelligible world would indeed know the moral law; but it would have no desires which could possibly conflict with that law. Such a being would act in conformity with the moral law, but it would do so as a necessity flowing from its very nature. It would act out of the sheer love of goodness, and could not act otherwise. But the moral law is experienced as duty only where there is a desire which may conflict with it. The "I ought" is significant only where it can differ from the "I want." A being in which this distinction is absent is not good but holy. But while man may do what he ought to do, he never does it merely as a matter of course. A man may be morally good; but he can never be holy.

In order to act morally I must not merely do my duty, I must also do it for duty's sake. The fact that it is my duty must be sufficient reason for my doing it. An action springing from any other motive may be lawful; but since the motive is ulterior, it is, properly speaking, not moral. Thus I may abstain from crime solely because of my fear of punishment; or I may support my aged father solely because I love him. But it would clearly be my duty to abstain from crime even if, contrary to Hollywood legend, it *should* pay; and I should be obligated to support my father even if the Oedipus complex had wrought havoc among my emotions.

It may seem that these two examples differ substantially; for love of one's father is a noble emotion, whereas the fear of punishment is not. But what they have in common is that they are both inclinations which, as such, are not subject to my will. Hence I cannot be obligated to have one inclination rather than another.<sup>8</sup> Only that action is moral which is motivated by reverence for the moral law itself. The inclinations may indeed support what the moral law commands, and it is very pleasant if they do; but they can never constitute the morality of an action.

A good man, therefore, is a man who makes the moral law the sufficient motive of all his morally relevant actions. His principle in life, or, in Kantian language, his maxim, is the moral law itself. This is the celebrated categorical imperative: "Act as if the maxim of thy action were to become by thy will a universal law of nature."<sup>9</sup>

Morality, then, lies essentially in the will. The human will may be determined by respect for the moral law, or it may be determined, in part or completely, by the inclinations. Kant calls the former a good, or autonomous will; the latter he calls a heteronomous will, a will which yields, in varying degrees, to the commands of inclination.

This account of moral obligation raises the problem of moral freedom. It presupposes that man, while subject to the inclinations of his empirical nature, is yet free to obey the moral law apprehended by his reason. Is there such a freedom? Clearly, all moral obligation disappears if there is not. Kant never wavers in the slightest degree on this fundamental point: only that can be a moral duty which I am free to fulfil; only that can be a moral crime which I am free to avoid. No action is morally relevant which is not the result of a free decision. Hence if moral freedom is an illusion, there is neither good nor evil, but only moral indifference. And all supposed acting from duty alone is a mere self-deception.

Is freedom a reality? Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* defends the possibility of freedom; whereas the *Critique of Practical Reason* defends its actuality. According to the former of these works, human knowledge understands, not things as they are in themselves, but merely things as they appear to us, or phenomena. Metaphysics, or the knowledge of things in themselves, is impossible. This means that freedom cannot be proven; for freedom, if it exists, is a property, not of man as a phenomenon, but of man as a member of the intelligible world. But it also means that freedom cannot be refuted. Such a refutation would have to show that moral freedom and causal necessity are incompatible. But the causal necessity which we know applies only to phenomena, and hence only to man in so far as he is an empirical being. Causality does not apply to things in themselves. Therefore, while we cannot prove that there is moral freedom, we can at least prove its possibility. It is possible that man, as a phenomenon, should be wholly governed by causal necessity, yet, as a member of the intelligible world, should nevertheless be free.

How then do we know that freedom is an actuality? We have this knowledge, argues the *Critique of Practical Reason*, not in the form of theoretical proof, but in the form of moral faith. We all are conscious of the moral law; we cannot escape the sense of obligation it imposes on us. Yet there can be no moral obligation without moral freedom. We know ourselves as free, because we know ourselves as morally obligated. The categorical imperative speaks to our consciences the words: "Thou oughtst, hence thou canst."

3

The foregoing may suffice as an account, of necessity brief and even superficial, of the essentials of Kant's moral doctrine. We must now consider more closely an important ambiguity in this doctrine. Kant wavers between two views of moral freedom. According to the one, man is free in the degree to which he is determined by the moral principle; according to the other, he is free to choose good or evil. The former view predominates in the writings so far considered; Kant adopts it as the only view which is philosophically intelligible. But in the essay on radical evil he emphatically embraces the latter view; and his reason is that it alone is morally defensible. He embraces it at the risk of leaving it philosophically unintelligible.

We begin, then, with the earlier account of freedom. By a free will Kant does not mean an undetermined will. Such a will would be unintelligible; and it certainly would not be a moral will. A moral will is not an undetermined will, but a will determined by the moral principle. The difference between a free and an unfree will lies not in that the latter is determined while the former is not. Rather, the unfree will is determined by an object, while the free will is determined by itself. The unfree or heteronomous will follows whatever inclination commands. The free or autonomous will liberates itself from the domination of inclination, and determines itself toward obedience to the moral law.

Now this clearly means that the will can determine itself in one way only: toward obedience to the moral law. Any other determination is not self-determination, but determination by the object of inclination. Hence a free will can only be a good will. Indeed, a free will and a good will are one and the same thing. Kant recognizes this implication with the utmost clarity. He defines the will as "a faculty of determining oneself to action in accordance with the conception of certain laws."<sup>10</sup> He derives from this definition the conclusion that "the mainspring of the human will . . . cannot be anything other than the moral law."<sup>11</sup> Hence "a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same thing."<sup>12</sup> As forthright perhaps as any is this passage: "the pure will is good in all men; there can be no such thing as a will contrary to the [moral] law."<sup>13</sup>

This conclusion may well puzzle a superficial reader. For it may seem to obliterate the distinction between the good and the holy will, which Kant had so carefully drawn. A holy being, Kant had said, is in necessary conformity with the moral law; but a human being is not. The fact that the latter ought to do his duty does not mean that he necessarily does it. Indeed, the very concept of "ought" implies that he is free to do otherwise. Does not Kant's identification of the free with the good will deny man's freedom to ignore duty? And in so doing, does it not obliterate the distinction between a good and a holy will?

The solution of the puzzle is this: man differs from God, not in that he may will anything other than the moral law, but in that he may not will at all. Or rather: God is morally free absolutely, whereas man always possesses only a degree of such freedom. A pure will would indeed be necessarily good in all men; but will in man is never pure. This amounts to saying that we must distinguish, not between a good and an evil, but between a pure and an impure will. Or, if we prefer, between a will which is strong and a will which is weak. To the degree to which man wills, he wills the good; and to the degree to which he is driven toward anything but the good, he does not will at all. He is the will-less victim of his inclinations.

Kant illustrates this conclusion in a striking passage. "There is no one, not even the most consummate villain . . . who, when we set before him examples of . . . steadfastness in following good maxims . . . does not wish that he might also possess these qualities. Only on account of his inclinations and impulses he cannot attain this in himself, but at the same time he wishes to be free from such inclinations which are burdensome to himself . . . He is [thus] conscious of a good will, which by his own confession constitutes the law for the bad will that he possesses as a member of the world of sense. . . ."<sup>14</sup> The villain here portrayed is not evil-willed but weak-willed. In so far as he wills at all, he wills the good; and in so far as he follows evil, he acts as determined, not by himself, but by an all-too-powerful inclination.

Now this account of moral freedom is open to so grave an objection that Kant, in the essay on radical evil, abandons it. For the account is compelled to deny that there can be such a thing as an evil will. Along with the evil will, it must deny evil itself. And in denying both, it cannot justify moral responsibility for moral evil.

The inclinations, as such, are neither good nor evil. The animal which is wholly governed by them is not immoral but amoral. This must clearly mean that in man, too, the inclinations are innocent. Good and evil are terms which refer, not to them, but only to free acts of will. "Moral good or moral evil refer to the actions, not the emotions of a person . . .; they are terms properly applied only . . . to maxims of the will."<sup>15</sup> But, according to Kant, there can be no will which is free and yet evil. What we might loosely call an evil will is merely a heteronomous or weak will. And a weak will is really only imperfectly good; it is not evil. To the extent to which it is will, it is good; and to the extent to which it is not good, it is not will at all. But where will is absent there is only inclination. And inclination is not immoral but amoral, not guilty but innocent. The weakling who yields to it is, *qua* yielding, not willing; and hence he is not responsible.

Let us once more consider Kant's unfortunate villain. "Unfortunate" is the exact attribute we should apply to him. Everybody calls him a villain,

treating him as if he had willed evil, whereas in fact he has done nothing of the kind. In so far as he wills freely he wills good. His moral failure is due, not to an act of will but to lack of will. And this lack of will cannot, again, be an act of will, a will, as it were, not to will. For, according to Kant, whatever is not will toward good, is not free will at all. This means that his moral failure is due to the domination of inclination, pure and simple, and will does not enter into it. It follows, therefore, that the villain is not a villain at all, but an innocent weakling. And he deserves, not our censure, but our pity.

To sum up we may say that Kant has tried to understand moral freedom by viewing man as subject to two laws: the laws of nature governing his inclinations, and the moral law governing his will. In this account, free will threatens to disappear into two necessities: a pure will which, *qua* will, is necessarily good; and the inclinations which are subject to a necessary law of nature, and hence morally indifferent. The possibility of evil has disappeared between divine holiness and animal innocence.

Kant comes to reject this view. Man, to be genuinely free and responsible, must have the choice, not between willing the good or not willing at all, but between good and evil. It must be possible for him to choose freely, i.e., responsibly, and yet choose *against* the moral law. The sole task of the essay on radical evil is to justify this possibility.

#### 4

"That 'the world lieth in evil' is a plaint as old as history, old even as the older art, poetry; indeed, as old as that oldest of all fictions, the religion of priest-craft."<sup>16</sup> These dramatic words open the essay on radical evil. Kant begins by quoting age-old wisdom in support of the fact that evil exists. The philosopher must explain it; he cannot explain it away.

Attempts to explain evil away do, of course, abound. Thus evil is often regarded as a kind of abnormal condition requiring no explanation in its own right, and disappearing along with the abnormal circumstances which have produced it. Proceeding in this vein, some blame evil on civilization, others on the lack of it. Kant makes short shrift of all such explanations, without bothering to give a formal refutation. The facts speak too loudly against them. Is civilization the villain in the piece, and is man by nature "noble"? The savage is anything but noble. He is given, not to mere animal fighting and killing, but to wanton cruelty and murder—to a cruelty which appears to be for cruelty's sake. If there is an innocent state of nature, then man is never in that state. Is then perhaps untamed nature to blame? Is there a latent goodness in man which, given civilization, will come to the fore? Here "we must listen to a long melancholy litany of indictments

against humanity: of secret falsity even in the closest friendship, . . . of a propensity to hate him to whom we are indebted . . . and of many other vices still concealed under the appearance of virtue, to say nothing of the vices of those who do not conceal them." And, Kant concludes, if these facts are not sufficient to convince us, we need but look at the relations among nations: a state of perpetual war, hot or cold; a state sufficient to ridicule man's hope for a naturally evolving millennium as a "wild fantasy."<sup>17</sup>

Kant takes this impressive factual evidence as sufficient proof that evil is no mere abnormality. It is somehow an essential and universal condition. This does not mean that every man is an out-and-out scoundrel. Kant holds no such gloomy view of human nature. But it does mean that the *possibility* of evil must somehow lie in human nature itself. And by evil we do not mean pain, disease, death, etc. No doubt these abound, but we are not concerned with them. Our concern is solely with moral evil, and "nothing is morally evil [i.e., capable of being imputed] but that which is our own *act*."<sup>18</sup> The evil whose possibility we must explain is a free act against good, and nothing else.

With this definition of evil Kant eliminates from the outset, as inadequate, a host of metaphysical theories. Evil cannot be located in a pre-existing cosmic principle, such as matter, the irrational, or non-being. These exist prior to my act of will, and independently of it. I am under their control, not they under mine. If they are the source of an evil, this is not moral evil. Anything which no will has freely chosen is not evil but innocent.

For the same reason, evil cannot lie in a pre-existing and unalterable condition within human nature. It cannot be, say, the limitation placed on human nature by the senses, a limitation distinguishing man from God. Man has not freely chosen this limitation, and is thus not responsible for it. Kant strongly attacks Stoicism which regards the passions *per se* as evil, and defines good in terms of their suppression by reason. The Stoic maligns what is innocent; and he arrogantly—and vainly—strives to escape from his human nature and become God.

Evil cannot lie in the sensible constituent of human nature; but neither can it lie in the other constituent, viz., reason. To explain evil, one might argue that reason in man is innately perverse; that, apprehending the moral law, it acts against it merely *because* it is the moral law, and that it does so necessarily. But in that case man could not help doing evil; to do so would be his very nature. And it would therefore not be his responsibility, but the responsibility of Him who created it.

Moreover, both these explanations fail to characterize evil in man as it really is. Evil is not the mere yielding to passion; it is more than that. But neither is it the sheer diabolic defiance of the moral law simply because it

is the moral law; it is less than that. Man may do evil, but he is no demon. The one explanation asserts too little, the other too much. For man is neither animal nor devil.

In what, then, does evil consist? It lies in neither of the fixed constituents of human nature, but in a perversion of their original relation; and this perversion is brought about by man himself. Man is meant to subordinate his inclinations to the rule of the moral law. Wherever he actually does so, he is good, at least in principle. The categorical imperative, in all its purity, will be the maxim of his will. He may, of course, yield to inclination; but he will do so merely out of weakness. He can never willfully deviate from the moral law. In sharp contrast, man may subordinate, not his inclinations to the moral law, but the moral law to his inclinations. Then he is not merely weak, but evil. For he wills freely, yet in a way involving departure from the moral law. As Kant puts it: "the proposition 'man is evil' can mean only that he is conscious of the moral law, but has nevertheless adopted into his maxim the (occasional) deviation therefrom."<sup>19</sup>

Here then we have Kant's new and crucial formula. Man's choice is not between acting on the good as principle, or not on principle at all. The choice is not between a good will and the absence of will. Man always acts on principle and freely; and he is always responsible. But his principle will be either the moral law, pure and simple, or the deviation therefrom, occasional or otherwise. Man may thus decide freely, and yet against the moral law. In other words, he is free to choose between good and evil.

This new formula undoubtedly gives greater satisfaction to moral consciousness. But can it be philosophically justified? Kant proceeds to consider its implications.

We have seen that the term "good" applies, properly, not to an action, but to the maxim of the will from which actions flow. Furthermore, by the term "maxim" we did not mean the haphazard motive inspiring an individual act, but a rational, over-all principle governing a man's life as a whole. The same considerations must now be applied to evil. "We call a man evil . . . not because he performs actions that are . . . contrary to law, but because these actions are of such a nature that we may infer from them the presence in him of evil maxims."<sup>20</sup> Again, the term "maxim" must mean an over-all principle. No doubt individual motives inspiring individual actions may be considered in isolation; but since man is a rational being who lives by an over-all principle, this will be a superficial consideration. Thus the motive behind an individual action may be respect for duty; and it may yet flow from an over-all maxim which includes the deviation from duty on other occasions.

But if this be admitted, two startling conclusions follow. The first of these is that a man is either radically good or radically evil; the second, that all men are, in fact, evil.

A man's empirical actions may be partly good, partly evil, partly morally indifferent. But his underlying maxim cannot be partly good partly evil; and it certainly cannot be morally indifferent. For either his over-all principle is to follow the moral law without qualification, wherever it applies; or else he has included deviation from it among his principles. No doubt there are degrees of evil. The principle of one man will be to take but an occasional holiday from the moral law, and to take that with great qualms; whereas the principle of another will be to make the holiday permanent, and without any qualms whatever. Yet this difference in degree does not affect the principle. We are confronted with a radical "either-or." Either perversion has entered into a man's principles, or it has not. Man is either good or evil. There is no third alternative. As Kant says: "[man's] disposition in respect to the moral law is never indifferent."<sup>21</sup>

The second implication is even more startling. There can be no doubt that all men are evil. For even a single evil action presupposes the perversion of principles, and is impossible without it. We may regard our fellow-men sufficiently highly to believe that some of them sin very rarely. But surely we must admit that "there is no man who liveth and sinneth not."

At this point Kant is driven to a conclusion which may well seem paradoxical. He must maintain, on the one hand, that evil is innate in human nature and therefore radical; and, on the other hand, that it is nevertheless produced by each man in himself. Both assertions are necessary: the first, in order to explain the occurrence of any evil action; the second, in order to justify us in calling it evil.

If evil is not, in some sense, innate, then we are unable to explain how anyone could ever commit an evil act. A man would then either will the good or else not will. He would follow good maxims, or no maxims at all. In other words, we should be driven back to the original Kantian position which can explain only moral weakness, but not moral evil. Every genuinely evil act, no matter at what point in time we locate it, already presupposes the maxim to deviate from the moral law. It is that maxim, not the action itself, which is evil. And that maxim must, in some sense, be innate.

Yet it must be innate in quite a specific sense. As we have seen, evil cannot be a fixed part of human nature, existing independently of any act of the human will. Thus evil, though "radical, innate . . . in human nature, yet nonetheless is brought upon us by ourselves." Kant elaborates by affirming that evil is "termed innate only in this sense, that it is posited as the ground antecedent to every use of freedom in experience (in earliest youth as far back as our birth) and is thus conceived of as present in man at birth—which is not to say that birth is the cause of it."<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps it is well to give Kant's view a formulation in which the dubious term "innate" is avoided. A man's empirical and temporal actions are, in so far as they are morally relevant, merely the manifestation of a

commitment to principles in which man determines what may be called his character. Such a commitment is the necessary presupposition of all moral life in the temporal and empirical world. But it is itself non-temporal and non-empirical, and known to us only by inference. That commitment consists in a radical decision, freely made, between good and evil. The empirical life lived by us all is of such a nature as to presuppose a decision for evil.

One question remains. Can a ground be discovered for this decision itself? Is there a higher principle determining the will in its decisions? Kant's answer must be emphatically in the negative. If man's alternative consists in willing the good or not willing at all, then indeed there is a higher principle determining the will; it is the moral law itself. But if man chooses freely, either for or against the moral law, then there can be no higher determining principle. Then each decision of each man is a metaphysical ultimate; and whichever choice is made, it is an ultimate irrationality.

## 5

The doctrine of radical evil, as so far presented, has so close a resemblance to the Christian conception of original sin as to be practically indistinguishable from it. Kant himself refers to the biblical account of the fall.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, "radical evil" and "original sin" cannot be identified.

Original sin is a state in which I am obligated to a law which I am nevertheless unable to obey. It is a paradoxical condition. Man can recognize, but not overcome, this condition; to overcome it requires an act of divine grace. To Kant the state of original sin is a moral and metaphysical impossibility. For he categorically denies the possibility of a situation in which there is a moral obligation without a corresponding moral freedom.

To be sure, man has brought radical evil upon himself. But if it is ineradicable ever after, then man's freedom has ceased with the first free act in which he chose evil; and along with his freedom, man's responsibility has disappeared as well. But, says Kant, "despite the fall, the injunction that we ought to become better men resounds unabatedly in our souls; hence this must be within our power." Elsewhere he says: "through no cause in the world can . . . [man] cease to be a freely acting being."<sup>24</sup> Through no cause: that is to say, not even through himself.

Kant's opposition to original sin is further illustrated by his general conception of religion. If sin is original, it follows that man must approach God primarily, not with his moral achievements, none of which are pure, but with the awareness of his sinfulness. And it follows further that God does not reward man according to merit; for man has no merit. God's gift to man is grace which, if and when it comes, is wholly unmerited.

In sharp contrast, Kant regards moral action as the core of the religious life. He defines religion as "the recognition of all duties as divine commands." And he denies the religious value of any activity other than moral action. "Whatever, over and above good conduct in life, man fancies that he can do to become well-pleasing to God is mere illusion and pseudo-service of God."<sup>25</sup> This pseudo-service presumably includes the sort of meditation and prayer in which man, recognizing his sinfulness, throws himself upon the mercy of God.

To be sure, Kant concedes that man is always imperfect; that he therefore requires divine aid; and that religion is the hope for such aid. But he denies that it is accessible in this life, and considers all supposed experience of it as sheer enthusiasm and illusion. Moreover, he regards it as harmful to think too frequently of God's future aid; such thoughts can only serve to induce moral lassitude. Indeed, our sole concern with God's future aid should be to live in such a way as to be worthy of it. Thus it does not really make any difference to the life we ought to live now whether this future divine aid—of which we can, in any case, form no conception—is fact or fancy. In order to live the good life now, we do not require it.

There is, then, a vast difference between original sin and Kant's radical evil. Both doctrines assert a radical perversion in man as he is now, a perversion brought about by man himself. Both assert that, inasmuch as this perversion is radical, no mere gradual reform can eliminate it. To eliminate it requires a total act of conversion, an act of redemption, the creation of a new man. But whereas, according to Christian doctrine only God can redeem fallen man, Kant asserts, and must assert, that man can redeem himself.

But surely such an act of self-redemption is, according to Kant's own principles, utterly impossible! For Kant himself declares that "how it is possible for a naturally evil man to make himself a good man wholly surpasses our comprehension; for how can a bad tree bring forth good fruit?"<sup>26</sup> Kant has introduced radical evil because any empirical evil act already presupposes a perversion of principles in a man's intelligible character. How then can any empirical good action restore the original goodness of character? Indeed, how is any unqualifiedly good action possible? We seem here driven to a ludicrous conclusion: Kant has adopted radical evil in order to account for man's freedom for evil; yet this very doctrine now seems to leave freedom for good inexplicable. Are we to say that the philosopher can explain either man's freedom to do good, or to do evil, but not both?

Kant denies this fateful dilemma. True, man cannot wipe out radical evil in himself by gradual reform, by deviating in his actions less and less from the moral law. It is the maxim to deviate at all which must be abandoned, and this requires, not reform, but revolution, not growth, but rebirth, the creation, as it were, of a new man. But man himself can put on the new man. "A man [can] reverse . . . , by a single unchangeable decision,

that highest ground of his maxims whereby he was an evil man (and thus put on the new man).<sup>27</sup>

How this act of self-conversion is possible is utterly unintelligible. For no higher determining ground can be discovered for it. The ground is not the moral law; for this is not in itself a determining principle; nor is the ground man's previous character, for this is exactly what is evil and what he puts away. This revolution, then, is a sort of *creatio ex nihilo*. But then, in this regard the conversion toward good is exactly parallel to the original perversion toward evil. It too is an ultimate act of decision for which there is no higher ground.

Kant's doctrine of the possibility of conversion thus sheds a final light on his doctrine of radical evil. Evil is radical only in the sense that at each moment we find that we have already committed evil; and we had to be evil in order to do it. But evil is not radical in the sense that we are not now responsible. On the contrary, in each empirical action, at every here and now, our whole being is at stake, and we are wholly responsible. "In the search for the rational origin of evil actions, every such action must be regarded as though the individual had fallen into it directly from a state of innocence."<sup>28</sup>

Kant thus places man in a cosmic position which is at once majestic and frightening. Everything in the universe is finished, from the lowliest plant to God Himself: everything but man. For what matters about man is not the finished constituents of his nature, but his character. And his character is not ready-made. Each man must make his own.

Finally the task confronting each man is not the comparatively harmless one of climbing up a ladder, as high as he is able. For his character will be not more or less developed, more or less pure, more or less good. His is the grim and radical choice between good and evil. No degrees of any sort soften the harshness of this "either-or." And even though man's temporal life is, as such, mere appearance, nevertheless any here and now may be the expression of a decision in his intelligible nature; and thus in any here and now eternity itself may be at stake. Nothing in heaven or earth is more important than the moment in which a man—any man—makes himself good or bad. And whenever a man makes such a decision, the universe, so to speak, holds its breath.

## Notes

1. Quoted by K. Vorlaender, *Kant-Schiller-Goethe* (2nd ed., Leipzig, 1923), p. 151.
2. *Vorlesungen ueber die philosophische Religionslehre* (2nd ed., Leipzig, 1830), p. 150.

3. *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften*, Prussian Academy ed. (Berlin, 1902–38), VII, p. 123. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations refer to this edition.

4. In a letter to G. Koerner, dated February 28, 1793, in *Schillers Briefe*, ed. F. Jonas (Stuttgart, n.d.), III, p. 288.

5. In a letter to Herder, dated June 7, 1793, *Werke*, ed. Grossherzogin Sophie Sachsen (Weimar, 1887), section IV, vol. X, p. 75.

6. Cf. especially Kant's *Streit der Fakultäten*, in particular the preface, *Schriften* VII, pp. 5ff. Cf. also K. Vorlaender's edition of *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der reinen Vernunft* (Leipzig, 1919), xxx ff.

7. The title of Kant's work alone is sufficient proof that he strove to make a sharp distinction between "natural" or "philosophical" religion, on the one hand, and "revealed" religion, on the other. There can be no doubt that Kant was sincere in making this distinction, though it is quite another question (and one well worth asking), whether he managed to preserve it. Nevertheless, one group of critics accused him of seeking to undermine revealed theology, whereas the other group accused him of giving a mere theological apologetic in a pseudo-philosophical form. As far as Kant's intentions are concerned, both accusations are equally unjust. And as regards performance, there may be some justice in the former criticism, but (as this paper seeks to show) there is none whatever in the latter.

8. Kant grants that there is a sense in which love is a duty; but he denies that love, in that sense, is an inclination. Cf. *Schriften*, VI, p. 449: "Die Liebe wird hier aber nicht als Gefuehl (aesthetisch), d.i. als Lust an der Vollkommenheit anderer Menschen, nicht als Liebe des Wohlgefallens, verstanden (denn Gefuehle zu haben, dazu kann es keine Verpflichtung durch Andere geben), sondern muss als Maxime des Wohlwollens (als praktisch) gedacht werden, welche das Wohltun zur Folge hat."

9. *Schriften*, IV, p. 421; Abbott, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics*, 10th ed. (London, 1926), p. 46. For an incisive study of the various formulations of the categorical imperative, cf. H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative* (Chicago, 1948), pp. 129ff.

10. *Schriften*, V, p. 72; *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Abbott (6th ed., London, 1923), 164.

11. *Schriften*, IV, p. 427; Abbott, *Fundamental Principles*, p. 54.

12. *Schriften*, IV, p. 447; *Fundamental Principles*, p. 79.

13. Reicke, *Lose Blaetter aus Kants Nachlass* (c. 1889), II, p. 139.

14. *Schriften*, IV, pp. 454ff.; *Fundamental Principles*, pp. 89ff.

15. *Schriften*, V, p. 60; *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 151.

16. *Schriften*, VI, p. 19; *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (Chicago, 1934), p. 15. For the most part, we quote from that translation (referred to as *Religion*).

17. *Schriften*, VI, pp. 33, 34; *Religion*, pp. 28ff.

18. *Schriften*, VI, p. 31; *Religion*, p. 26.

19. *Schriften*, VI, p. 32; *Religion*, p. 27.

20. *Schriften*, VI, p. 20; *Religion*, p. 16.

21. *Schriften*, VI, p. 24; *Religion*, p. 20.

22. *Schriften*, VI, pp. 32, 22; *Religion*, pp. 28, 17.

23. *Schriften*, VI, pp. 41ff.; *Religion*, p. 36.
24. *Schriften*, VI, pp. 45, 41; *Religion*, pp. 40, 36.
25. *Schriften*, VI, pp. 153, 170; *Religion*, pp. 142, 158.
26. *Sebriften*, VI, pp. 44ff.; *Religion*, p. 40.
27. *Schriften*, VI, pp. 47ff.; *Religion*, p. 43.
28. *Schriften*, VI, p. 41; *Religion*, p. 36.



## UPROOTING EVIL AND THE BUILDING OF ETHICAL COMMUNITIES

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Sharon Anderson-Gold

Reflecting on the tragedies of our times, our symposium sponsors tell us: “The twentieth century has put a dark shadow of doubt over the residual hope in the moral progress of the human species. The World Wars, the Nazi concentration camps, the Soviet Gulag, the Chinese ‘Great Leap Forward’, and many other less spectacular but no less horrific examples of ideological, ethnic and religious slaughter force us to come to terms with the problem of evil.” Such reflections prompt questions. Where does evil come from? What is the source of the impulses that lead people to commit such deeds? Can we at least place the blame for the more massive crimes of our times on leaders with desires and motives of a different cast than those of the ordinary good citizen? One of the most surprising outcomes of the analyses performed regarding the motivational structure of Nazi war criminals was that these individuals, for the most part, were not psychologically aberrant. Commenting on the particular personality of Adolf Eichmann, Hannah Arendt coined the unforgettable phrase the “banality of evil.” Must we not then assume a capacity for evil within even ordinary people to account for the possibility of these massive crimes? If evil is innate to the species, must we not abandon our hope for moral progress altogether? I will argue that rather than abandon our hope for moral progress because of the seeming “radicality” of evil, we ought to embrace this doctrine first enunciated by Immanuel Kant in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* as the very source of a solution.

Perhaps no doctrine on the sources and nature of evil has proved more perplexing than Kant’s notion that man has an innate propensity to evil and that, therefore, the character of the species is evil. However, as pessimistic

as this may sound regarding the nature and destiny of humanity, this perspective on evil offers us a way to envision an “uprooting” of evil through the development of ethical forms of community. To see this I will have to unpack the connection in Kant’s theory between evil and human predispositions. I shall argue that because radical evil is rooted in our predisposition to humanity, it is rooted in the conditions of social existence and can only be overcome through collective action and the production of ethical community. In other words to penetrate to the “roots” of evil is to understand the way to moral development.

Kantian ethics is generally associated with the idea of “autonomy” and accounts of moral responsibility that focus on the role of reason and principles in determining individual choice and intention. Because Kant rejects the possibility of deriving evil from reason, there cannot be a principled evil. For this reason many have critiqued Kant’s concept of evil as unable to account for the committed pursuit of destructive acts or the pursuit of evil “for its own sake.”<sup>1</sup> But what can it mean to do evil “for its own sake”? What kind of an objective is evil-doing?

Kant also rejects evil as derived from nature since we cannot be held accountable for what we cannot choose. Evil then must arise from some characteristic of our volition. It is well known that moral significance for Kant does not derive from the external characteristics of the act, rather evil acts provide the occasion for inferences concerning the motives and intentions of human beings. Furthermore, since the moral law is an incentive for action without a countervailing incentive, our actions would be fully in accordance with morality and given only the moral law, we would be living in a morally perfect world.

But if evil exists, and no one seems to doubt that it does, then its very possibility requires a countervailing incentive, which Kant refers to in its unactualized state as “the propensity to evil.” As a subjective ground of the possibility of evil this propensity is universal, it is “rooted in humanity itself,” in the sense that it is a capacity characteristic of the species. The actualization of this propensity, its influence as an incentive arises from an exercise of freedom, from an unfolding or development of some predisposition that in its unactualized state is a predisposition to the good. In other words, before we become either good or evil through our actions, we must “be” in some more basic condition. How do our original predispositions help to explain the nature and source of evil?

Kant entertains only two fundamental incentives, principles that can determine the will, the moral law and rational self-love or prudence. Because predispositions which are simply original conditions of our being must be developed, they can be expressed in accordance with either the moral law or self-love. Although Kant recognizes three original predispositions, animality, humanity and personality, the predisposition which turns

out to be most closely associated, in Kant's account, with the production of vice is the predisposition to humanity. The susceptibility of this predisposition to corruption arises from the rational capacity to compare the condition of the self to that of others. Comparing in the first instance appears to arise from the legitimate desire for equality, but this desire can become unstable as the self engages others. Mere social exposure, Kant argues, and not necessarily evil deeds, is a ground of insecurity and thus tempts the individual to devalue others to gain superiority. To devalue then is devolution of a more original attitude of valuing implicit in our recognition of others as moral equals. It is an attitude that prepares the agent for immoral actions by removing the other from the category of moral equal. The psychologist Ervin Staub in his work *The Roots of Evil* has identified organized social devaluation as a preliminary stage in all of the genocide he has studied.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, prior to any cultural or institutional framework and operative at their deep, muddy roots lies the propensity within each to compete for esteem and devalue others. Since the moral law posits a kingdom of ends-in-themselves, each of infinite value, this propensity reveals an inner resistance to the dictates of morality.

The propensity to evil is then the ground of a corrupt form of self-love which rears its ugly head in contexts of social competition. It is moral evil insofar as this propensity develops into a willful resistance to the moral law which subordinates morality to self-love. Self-love, however, need not be narcissistic; it can expand to include all those with whom we identify our own good. An expanded self-love can provide the basis for alliances with all those who can engage in mutually benefiting exchange. Mutually benefiting coalitions in turn create unequal distributions of power across groups which result in social stratifications. Such stratifications not only produce uneven material benefits but can also lead to overt social devaluations, conflicts and violations of our inherent moral duties to others.

Once we view evil as manifest through a corrupt form of the predisposition to humanity, we can begin to make sense of Kant's phrase that radical evil is "rooted in humanity itself." The capacity of the self to identify with others and formulate concepts of value and worth in a social context is the ground of all moral life and the matrix of culture. Thus, Kant maintains that nature intends only that the inclinations original to this predisposition operate as a "spur to culture." Nonetheless, when misdirected by self-love and transformed into jealousy and rivalry, such inclinations can become "vices of culture." From the vices of culture as magnified through social conflicts arise what Kant terms "diabolical vices."<sup>3</sup> Kant's initial moral rationalism, then, does not lead him to overlook the manner in which cultural formations shape the moral life by shaping our social identities.

But can we not, on the basis of the very freedom that the moral law makes possible, overcome this propensity, this inner resistance to morality? Let us suppose this was possible and the self emerges with a renewed commitment to morality. Because this propensity feeds off our predisposition to humanity, and because we cannot extricate ourselves from our social context, every social encounter remains a new occasion for the refueling of the propensity to evil. Kant tells us that “it suffices that they are at hand, that they surround him, and that they are men, for them mutually to corrupt each other’s predispositions and make one another evil.”<sup>4</sup> Kant calls this condition an “ethical state of nature,” with obvious parallels to the pre-political condition. The most striking parallel is the mutual insecurity of human association and the consequent need for reciprocal recognition. Unlike the means for securing outer freedom, however, the ethical state of nature cannot be ended by coercive measures. Unless we can transform the structure of interaction itself, unless we can collectively manage the occasions for these conflicts, there can be no “moral security” for any individual.

While each individual is accountable for the influence of this propensity on his or her actions, moral evil cannot be understood in a reductive individualistic sense. To view the problem of moral evil as somehow confined to an inner form of discipline is misguided and can only result in futility. The impact of evil on the social and cultural life of humanity is of grave concern to the individual, both as an impediment to her own moral development and as a source of significant moral duties to improve one’s social conditions. Precisely because as individuals we are fettered by the propensity to evil, we are directly obligated to promote those objectives which, through the transformation of our social conditions, enhance the moral development of humanity. These social conditions involve not only the stratification of groups within states, but also the interactions between independent societies. While external institutions are significant factors affecting the nature of our interactions, the root of the problem must be addressed at the level of social values. To rethink the problem of evil is to rethink the nature of community. Community itself must be ethically grounded. Contrary to some contemporary communitarian theories, cultural traditions alone cannot ground an ethical community. Cultural and political conflicts are additional sources of ethical instability that render overall human progress problematic. Rather, we must look to the cosmopolitan tradition of universal human rights to understand the possibility of an ethical form of community. Within a cosmopolitan community of communities, human rights set minimal standards for ethical cultural life both within independent communities and for interaction between them. In fact, it would seem impossible to maintain an ethical form of interaction between societies without commitment to some basic norms regarding what we owe

human beings as human beings. Such norms define the ethical structure of social interactions.

Since moral evil cannot be overcome without the realization of ethical community, overcoming evil is more than an act of individual renunciation. Moral development requires the simultaneous promotion of an ethical form of community.

That radical evil affects the entire species binds the destiny of each to all, both as a matter of global interdependencies and as a matter of historical legacy. To contribute to moral progress historical institutions must develop within the context of ethical communities. This means that genuine solutions to the problem of evil will require institutions dedicated to both international distributive justice and ecologically sustainable development.

If the idea of a collective moral progress is coherent, then we must identify and face our collective moral failings. But this is not a merely theoretical endeavor. It must have practical implications for personal moral life. How does a collective moral progress take on personal dimensions and shape an individual moral life? Moral tasks are shaped by historical processes and are different for different generations. Social and political developments have an historical context. The external institutions that provide the basis of civil rights and peaceful economic and political interactions among nations are in constant need of modification and adjustment if they are to accord with justice. In order to contribute to moral progress we must understand how these institutions arise in answer to specific historical failings, and how they can be designed to promote specific objectives. Social scientific understanding must be applied to moral objectives. Clearly, the constitution of the United Nations, particularly its human rights declarations and organs, arose in response to serious institutional and moral failings and consequent mass crimes. Have we then the right to hope in light of the UN Declaration of Human Rights that we have made the institutional fixes that will finally bring peace and justice to our time? Recent ethnic conflicts and terrorist activities continue to shadow that hope because we are able to see that institutional fixes are not enough. The current commitment to human rights is not yet as universal, nor as deep as originally envisioned, and we have not yet achieved substantive international justice.

However, the groundwork for a cosmopolitan community of communities has been laid and cannot be abandoned because only an ethical form of community can produce the moral solidarity through which evil can in time become "uprooted." It is not my intention to belittle the immense difficulties entailed in the current struggle to get human rights infused into the social values as well as the institutional structures of contemporary nation states. But I do believe that the commitment to cosmopolitanism can be abandoned only at the peril of our future moral life.

## Notes

1. See, for instance, John Silber's introductory essay to Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).
2. Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
3. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, p. 22.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

## THE REALITY OF RADICAL EVIL

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Jeffrey B. Russell

According to academic Conventional Wisdom at the beginning of the twenty-first century in many academic and media circles, as well as in many textbooks in the natural and “social” sciences, evil cannot exist. The reason is simple: Conventional Wisdom has it that consciousness itself does not exist. Thought, and indeed every variety of consciousness, is merely either the product of the movement of neurons and axons caused by random chemical fluctuations in the brain, or else the product of cause and effect once quantum fluctuations have been taken into consideration. In this Conventional Wisdom, there can be no truth, no goodness, no beauty—and no evil.

Consequently philosophical and religious leaders such as Plato, Jesus, and Siddhartha must all have been badly mistaken or even disturbed people, for the reason that their Wisdom does not fit twenty-first-century Conventional Wisdom. Or, if it was their followers who invented the ideas attributed to Jesus and Siddhartha, those followers—such as St. Paul the Apostle or the Dalai Lama—must themselves have been disturbed.

Conventional Wisdom accepts only that Tibetan Buddhism, rabbinic Judaism, and the Christian theology of the Church Fathers, as examples, exist (or existed) as mere social constructs rather than as insights into reality. Consequently, Conventional Wisdom says, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, economists, and historians may study them only as such and may not take their intellectual content seriously. Anyone who does not follow contemporary Conventional Wisdom must be ignorant, stupid, insincere, or at the least sadly misled. The problem is that the question remains: By what standards is the Conventional Wisdom to be judged? Is it not itself a social construct? Since there is no consciousness by which consciousness is to be judged, what makes contemporary valid consciousness and that of

Christ or Buddha false consciousness? Courageous atheists, such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre, have admitted the problem but have gone on to insist on the “will to power” or “the will to say No,” subordinating any sort of rational system to the “will” (though Sartre himself insisted upon the radical reality of evil). The will to power has come to dominate contemporary academic departments of humanities and social science. Since the Conventional Wisdom has no rational, conscious, or coherent means to criticize anyone’s personal construct of reality, the supporters of Conventional Wisdom seek to impose their own personal constructs on others by means of shrillness, anger, contempt, and ridicule. They refuse to understand, or to enter into any dialogue with those whose Wisdom is different. They insist that radical evil does not exist. How do they know? They do not ask; they simply enforce their views.

Conventional Wisdom is dead wrong. Still, it is necessary to grasp the radical challenge it poses to humanity. It holds that only things that can be quantified really exist; that the universe has no inherent meaning or purpose; that consciousness is nothing but a reducible manifestation of quantitative processes that arise either from blind chance or from mechanistic actions, or from both; and that all judgments or values are consequently subjective, so that one person’s evil is another person’s good. Radical evil does not exist. This point of view, scientism or scientific reductionism (as opposed to real science, which is always open-minded and open-ended) has been widely promoted by a number of contemporary thinkers. Reductionism is either/or thinking with a vengeance, and it is identifiable by certain key words and phrases, such as “just,” “merely,” “only,” and “nothing but.” Your reaction to your favorite music is nothing but chemicals in your brain. The grief you feel at the death of someone you love is only chemicals in your brain. Your mathematical ideas are merely chemicals in your brain. Your disapproval of slavery or lynching is just chemicals in your brain.

These are not caricatures. Reductionists mean what they say. From E. O. Wilson’s *Consilience*:

Everything can be reduced to simple universal laws of physics. Ideas and feelings are merely linkage among the neural networks. It can all eventually be explained as brain circuitry. Everything that is knowable but not yet known to science is open to being explained by science.<sup>1</sup>

Are you suffering in pain and despair? Never mind, it’s just your neural networks. From Douglas Futuyma’s *Evolution*:

By coupling undirected, purposeless variation to the blind, uncaring process of natural selection, Darwin made theological

or spiritual explanations of the life processes superfluous. Together with Marx's materialist theory of history and society and Freud's attribution of human behavior to influences over which we have little control, Darwin's theory of evolution was a crucial plank in the platform of mechanism and materialism—of much of science, in short—that has since been the stage of most Western thought.<sup>2</sup>

From Richard Dawkins:

[The reductionist world] would be neither evil nor good in intention. It would manifest no intentions of any kind. In a universe of physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.<sup>3</sup>

Your family wiped out by the Holocaust? Children mutilated in Sierra Leone? Hardwood forests in Indonesia destroyed by corporations? Pay it no mind. William Provine:

Modern science directly implies that there are no inherent moral or ethical laws, no absolute guiding principles for human society. . . . Free will as it is traditionally conceived—the freedom to make uncoerced and unpredictable choices among alternative courses of action—simply does not exist. . . . There is no way that the evolutionary process as currently conceived can produce a being that is truly free to make moral choices.<sup>4</sup>

Your daughter is raped? Stalin executed and deported millions? It's nobody's fault. E. O. Wilson:

We have come to the crucial stage in the history of biology when religion itself is subject to the explanations of the natural sciences. As I have tried to show, sociobiology can account for the very origin of mythology by the principle of natural selection acting on the genetically evolving material structure of the human brain. If this interpretation is correct, the final decisive edge enjoyed by scientific naturalism will come from its capacity to explain traditional religion, its chief competitor, as a wholly material phenomenon. Theology is not likely to survive as an independent intellectual discipline.<sup>5</sup>

Richard Lewontin:

We take the side of science . . . because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to materialist causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to these dogmas is the simple truth that there is no scientific evidence that life has no meaning and plenty of other kinds of evidence that life does have meaning. Certainly dreams and feelings and thoughts (including, by the way, scientific ones) are linked to chemicals in our brain, but it is not clear which is the cause and which the effect, and even asking that question in an either/or manner is unhelpful. Evidence that life does have meaning is all around us and within us and above us and beneath us and before us. “You have to be carefully taught” by the understanding-impaired to believe otherwise. The success of the reductionists with the media lies in their providing people a safe, windowless room in which they can live without having to respond to beauty; this closedness is encouraged by consumer capitalism, which is threatened by any transcendent beliefs that cast doubt on the value of consumerism.

One of the most serious problems with reductionism is that it denies the direct human experience of consciousness, of thought, and indeed of good and evil. Evil is not abstract: it is real and tangible. The fact is that everyone except the sociopathic and insane recognizes evil when they encounter it. I kick a baby to death before your eyes: do you fail to recognize this act as evil? The Nazis sent millions to death in extermination camps: do you fail to recognize this act as evil? Terrorists kill thousands at the World Trade Center: Do you not recognize this as evil? Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge killed as many as one-third of their own Cambodian people, usually by brutal means such as hacking and clubbing. Not evil? Stalin killed tens of millions of ethnic and religious dissenters. Not evil? You have to be very carefully taught indeed to believe that radical evil does not exist, and indeed you have been—by the Conventional Wisdom of friends, teachers, and writers.

It is certainly fair for Conventional Wisdom to demand what we mean when we assert the existence of evil. Some evil appears to be “banal,” in Hannah Arendt’s word, as with those who mindlessly obey orders to slaughter, or those who unreflectively design weapons of mass destruction,

or those who produce or consume products harmful to the health of the planet. It is not a question of damning certain people as evil—quite the contrary, we must recognize that there is a tendency to evil in all of us. Rather, it is a question of identifying some acts as intrinsically evil. Mindless as some evil acts may appear to be, they all have their root in *radical evil*. What is radical evil? *It is the deliberate, free choice to impose suffering upon a sentient being, a being that can feel pain.*<sup>7</sup>

Again, Conventional Wisdom poses a radical challenge to humanity. In the view of the reductionist writers cited above, there can be no such thing as evil, precisely because there is no such thing as deliberate, free choice. No deliberate choice, no evil. In such a view, we are all victims of our selfish genes; the rapist of children is as much a victim as the children he rapes; Stalin is as much a victim as the millions he sent to die in the labor camps. The universe, and life itself, according to Conventional Wisdom, has no meaning or purpose. The philosopher Bertrand Russell wondered at the idea of comforting a grieving mother by telling her that God makes the child's death meaningful; we may wonder at the idea of telling her that the child's life never had, and will never have, any meaning whatever.

It is philosophically necessary to distinguish between moral evil (done by humans or by alleged angels and extra-terrestrials) and natural evil, such as tornadoes or cancer. Although the question whether God is morally responsible for causing natural evils is legitimate, what we are concerned with here is evil perpetrated by human beings.

What are the principles upon which to deny Conventional Wisdom's denial of consciousness, free will, and responsibility? When we throw out preconceptions, what are the first options we encounter?

The first option is whether the cosmos (the universe) has meaning or purpose outside human constructions and opinions. Either it does, or it does not. To put it another way, either the cosmos is random and meaningless, or it has transcendent or objective meaning. This absolutely elementary logic is often ignored or denounced by relativists who dismiss logic as invalid. (The problem with such a denunciation will be clear below.) If there is any inherent meaning in the cosmos, then there are principles by which humans may live: the possibility of freedom and dignity exist.<sup>8</sup> If there is no inherent meaning in the cosmos, then absolutely nothing can be absolute good and evil, and everything is relative according to personal view. If I choose to rape and murder children, who are you to say that I should not do it? You may say that you personally find it repulsive, but you have no right to impose your will on me. You have no right to denounce the Nazis for killing Jews or bin-Laden for destroying the World Trade Center or, for that matter, the United States Government for attacking the Taliban. You have every right to your feelings in these matters, but why do your feelings matter more than Adolf Hitler's? Marquis de Sade

rightly recognized three hundred years ago that, if there are no absolute standards, then there are no absolute moral standards: everything is relative to the individual or perhaps to the society, and though you or I may personally dislike raping and killing, even Sade's own victims have no grounds on which to seek to impose their views on him. If there are really no criteria of good and evil, by what possible criterion do you denounce torture? Your outrage is just brain chemistry, as the torture itself is the result of nothing but chemicals in the torturer's brain.

We actually do recognize radical evil immediately, but have been conditioned by the social constructs of the late-twentieth century to dismiss our recognition. Do you really and truly believe that you have no freedom of choice or action? If you say that you do believe this, do you live your daily life in a way consistent with this proclaimed belief? If you answer yes to either of these questions, you are not alone in deluding yourself. The delusion is not an accident: it has an intellectual history. That history occurred in western civilization. It culminated by the end of the last century in two movements—scientific reductionism and deconstruction (the view that everyone constructs one's own meaning)—that (though diametrically opposed) have both encouraged relativism and nihilism.

Many philosophers, such as utilitarians, pragmatists, reductionists, and (in the other corner) deconstructionists deny the self-evident truth and maintain that it is possible to construct a prescriptive system of ethics without recourse to any absolute. This calls to mind the image of a spaniel chasing its cropped tail. The falsehood of their idea lies not in its details (every moral system, no matter how rigidly traditional, has problems in its details) but in its basis. It is not a real option in itself, for it follows from the denial of inherent meaning and purpose in the cosmos. Thus a system that maintains that all values are merely social constructs is obliged to admit that it is merely a social construct and, therefore, can ask no compliance from those who disagree. It has been suggested that one can be a relative relativist, holding a firm set of values oneself while admitting that these values may be meaningless to others. But such a person then has no basis at all for criticizing anyone else's actions, including torture and rape.

The Conventional Wisdom even unintentionally produces a kind of dark, ironic humor in its displacement of the terms "good or evil" with such weak terms as "appropriate or inappropriate," "healthy or unhealthy," "legal or illegal," "well-adjusted or badly adjusted," "professional or unprofessional," and so on. One might just as well say "nice or naughty." Can putting people in gas chambers because of their ethnicity be defined by any other term than "evil"?

If evil exists, are there not only evil actions but also evil people? What you actually are in the framework of space and time over which your life is spread out is your character. Ideas of how character is formed can be

classified under four rough headings. One is “nature”: that is, your genes, in addition to random events, inevitably determine your character. It’s all genetics. This looks attractive to some proponents of genetic engineering, for we might engineer people who cannot murder or rape; or who cannot fight wars; or who cannot rob; or who cannot cheat on their taxes; or who cannot disobey the government; or who cannot disagree with their professors . . . In other words, someone has to decide in which direction we should be engineered, and it is unfortunately far more likely that the ultimate engineer would be someone like Stalin or Hitler rather than a genial Harvard professor like B. F. Skinner. Again: you have no choice as to what you think or do.

A second is “nurture”: our character is determined by our environment, i.e., parents, siblings, teachers, peers, television shows, the Internet, and so on. This looks attractive to many social scientists and their followers. If we could change the environment, we could eliminate, or at least reduce, “inappropriate behavior.” If we could eliminate poverty, child-abuse, welfare abuse, violent TV shows, overcrowded housing. . . . Now, the most effective way to eliminate “inappropriate behavior” of the kind that we usually call crime, would be to eliminate criminals (through the death penalty if necessary), or even to eliminate environments (through destruction if necessary) that encourage criminal behavior. Not many social scientists are willing to accept the consequences of behaviorist reductionism. But again: Conventional Wisdom says you have no choice as to what you say or do. Some argue that our character is determined by a combination of nature and nurture. Still, Conventional Wisdom asserts, you have no choice as to what you think, say, or do.

A third is a utilitarian system where the good is determined by equations (usually in economic terms) as to how we can maximize the good of the world by maximizing the good of our society, which we do by maximizing the good for each individual. This is the system promoted by many adherents of capitalism. The indemonstrable assumption is that “we” know what the good is for people: capitalism holds that *the good* basically means the distribution of *goods*, material possessions. Thus capitalism and consumerism (as well as old-fashioned communism) converge with scientific reductionism to affirm the purely material, quantitative value of life. But not all believers in economic theories are determinists. Some allow freedom of choice. But in what this freedom consists of other than having material goods and choosing among them (if one is rich enough to have any choice) is unclear. In this system, you have the appearance of free choice without any basis for believing you do.

A fourth is free will. With free will, our character is formed by the choices we make over a lifetime. Not trivial or temporary choices, such as between chocolate and vanilla ice cream, but the deep moral choices we

make frequently in our lives to help or harm others directly or indirectly. (Thus to take cocaine or to drive an SUV, indirectly harming others, constitutes moral choice as does the choice to stab another person.) Your character is what you make of yourself in the long term over the time and space allotted to your life. The particular choices you make gradually form your character over your lifetime. And you are free to modify or even change that character at any time during your life by making the free choice to do so. Character is the deepest form of your soul: the shape of your life as you choose to live it. Though few proponents of free will have claimed that nature or nurture have little or no effect on our character, it has long been observed that there can be no cause of an act of true free will. Our environment, our genes, or maybe even God and the Devil, can influence us, but nothing can determine our character: it is something we build. Unlike the other scenarios, free choice—free will—expresses what we directly experience consciously: our freedom to think, act, and say what we decide.

Thus we are responsible for our words and actions. If we are not, who is? If no one, then who can blame the Nazi or the terrorist—or the U.S. administration? And if we are not responsible for our destructive actions, then we are not responsible for our creative or kind actions either. No one deserves either blame or praise. Do you really believe that you have no freedom, no choice, in your life? Watch what people, especially academics, do rather than what they say. It is interesting that the firmest proponents of “choice” politically usually deny that humans have any fundamental free choice (it is by the way curious that they support choice in schools at the same time as they support choice in reproduction).

What choices do we have? The essential choice is to be happy. We have the option to choose to pursue happiness (though any of us may of course be blocked by others in our pursuit). What is happiness? Perhaps its kernel is loving gratitude. It is the good for ourselves, for our neighbors, for our society, for humanity, for the natural world, for God. It is the choice, as was said a long time ago in both the Hebrew and the Christian Bibles, to love God and our neighbors as we love ourselves. (Similar ideas are found in Buddhist, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Sikh, Jain, and most other religions.) And that choice involves the really free choice *to not love God and our neighbor*. Whatever free beings (angels, extraterrestrials, and so on) may or may not have fundamental free will, humans are the only beings that we know, from our own experience, are able to choose between good and evil. That choice, then, permits us to do evil: to choose self, power, separation, exclusion, narrowing ourselves down to the dark, confined, infinitely smaller world of selfishness ending in Nothing, instead of opening out in selflessness, in love of God, the natural world, humanity, in Reality.

Character is the key to the question of whether there are evil people as well as evil actions. A person who, over the long run, makes one bad moral choice after another has created a serious habitual tendency to evil. That person can fairly be called an evil person. There is no point in not thinking of Hitler or Stalin as evil rather than “inappropriate.” The point was recently illustrated by the bizarre public reaction by many psychologists to the murders at the World Trade Center by Osama bin-Laden. Bin-Laden must, many thought, be delusional, “sick,” despite the fact that there is little evidence to that effect; he is literate, educated, brilliant, and coherent.

What about human nature? Is it good, or evil, or mixed? If it were entirely good, where would evil come from? If it were entirely evil, where would good come from? Most philosophers, whatever their systems and approaches, would agree that, for whatever reasons, human nature is mixed. The question of why or how an all-good and all-knowing God would permit evil has been so long answered by so many thinkers in so many different ways that I will not broach it here, except to make one observation. Since the eighteenth century, when David Hume argued so forcefully against religion, atheists have claimed that the existence of evil is a disproof of the existence of God. But if, as contemporary reductionists and relativists believe, there is no such thing as evil, if it does not exist, that particular argument is incoherent.

Radical, absolute evil does exist in humanity. And we know it when we experience it. But how do we know it? First by experience, of course. And second, through wisdom. Not the Conventional Wisdom, which always changes decade by decade, year by year, sometimes month by month, but true wisdom. And what is that? Reflection on the tradition of religion and philosophy and science over time: reflection on what intelligent, learned, honest thinkers have thought over time, from the monotheist Pharaoh Akhenaton and before to Einstein and after.

But aren't all those old thinkers wrong or irrelevant? Only to reductionists, who assume that only the quantifiable is true and that therefore no one much before Newton had any true (yes, they will use the term) idea of truth.

The way to counter evil is of course less to theorize it than to act. And the only way to act against evil is to act with love. We are called to fight evil, but we are also called to know how to fight it. Evil is not effectively resisted with hatred and weapons. Evil cannot be defeated with evil, negation with negation, terror with terror. Otherwise, as is evident so often and in so many places today and in the past, evil begets more evil. It is all too common to assume that “we” are good and “the other” is evil, or that the bad feelings in ourselves must be caused by bad feelings in others. We need to understand ourselves very well in order to avoid projecting evil onto others. Understanding, fulfillment, openness, freedom, dignity, and

above all, love: that is both the means and the goal in reducing evil and in pursuing the good. That means what it has always meant: visiting the sick, giving to the poor, fostering children. The prescription is the same as it has been for millennia; it remains only to follow it, at last. Love, *agape*, gratitude, the old love that today dares not speak its name without being mocked, is the only way to happiness.

## Notes

1. Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience* (New York: Knopf, 1998), p. 261.
2. Douglas Futuyma, *Evolution* (Sunderland, MA: Sinauer, 1986), p. 2.
3. Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Harper, 1995), pp. 132–33.
4. William Provine, "Evolution and the Foundation of Ethics," *MBL Science* 3 (1988): pp. 25–29.
5. Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 192.
6. Richard Lewontin, review of Carl Sagan, *The Demonized World*, in *The New York Review of Books*, January 9, 1997.
7. On radical evil, see Jeffrey Burton Russell's books, all published by Cornell University Press from 1977 to 1988: *The Devil*; *Satan*; *Lucifer*; *Mephistopheles*; *The Prince of Darkness*.
8. B. F. Skinner, the Harvard behaviorist psychologist, explicitly renounced such meaning in his book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Knopf, 1971).

## ROADS TO HELL

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Susan Neiman

Tell people you work on the problem of evil, and you're bound to disappoint them. For you've begun by raising hopes for solutions we'd all like to hear. We'd prefer an answer to the practical question: how can the amount of evil in the world be reduced? But if we can't actually get rid of evil, we'd like some help in thinking about it properly; in particular, we'd like to know how to justify the world, and life within it, when massive evil abounds. But this was Job's question, and not even God could answer it. Where does that leave the rest of us?

For me, it serves as a warning: solving the problem of evil is a hopeless undertaking, and may even involve an element of hubris that's uncomfortably close to blasphemy. So I want to try something else—itself not undaunting—namely, to compress a narrative of the modern history of the concept of evil into fairly short space. It's a project I've been working on for many years, and I was faxing final changes to my editor on September 11. Without wanting to raise other sorts of false hopes—nobody is more aware than I am that what might have been not too much more than an interesting topic in the history of philosophy has suddenly moved to the forefront of political discourse. So I'll conclude my narrative of the history of modern philosophy by suggesting ways in which I hope that conceptual clarity might contribute to a bit of moral and political clarity.

Let's begin with the recognition that the word "Lisbon" was used, in the eighteenth century, to mean approximately what the word "Auschwitz" means for us: the sudden and total collapse of a set of assumptions that give the world sense and meaning. You think you know what justice is, more or less, and how much of the opposite a world can be expected to contain and still count as being civilized. You think you are realistic, know that the distance between this world and the best of all possible ones is vast

and unbridgeable; you don't expect kitsch or fairy tale, just a world which doesn't make you cry out in disgust and shame. You're grown-up, have found a way to navigate a world that thwarts you and your hopes often enough to be used to living within it and still calling your life meaningful—and something happens to make you feel the ground has dropped out from under your feet.

In 1755, what happened was literally an earthquake—the earthquake at Lisbon that, on the first of November, destroyed most of the city, and some 10,000–15,000 of its inhabitants, in about ten minutes. It should be remembered that in 1755 there were no weapons larger than small artillery; only an earthquake, or possibly a volcano, could cause that much death and destruction in that short a time. But it wasn't the numbers that shook up people like Voltaire, by then used to so much trouble one could take him for jaded, or Goethe, a child who remembered Lisbon as his first intellectual experience. Kant and Rousseau, interestingly, wrote pieces about Lisbon that were meant to be reassuring, arguing that the world was not measurably different after the earthquake. Kant later held this to be of the same genre as his writing on optimism—the only texts of which he was later ashamed. Eighteenth-century observers felt despair about that project whose success had seemed assured: making sense of the world most generally, and more particularly, showing it to be a place of order both elegant and grand.

That an earthquake could lead thinkers like Voltaire to long poems lamenting that philosophy is forthwith proven to be false and vain can make us feel wistful, if not positively envious: lucky the age whose confidence can be destroyed by an earthquake. Even comparing Lisbon to Auschwitz seems to risk moral as well as conceptual confusion. Earthquakes have become what insurance companies call acts of God or natural disasters. They are not signs of wrath, or of anything at all: unlike signs, they do not call for interpretation. We seek to understand only so much about them as might help us to gain control over predicting them, or preventing their worst consequences. We do not demand that they make sense, lest they threaten our notions of sense and meaning themselves. They are devastating, and maybe tragic, for those caught in the middle of them; for the rest of us their occurrence is merely bad luck.

This is how we now think about earthquakes, but not about Auschwitz; September 11, as I'll later argue, has uncanny elements of both. To claim, as did the author of a mercifully forgotten book of the 1970s, that after Auschwitz we are all survivors, is unspeakably bad taste. Anybody who tries to talk about the Holocaust without having been through it should remember Jean Améry's warning: our attempts will be no more successful than a blind man's attempts to talk about color. It would be grotesque to compare the conceptual damage done to the observer of Auschwitz with

the life-destruction experienced by an inmate—yet something about the world common to both of us was shattered, in ways we still feel. I share Arendt's sense that if, at Auschwitz, the impossible became true, the worst thing that happened there was a change in our sense of possibility: what was in one moment inconceivable became merely history, an event that happened, hence could happen again. But the limits crossed there were moral limits. The deliberate industrial murder of millions of people has come to function as shorthand for incomparable or absolute evil. What could this have to do with an earthquake?

It is just this sense that the two events are utterly different in kind—that speaking of them in the same breath is what philosophers call a category mistake—which has come to mark modern consciousness. Indeed, I have argued that the attempt to distinguish them is the major guiding problem of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy—not, for instance, the problem of foundationalism or epistemology, demonstrating the existence of the external world. The metaphysical worry driving questions about the difference between appearance and reality is not the fear that the world may not turn out to be what it seems to us—but rather the fear that it will. It's the attempt to explain the otherwise unbearable appearance of evil which drives most metaphysical systems. I won't even try to summarize the argument today, just to give you part of the pieces that distinguish what the eighteenth century viewed as three kinds of evil: metaphysical evil, natural evil, and moral evil.

Our conceptual frameworks are so different from those of our predecessors two centuries earlier that we find it hard to understand how they could use "evil" for three such different things. What they called metaphysical evil is what we call finitude: the fact that the stuff of which we're made is less than perfect, subject to wear and tear and dissolution. Compared to what? you might say, and get the answer: compared to God, or Plato's Forms. But since we've long stopped using these as standards, the fact that we don't measure up to them is hardly experienced as lack, much less grounds for complaint. Natural evil, the second sort of evil in early modern catalogues, is also something we've come to take as a major piece of the way the world is. Earthquakes and floods and lightning, sickness and pain and death, are standard items of the furniture of the universe—everywhere but the Garden of Eden. The latter, of course, was posited as an explanation of why life is not what it should be. Long ago, it was. The earth was a paradise in which everything was good. Hunger was stilled without work, children were born without pain. We knew neither death, nor shame or confusion. If you were designing a world, wouldn't you design it like that?

If this is the way things should be, something must explain the way they are. What our forefathers did was trivial. To complain that a taste of

the wrong kind of fruit isn't enough to merit a death sentence for themselves and all their descendants is to miss the philosophical point, and Christian attempts to make the deed look worse than it is are misguided. What counts is not the justice of the connection between what they did and what they suffered, but the fact that there's a connection at all. Why do bad things happen? Because bad things were done. Better to have some causal explanation, at whatever price, than to stay in the dark. To connect sin and suffering is to separate the world into moral and natural evils, and create thereby a framework for understanding the human condition.

For us, the distinction between sin and suffering is so fundamental that an eighteenth century discussion of them will simply seem confused. We can understand the use of the word "evil" to refer to both as a mistake that only theists could make. Since they give God responsibility for both human cruelty and human suffering—and everything else under the sun—they can view as intentional what we view as accidental. For theists, earthquakes and mass murders may be equally instances of evil, because both of them were caused; they didn't simply happen. Of course theists are stuck with a variety of questions that congeal into what was traditionally called the problem of evil: how can a good and powerful God create this world that redounds with sin and suffering? The difficulty of responding to the question has given many a major reason for rejecting any form of theism. Take God out of the picture, and you've got one less intellectual worry: the problem of evil, many think, disappears along with the Being once ultimately held responsible for it.

I want to suggest, very quickly, why this view is false. The problem of evil is not a religious problem, in any meaningful sense of the word "religion." Different religions have found forms for both articulating and answering it, and these are so common that we're tempted to take the idiom for the essence. (As one Christian put it: Job is the question, and Jesus is the answer.) But you don't have to be a believer to find the problem of evil a threat—not to faith, which can do whatever it wants without justification—that's just what makes it faith—but to reason.

To see this, let's consider two eighteenth century examples: Pierre Bayle, author of the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* often called the arsenal of the Enlightenment, and David Hume, who admired Bayle and honed his weapons into arguments that gave Kant nightmares. Bayle began from the premise that human history is a history of crimes and misfortunes, and that all you need to do is look to experience to confirm it. A God who created such a world, as rational religious traditions would have it, can be nothing but a giant criminal Himself. Hence, Bayle argued, the theory that makes most sense of experience is Manicheism: the belief that the cosmos is controlled and created by two warring forces, one seeking good and the other evil. The inference to the best explanation of the mixed blessings

which life offers us may lead straight to Manicheism—but it could also lead straight to the stake. For any version of Manicheism had been banned as a heresy, and many a thinker had been burned for trying to make traditional claims of God's benevolence and omnipotence compatible with reason. Bayle's own brother had died as a heretic in prison—one reason for Bayle to perfect his own skills of indirection and irony.

His answer to the best attempt to save God's face was brilliant, and remained unanswered. Augustine, you may recall, offered what came to be known as the free will defense of God. On this view, God created a world containing both natural and moral evils, but He cannot be held to blame for them. For in making human beings He made them in His image, giving them the incomparable gift of free will. If they choose to abuse it, they have only themselves to blame, not only for their sins but for the suffering which results as punishment for them. It's an argument which seems to work in getting God off the hook, reconciling the goodness and power we attribute to Him with the mess His creation often seems to present. But Bayle saw it otherwise. He compared the argument to that of a mother who allows her daughters to go to a ball, knowing full well they will be seduced there, and that such seduction guarantees them a future of poverty and shame. In vain, says Bayle, would the mother protest that the girls were free to resist their seducers' temptations. A mother who acts this way loves neither her daughters, nor chastity.

Bayle concluded his verbal pyrotechnics with a leap of faith. Reason cannot put a good God and an evil world together; so much the worse for reason. The question of Bayle's genuine religious convictions in a world governed by censorship provided occasion for scholarly speculation. As a consummate de-masker, it's sometimes hard to imagine him bowing his head before anything. But most scholars decided to take Bayle at his word, as the most brilliant representative of the skeptical fideist tradition. Where reason stumbles, the wise turn to faith.

Hume cherished Bayle's wit, nerve, and corrosive sort of brilliance: they were clearly kindred souls. Three quarters of a century later, Hume sharpened Bayle's arguments until they were annihilating. A really great empiricist knows how to separate data from assumptions, and Hume's *Dialogues* revealed how many unwarranted assumptions were present in most enlightened critical thought. Did the world reveal beauty and order which were evidence of wise, all-seeing Providence? Didn't it look more like the product of an infant deity, who makes worlds in the haphazard way children make sand castles? Perhaps an aging, senile deity who doesn't realize he's lost his touch? Hume's suggestions go somewhere beyond blasphemy. God is not, for him, the unjust tyrant against whom you might dare rebel, but rather the bumbling architect you might decide to fire. Hume's *Dialogues* were published after the death he faced with pagan

sanguinity. He expected no punishment for his atheism after his life was over, but knew he would suffer if he promoted it earlier. We have no good reason to believe that Hume's refusal to state his atheism openly stemmed from deep hesitation; it was rather the work of a prudent and savvy Tory.

I sketch the views of these two very similar men to suggest that belief in God is less decisive than we think—at least for thinking about the problem of evil. Let's take Bayle to be the skeptical fideist he said he was, and Hume to be the skeptical atheist he didn't say he was. Both use the same sort of arguments—about the presence of evil, natural and moral, in everyday experience, to lead to opposite conclusions about God: one embraces God because there's nothing left to embrace, the other rejects God, and quells whatever emptiness ensues with a glass of sherry. Where they meet is in their rejection of reason. Arguments like theirs can lead either way—to reject God in general, and any religion in particular, in rage or disgust; or to embrace them in a moment of desperation or ecstasy. The most fundamental skepticism is skepticism about human reason. Each of the three western religious traditions contains both rationalist and fideist traditions; each can be taken up, or abandoned, within them. The problem of evil cannot determine your religious standpoint; nor is it determined by it. But the way you react to the problem of evil does say much about your conception of reason. How much reason do you demand of the world?

Thinkers like Hume and Bayle and Voltaire demanded very little. They would have agreed with Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov, who refuses to understand—out of faith to morality. Morality itself, recognizing evil and condemning it, requires us to find the world unintelligible—if it's a world in which children are tortured to death. It requires us to reject all attempts to make sense of the world by positing another, truer reality that takes place behind or before or after the appearances that besiege us—be the other reality Plato's Ideas, next to which the evils of the world appear as fleeting shadows, or the Platonism of the masses (Nietzsche's term for Christianity) in which the evils of the world appear as brief trials. All these, along with their Hegelian or Marxist versions, are attempts to make a world full of evil intelligible. Their prototype in modern philosophy was drawn by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Kant called him the Newton of the mind. After Newton, Kant wrote, the planets follow regular orbits; after Rousseau, the Manichaeans are refuted. Both Newton and Rousseau proved the glory of God and the wisdom of Creation. Where earlier scientists saw chaos and epicycles, Newton found order and harmony. Where earlier authors saw crimes and misfortunes, Rousseau found history, and just possibly redemption. Rousseau's great service was to provide a way of stating the problem of evil, and even resolving it, in thoroughly naturalistic terms. His argument uses a version of Augustine's premise. The opening of *Emile* gives it the tone of an

axiom: everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of nature, everything degenerates in the hands of men. Like Augustine's creatures, Rousseau's were given freedom; like Augustine's creatures, Rousseau's chose to abuse it. But though he must have had more than one sort of affinity to the author of the first *Confessions*, Rousseau's differences were crucial, and they make his work both secular and modern. First: Rousseau provided an account, and it's one that introduces history. History is the category which allows evil to be explicable without being necessary. We can understand the world, and possibly even change it. For earlier thinkers, human nature changed just once: at the time of the Fall. For Rousseau the crucial fact about human nature is that it's been altered, time and time again. Our choices affect it. After Rousseau, we need not be left with two bad choices: denying the reality of evil, or denying the efficacy of reason. If evil was introduced into the world by a historical process which isn't fundamentally mysterious, it may also be eradicated from the world. After Rousseau, we can acknowledge the reality of evil, and incorporate it into a world whose intelligibility is expanding. Exploring evil as historical phenomenon became part of our efforts to make the world more comprehensible in theory, more acceptable in fact.

Rousseau was the first to assert a connection between moral and natural evils without calling the connection punishment, hence the first to see a solution that doesn't depend on miracle. He could thus avoid bad faith—a concept he virtually invented—and still affirm the glory of God. His account of evil refers to processes, not to willful sins. They occur because of error; we became wicked without willing it. Rousseau's second *Discourse* is an attempt to provide a secular narrative of the Fall. He begins it by saying: Let us begin by setting aside the facts, for they do not affect the matter at hand. This sounds outrageous until you realize: the story doesn't matter, but neither does the story he wished to replace. (You can eat all the fruit in the garden besides that one. Why not?) He describes one particular descent from original innocence into civilized misery, but we might have gone down in a number of ways. Evil came into the world through a long slow development during which human beings alienated themselves from their own true nature.

History, for Rousseau, began in isolation. Savages gathered food, met occasionally to copulate, and scattered again without emotion, except for a sort of basic pity. Pity insured that mothers cared for their infants until the age of two, when they could disappear into the forest. The isolation Rousseau imagined was broken by one natural accident or another. A particularly harsh winter, a particularly dry summer forced these solitary nomads to band together into tribes sharing labor and land. So long as they lived in little villages, property was held in common, and division of labor was minimal. As in the Biblical Fall, the original dissonance in this paradise

was erotic. As soon as people gathered in groups, human sexuality was formed. Mere desire for the other's body is easy to feel, and not hard to gratify; desire for the other's desire is complex. When people begin to feel it, public esteem acquires value. You want to be better than your neighbor in order to attract the attention of the opposite sex. So you begin to pay attention not just to how you are, but how you appear—and begin that alienation from your own nature which is the source of all our troubles.

So long as it's confined to wearing paint and feathers, and outdoing your neighbor in singing and dancing before a fire, this alienation needn't be fatal. What's the decisive point in the catastrophe which became civilization? It's easy to feel bewildered in reading Rousseau. At several points in his retelling of history, Rousseau interrupts his narrative to claim that some event or another was the key to our downfall. After human sexuality he names the discovery of iron and wheat, the division of labor, and private ownership of land—mentioning each as *the* decisive event, with authority and passion. Possibly he was confused, or didn't notice the contradictions. I think it's more likely that he held no one moment to be decisive. No point was the turning point in civilization, and it's a mistake to try to seek one. It's important rather to show that once certain processes begin, the move to the next stage of civilization—and misery—is almost, but not quite, inevitable. At several points in time, we might have turned the course of history. Since we did not, the process by which we went from self-sufficient decency, to the web of dependence and betrayal which composes the social world, is a process we must understand.

The second *Discourse* is Rousseau's diagnosis, and etiology, of the illness called civilization. At the time that he wrote it, he didn't see a cure. (When one of his readers wrote to demand one, his answer was bleak: you don't call the doctor when the patient is dead.) Most readers found the book unremittingly dark: Voltaire's letter thanking him for sending a copy begins: "I have received, Monsieur, your new work against mankind." The second *Discourse* displayed nostalgia for the state of nature, its author thought we were no more likely to regain it than to return to the Garden of Eden. But a few years later, in 1762, Rousseau saw a chance for salvation. In *Emile*, the isolated savage of the second *Discourse* gets a second chance. This time, Rousseau took care that he won't be left on his own. He designed an education to undo the process that would undo the evils the *Discourse* had described. Raised as nature intended, the child would be invulnerable to the evils of civilization, and could even play a role in building a better one. Rousseau offers an account that shows that just those forces which had brought on disaster—freedom, reason, and sexuality—can be used, if properly handled, to form human beings more sound and noble than anything possible in the mere state of nature.

I am not going to go into the details of Rousseau's account—just ask you to take my word that he has one, and don't be fooled by the awful fifth book of *Emile* into dumping out the baby with the bathwater. The bathwater, in this case, is the discussion which insists that girls be raised in just the opposite way from boys; boys are taught to scorn appearances, girls should attend to nothing else. But one could rewrite the book, and educate Sophie, whose name, Rousseau emphasizes, is no accident, in a way appropriate to her name—and you'd have an account without kitsch as well as without sexism. Again, there's no time to go into the details, but it is important that there are some, for *Emile* is meant to be many things, among others, a manual of instruction. It offers directions for the right use of our faculties, as well as a description of a long, controlled experiment—one of the reasons Kant saw it as Newtonian. Rousseau insists that Emile is an ordinary boy, with nothing but average intelligence and talent. He may be an invention, but he's not an invention of anything special. Whatever works in this case will work in others. Without *Emile*, the Fall in the second *Discourse* would be just as mythic, and just as irrevocable, as the Fall in Genesis. With *Emile*, we've entered the world of organization. Conditions for redemption may be hard to arrange, but they're entirely prosaic. The overcoming of evil is something banal.

Throughout his work, Rousseau proposed a natural connection between sin and suffering. Our misery isn't groundless, but results from our sins. We suffer because of our actions, but not as direct divine punishment. Every sin contains its own penalty as a natural consequence, every virtue leads to its own reward. We are the authors of our own misery, and could be the authors of our own happiness—not because God is keeping score and meting out justice, but because He's so arranged the world that this kind of justice is part of a natural order. Gathering wealth, for example, has immediate costs. The rich man must protect his riches against other people's claims, and condemns himself to isolation in boredom and fear. The luxuries he enjoys become stale and humdrum; they are more painful to lose than they are pleasant to gain. Each object creates new sources of discontent faster than it satisfies old ones. Rousseau's analysis of false needs and consumerism is marvelously modern, but his point is as theological as it is political. Understood rightly, evil shouldn't even be tempting: for the universe is so created that suffering follows evil as the night the day.

What does any of this have to do with earthquakes? It doesn't. Rousseau's discussion of Lisbon is almost feeble. (He wrote Voltaire a long letter complaining that Voltaire's poem about the Lisbon earthquake was an unfair attack on God. If people lived in the country where they ought to, and didn't run back into their houses to get their money, they would be spared the worst consequences of earthquakes when they happen. Here it isn't surprising that Voltaire didn't deign to reply.) It's a striking moment in

the history of philosophy. What would come to be two completely different problems of evil were bound together. The question of why free rational beings commit crimes is a question that occupies ethics and psychology today—without any connection to the question it was developed to solve. Rousseau wanted a solution to the question Augustine left open: how can free will lead to the moral will which leads to natural suffering, and still be part of a good Creation? Rousseau's message to the old question is this one: we should worry about the evils for which we're responsible, and God will take care of the rest. The first half of the message is very modern. Rousseau made it more so by increasing the number of evils for which we're responsible. This would give traditional theists grounds for worry, in ways I can only hint at now. For Rousseau's Creation is so perfect that its Creator is almost superfluous. God is benevolent, but we do not need Him. Here too Rousseau was close to Newton. Both wanted to show God's greatness by showing that His order was flawless. Both ended by describing an order so flawless it could almost run on its own.

But since I imagine most of you are more plagued by moral worries than by theological ones, I want to turn to the second term in my example. I will argue, again most briefly, that Auschwitz presented us with a similar crisis about the notion of evil. The very general, unclear, but pragmatic and functional understanding of evil that had evolved in the wake of Lisbon broke down in the second half of the twentieth century. Lisbon too made something impossible—for shorthand, let's call it trust in the world as a whole to function beneficently. Lisbon shocked the eighteenth century in a way that larger and more destructive earthquakes did not move the twentieth century. As anyone who knows a bit of history will tell you, the twentieth century has no monopoly on human cruelty. It may have a monopoly on absolute numbers, but not on relative ones; two-thirds of the population of Brandenburg, where I work, was wiped out in the course of the Thirty Years' War. Devastating as it was, it didn't seem to leave those who survived it feeling conceptually shattered. Auschwitz did. The difference in response lies in the difference between the structures which each era had used to make sense of suffering. Lisbon, you might say, revealed how remote the world is from the human; Auschwitz revealed how remote humans can be from each other, and from themselves. If disentangling the natural from the human is part of the modern project, the distance between Lisbon and Auschwitz showed how hard it is to keep them apart. After Lisbon, the scope of moral categories contracted. Before it, they could be applied to the world as a whole; it made sense to call earthquakes evils. Afterwards moral categories were confined to one small piece of the world, those human beings who may just be able to realize them. But Auschwitz raised doubts about the sense in which we apply moral categories at all.

One can summarize the differences by saying that humankind lost faith in the world at Lisbon, and faith in itself at Auschwitz—but only by making two important qualifications.

First, the breakdown of the modern took place much earlier. For many thinkers, it was World War I which marked the end of certain hopes for human progress. From where we stand, WWI remained within the outer limits of the normal, but it did not look that way at the time. Second, even if the year 1945 seems to us to mark a divide which can almost make us nostalgic for the despair that followed the war before it, the divide was not, initially, called Auschwitz. The meaning of Lisbon was clear in 1755. In 1945, the judgment at Nürnberg viewed the systematic murder of Jews as one of many war crimes for which Germans were responsible. For a good two decades after WWII, the convictions that limits had been crossed in ways we would never recover was equally captured by the word “Hiroshima.” Atomic warfare disturbed the order of the universe, for it not only exceeded every prior limit to destruction, but made the total destruction of life itself an ever-present possibility. Not until the last 25 years or so has Auschwitz offered itself as a synonym for “incomparable evil” as well as for something that German historians now call a “civilizational” rupture.

It is almost inevitable to turn discussions like these into exercises in comparative suffering—at its most degenerate, the sort of argument that my pain is worse than your pain. But I’d like to enter a plea for avoiding it. There can be all kinds of contexts in which it’s important to examine differences in forms of mass murder. The German Jewish philosopher Günther Anders argued that crimes like those committed at Auschwitz are greater threats to the individual human soul; what happened at Hiroshima is a greater threat to humanity. To understand history and psychology and draw conclusions for our futures, we will often need to understand how mass murders are different. But most attempts to assert that one form of mass murder is worse than another is motivated by political, not philosophical concerns. In some contexts, of course, political concerns are primary, and furthering them is a moral act. During the German Historians’ Debate, for instance, right wing historians insisted on the universal element in Nazi concentration camps, and their insistence functioned as a way of mitigating German guilt. For a German historian to assert, in that context, that what happened at Auschwitz was worse than what happened in the gulags was to take a stand against rightist attempts to avoid responsibility. When an American politician asserts the uniqueness of Auschwitz, and refuses to allow all comparisons with it, it can be a way of avoiding responsibility for crimes committed in his name—by claiming that anything short of putting children in gas chambers is relatively benign.

So when I use “Auschwitz” as shorthand for contemporary evil, I am making no claims about its uniqueness. It is singular in some ways, and it

isn't in others, and the comparisons can be manipulative or honest, but they are nearly always political. For the moment, I am interested in something else, namely grasping what sort of major changes have occurred in modern consciousness, and for this what is crucial about Auschwitz is the way in which it symbolizes the possibility of total extinction through weapons of mass destruction—*without* any of the features that once seemed essential to evil. For this it is enough to take it as emblematic without being unique. A moment's reflection on the history of torture shows that, before and after Auschwitz, human beings show capacities for cruelty that words fail to grasp. If we were not used to Jesus' death as an icon, we could still see the crucifixion as the paradigm of innocent suffering that early Christianity saw. To force a condemned prisoner to drag through a jeering crowd the instrument that will shortly be used to torture him to death is a refinement of human cruelty that ought to take your breath away. It should be enough to stop the impulse to comparative suffering before it begins. What makes Auschwitz a problem for thinking about evil cannot be a matter of degree: at this level, there are no scales.

Of course there is more than one intellectual problem created with Auschwitz, but I want to focus on one: the question of intention. For it was the appeal to intention that had focused the problem of evil after Lisbon, and created a climate of discussion that held, more or less stably, for two hundred years. It's a climate that rejected every attempt to reconcile nature and morality. Natural and moral categories do not support or reflect each other: nature is just nature, it isn't good or evil. This abolishes two kinds of evil, natural and metaphysical evil, that survived well into the eighteenth century, and insists that evil is a moral category alone. Modern evil was the product of will. Restricting evil to things that were produced by evil intentions does rid the world of a number of evils, in ways that made sense. Less clear were the concepts of willing and intention themselves. Falling rocks and tidal waves do not have them. What having them comes to remained unclear.

Kant's ethics began from the claim that only the good will is good in itself, and offers the shopkeeper example to illustrate. A shopkeeper who doesn't cheat because good reputations are good for business is different from a shopkeeper who knows he can get away with cheating, but doesn't. Though we may never see the difference between them, we know that one is merely prudent, and the other is good. Suppose we accept this account of the difference between a good will and an evil one: Kant called it acting from respect for the moral law. The indifferent will wants good—as long as it suits its other interests. But what is an evil will?

If willing evil becomes too deliberate, we risk the return to original sin that Rousseau wanted to avoid. In his version of the Fall, remember, humankind became wicked *without* willing evil. Our descent from

innocence into civilized barbarism wasn't a result of the deliberate defiance that led Adam and Eve to ruin. The noble savages in Rousseau's story made a series of natural, understandable, and contingent mistakes. So he could assert the fundamental goodness of Creation, without denying the reality of the evils within it.

The account had flaws, but it had the great merit of both acknowledging the appearances, and asserting that there is order behind them. It was particularly brilliant in accounting for evils like inequality, and even slavery, and providing hope that they might be overcome. For Rousseau showed how such evils were not part of the order of nature, but consequences of human actions, that did not emerge from incorrigibly corrupt wills. Now even the eighteenth century raised the question: is Rousseau's account too naive? Is there evil it fails to capture? For the origin of evil in a series of good-natured mistakes can threaten to leave what is evil elusive—and to threaten the very responsibility it set out to ground. For if our mistakes arise from brutish self-interest, it is nature that made us self-interested brutes. How can there be crimes against nature, if evil is such a natural possibility after all?

It's a grave dilemma, and philosophers as great as Kant tried to solve it, without real success. But though crucial questions remained open, this way of fixing a distinction between nature and morality remained standing. It fit and promoted needs arising in a disenchanted world. As Freud showed, one goal of disenchanting the world was to solve the problem of natural evil. If there is no will behind things like earthquakes and lightning, those that turn out to strike you dead are merely bad luck. Even thinkers who, unlike Freud, still acknowledge God's presence in nature no longer hold him accountable for his absences. With natural evil reduced to unfortunate accident, and metaphysical evil transformed to the limits we expect every grown-up to acknowledge, the problem of evil was as far on its way to resolution as philosophical problems ever go. Though the solution left questions unresolved, it worked well enough for pragmatic reasons: there's enough to do in the business of eliminating those evils we can do something about without worrying about the ones that we can't. Resolving to take responsibility for some piece of the world, even without good metaphysical grounding for your stance, is part of what it means to grow up in it.

In this context Auschwitz posed philosophical problems because it left the nature of assuming moral responsibility so very unclear. It's easy to see that evil will is absent in earthquakes, but what does it mean for it to be present in humankind? Auschwitz stood for evil as other war crimes did not because it seemed deliberate as other war crimes cannot. Shooting prisoners is criminally punishable, but the punishment can be mitigated by claims about wartime exigencies. Shooting children cannot. Sending boys to fight

in the mud of Flanders without grasping the power of the weapons you have put in their hands may be gross criminal negligence. Rounding them up from all corners of Europe to be gassed in Poland required, as we now know, a degree of planning so complex that it is hard to imagine an act which is more intentional—at a structural level.

For the individual, however, things were infinitely murkier. For jurisprudence, the worst crimes are those done with malice and forethought. Both these components of intention were missing in many agents who carried out the daily work of extermination. Sadists, and particularly poisonous anti-Semites, were present among the murderers, but the SS tried to avoid using those who took too much pleasure in killing, and most of it was done as routine. The chance to avoid being sent to the front enlisted far more concentration camp guards than the chance to torment Jews. At the highest levels, forethought, a clear view of the consequences of one's actions, was often missing as well. Eichmann is only the most famous of Nazi officials whose initial interests had nothing to do with mass murder, or even with anti-Semitism, but with petty desires for comfort and personal advancement. At every level, the Nazis produced more evil, with less malice, than civilization had previously seen.

The apparent absence of malice or forethought has been so disturbing that many observers would rather argue they were present, in some sort of underground form. Goldhagen is only the most recent of those who have tried to show that German culture contained particularly vicious forms of anti-Semitism behind a relatively tolerant mask. Similarly, ordinary Germans who insist they never knew what crimes were being committed in the East are dismissed as dishonest. Such dismissals are moved less by historical than by philosophical needs. It is easier to appeal to unconscious hatred and unconscious knowledge than to admit the more disturbing view. They really *didn't* mean it—and it really doesn't matter. Auschwitz embodied evil that confuted two centuries of assumptions about intention.

We are so used to identifying evil with evil intention that we think anyone denying the latter is denying the former. This is the source of the controversy that still surrounds Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, twentieth-century philosophy's greatest contribution to discussion of the problem of evil. Convinced that guilt requires malice and forethought, most readers accused Arendt of excusing Eichmann because she denied that he acted with malice and forethought—though she repeated that he was guilty, and insisted he ought to hang. Her main point is that Eichmann's harmless intentions did *not* mitigate his responsibility.

Let's recall that other legal conceptions tied guilt to intention in different ways. Oedipus did everything he could to avoid the oracle, leaving his home and abandoning his inheritance in order to avoid his awful fate. His efforts to elude his fate may have mitigated his guilt, but they did not erase

it, for his crime damaged the order on which Greek life depended. Now Greek audiences would have judged Oedipus, who did everything possible to avoid his crimes, differently from Eichmann, who did not. Eichmann caused tragedy; he wasn't fit to be a subject of it. But his example should remind us that the moral consequences of intending an action are no more self-evident than the concept of intention itself. Both can change significantly, and with them the ways that we cut up the world.

Arendt's account shows what makes Auschwitz emblematic for contemporary evil. It shows that today, the very greatest crimes may be committed by people with motives no worse than banal. Criminals like Eichmann have none of the subjective traits we use to identify evildoers, but his crimes were so massive they made subjective factors irrelevant. His attempts to prove he was perfectly normal were as strenuous as the prosecution's attempts to prove he was not. Both attempts were wasted. If Eichmann were as demonic as the prosecution tried to show him, we could all be relieved—for a handful of devils cannot threaten humankind so surely as what his example really showed, namely, that the most unprecedented crimes can be committed by the most ordinary people. In contemporary evil, individual intentions rarely add up to the magnitude of the evil they cause.

Nazis forced everyone from passive bystanders to the Jewish councils to victims in concentration camps to participate in the network of destruction. Their success in doing so shows the impotence of intention, when considered on its own. To shut your eyes to the growing dangers of fascism, and even to profit from a fascist government, is *not* the same thing as to will the sequence of events that ended at Auschwitz. Auschwitz was nevertheless the product of discrete actions decided upon by particular human beings. Debates about moral responsibility in the third Reich were often distracted by discussions of authenticity. If all the Germans who later claimed to have hated the government privately were telling the truth, it could hardly have survived twelve months, much less years. But suppose that many claims are perfectly genuine: rather than actively supporting the Nazis, most people wanted nothing better or worse than to be left alone to pursue their own private harmless lives. On most evidence, Eichmann himself was perfectly sincere. He may have been more willing than some of us to ignore other people's interests when pursuing his own, but he took no pleasure in causing suffering, and actively disliked observing it. Far from mitigating his guilt, it shows that subjective states are not decisive. For what counts is not what your road is paved with, but whether it leads to hell.

Indeed, it's just the belief that evil actions require evil intentions that allowed totalitarian regimes to convince people to override their own moral scruples. Massive propaganda undertook to persuade people that the criminal actions in which they were implicated were guided by acceptable,

even moral motives. The *feeling* of guilt is so unreliable that it can often serve as an index of innocence. The best of bystanders are usually the ones whose consciences are tormented—indifferent souls are rarely troubled by the thought they have done too little good. Like most Nazi officials, Eichmann felt little guilt. This feeling (or its absence) was subjective. Inspecting his conscience, he discovered nothing worse than the ordinary wish to get ahead, and even the admirable desire to fulfill obligations that sometimes countered his own wishes. Suppose he was sincere: the contents of his soul were just as meager as he reported. This is no reason to deny his responsibility, but to look for responsibility somewhere else than in the contents of the soul.

There is a great deal more to be said about all these questions—we could go anywhere from further discussion of the Eichmann book to the postwar fascination with the Marquis de Sade, whom I think has become popular because he described the devils we'd prefer. It's said often enough that we long for lost heroes, but our need for the right sort of villain is no less acute. We long for a picture of what went wrong in the world. Fortunately or not, Sade's villains are relatively infrequent. We are threatened more often by people with misguided or indifferent intentions than with malevolent ones. *Bad* intentions and thoughtlessness are present enough, but they do not add up to the magnitude of the evil they cause. But I want to say a few words about the most recent events, so I will close this section by saying that I think we should admit the extent of our losses. Sade and Auschwitz have very little in common, and seeking a general account that makes sense of both may obscure what is morally important in each.

The absence of a general account of intention and evil is particularly disturbing because the hopes for it represented a minimalist demand. The problem of evil began by trying to penetrate God's intentions. Now it seems we cannot even make sense of our own. If Auschwitz leaves us more helpless than Lisbon it is because our conceptual resources seem exhausted. The notion of intention cannot carry the weight that contemporary forms of evil bring to bear on it—but we can neither do without it, nor collapse the distinction between natural and moral evil.

It's this conceptual helplessness that conditioned our response to the events of September 11. (Note that, unlike catastrophes that have become known as a place, this one will remain as a moment in time—I think because it is hard to tell which attack was more threatening. Wall Street and the Pentagon are both symbol and reality of western power, and both the collapse of the glaringly conspicuous Twin Towers and the assault on the impenetrable resources of military might were terrifying. Watching both shatter so quickly, no one could possibly feel safe.) It is a moment that all of us will remember, and talk about, wherever we are. I received a handful of emails: is this another Lisbon?

The parallels are undeniable. The suddenness and speed of the attack resembled natural catastrophe. There was no warning; there was also no message. Like earthquakes, terrorists strike at random: who lives and who does not depend on contingencies that cannot possibly be deserved or prevented. Natural disaster is blind to moral distinctions that justice tries to draw; terrorism deliberately defies them. Where it uses biological weapons like anthrax (by all current accounts, an act not of al-Qaida, but of the American political right) the distinctions we so carefully drew between natural and moral evils threaten to collapse once again. And so it has been said, over and over and in many languages, that the world will never be the same.

It is, of course, far too soon to tell. What is clear to me is that we are facing a similar uncertainty about our understanding of evil. In the face of the loose and irresponsible way the term has been used in recent months, indeed weeks, the temptation to drop it altogether is strong. Of course—and here I descend, or ascend, from the history of philosophy quite frankly—there are so many things wrong with the “axis of evil” speech that it is hard to count them. One is its utter disregard of the distinction between moral and political discourse. Saddam Hussein—when not the country of Iraq—is undoubtedly prepared to send missiles full of poison on Tel Aviv in the event that his back is pushed to the wall by an American invasion. If anything qualifies a person to be called evil, it is this sort of thing—which also makes it advisable that he be left alone to die of natural causes. So politically speaking, the speech is a disaster, but I think it contains elements of moral disaster to which we should attend. For September 11 has left us rhetorically and conceptually paralyzed.

By “we” I mean those of us who have learned about evil from events in Chile and Vietnam as well as in Auschwitz and Cambodia, and from analyses, above all, like Arendt’s. We learned that the greatest dangers don’t come from demonic figures bent on destruction, but rather from bureaucrats intent on nothing worse than furthering their careers and increasing their incomes—interests that most of us share. We learned that evil was both hard to recognize and hard to resist. It came in suits and ties and soft rhetoric about freedom. It seduced us by seeping into structures which further our short-term interests while making it easy to forget their long-term consequences.

What are we to do with an event that is so full of malice and forethought that it bypasses complex devils like Mephisto and takes us all the way back to de Sade? If you accept Arendt’s account that shows they were absent in Eichmann, what do you say when they’re so obviously present? You can’t find more forethought than was evident on September 11: from the years of planning and training to the willful preparation of the terrorists’ own certain deaths, all the ends and the means were calculated

perfectly. The terrorists' mastery of instrumental reasoning was matched by their flaunting of moral reasoning. Malice was present in spades. Terrorism seeks to produce what morality tries to prevent—random death, and general fear. (Rousseau thought fear was worse than death, since it threatens our freedom and poisons our lives.) Natural disasters make none of the basic moral distinctions that human beings try to draw: earthquakes and plagues strike the righteous and the rotten alike. When terrorists actively scorn those distinctions, they show their scorn for the very idea of morality.

Faced with old-fashioned, straightforward, utterly intentional destruction, it's exactly those who have complex views whose intuitions falter. To call the terrorist actions evil is to join forces with those whose simple and demonic world-view has so often been used to obscure more insidious crimes. Not to call them evil is to make them part of calculation—weren't the terrorists simply responding out of rage at crimes committed more quietly throughout the third world? If this were the case, as Michael Walzer has pointed out, it would be Africans and Latin Americans who were in the front lines. Vaguely sensing this view, people have been willing to say that one sort of crime actually justifies the other. But we have yet to formulate an adequate response.

I don't have one either, but want only to suggest pieces that our response should include. We should beware of seeking ways in which terrorism makes sense; it's an attempt at relief, a form of magic thinking that characterizes crude theodicies. Kant said the attempt to justify suffering flies so desperately in the face of experience that it can only result from a search for protection. You say what you think the powers that control your life want to hear—in the hope that they are eavesdropping, and will reward you accordingly. Jerry Falwell's claim that the Twin Towers fell because America abandoned God for secular liberalism has the same form as the claim that they fell because America abandoned decency for unbridled global capitalism. Both are not only ways of trying to make sense of the senseless, but of hoping it won't visit you. Jerry Falwell never had an abortion; Paris critics never bombed an Iraqi child. Perhaps they are therefore safe from terrorist attacks?

Even they know they're not, but we understand the impulse. Making sense of the world is a commendable project, finding shelter in it a comprehensible one. Neither should go on at the cost of denial. To recognize what happened on September 11 as evil hardly entails a refusal to recognize other kinds. Evils cannot be divided into greater and lesser. To call something evil is to deny it can be justified. But while they cannot be compared, evils should be distinguished. Seeing simpler forms of evil needn't blind us to complex ones, and it may even sharpen our eye. Systematic world-wide oppression doesn't even explain terrorism, and it certainly

doesn't justify it. It does provide ground in which terrorism grows. But even if it didn't, we should resist it with all our strength.

You don't need to find something common to the mass murder committed by terrorists and the mass starvation furthered by corporate interests in order to condemn both. Thinking clearly is crucial; finding formulas is not. Calling things by their proper names belongs to the first task. To refrain from calling terrorism evil because moral idiots do it too is to leave conceptual ammunition in the wrong hands. Abandoning moral discourse to those who have no scruples about it is no way to maintain your own.



## PART II

CONFRONTING EVIL IN OUR DIVIDED WORLD:  
ON GENOCIDE, SELF-DESTRUCTION, AND WAR

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## THE BANALITY OF EVIL: FAILING TO THINK

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Hannah Arendt

To [write] about thinking seems to me so presumptuous that I feel I owe you a justification. Some years ago, reporting the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, I spoke of “the banality of evil” and meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past as well as in his behavior during the trial and the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think. He functioned in the role of prominent war criminal as well as he had under the Nazi regime; he had not the slightest difficulty in accepting an entirely different set of rules. He knew that what he had once considered his duty was now called a crime, and he accepted this new code of judgment as though it were nothing but another language rule. To his rather limited supply of stock phrases he had added a few new ones, and he was utterly helpless only when he was confronted with a situation to which none of them would apply, as in the most grotesque instance when he had to make a speech under the gallows and was forced

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From “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture,” in *Social Research: An International Quarterly of the Social Sciences* 38, no. 3 (1961): 417–46; this excerpt is from pp. 417–23.

to rely on clichés used in funeral oratory which were inapplicable in his case because he was not the survivor. Considering what his last words should be in case of a death sentence, which he had expected all along, this simple fact had not occurred to him, just as inconsistencies and flagrant contradictions in examinations and cross-examinations during the trial had not bothered him. Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted; the difference in Eichmann was only that he clearly knew of no such claim at all.

This total absence of thinking attracted my interest. Is evil-doing, not just the sins of omission but the sins of commission, possible in the absence of not merely “base motives” (as the law calls it) but of any motives at all, any particular prompting of interest or volition? Is wickedness, however we may define it, this being “determined to prove a villain,” *not* a necessary condition for evil-doing? Is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, dependent upon our faculty of thought? Do the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience coincide? The question that imposed itself was: Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it “conditions” men against evil-doing? (The very word *conscience*, at any rate, points in this direction insofar as it means “to know with and by myself,” a kind of knowledge that is actualized in every thinking process.) Finally, is not the urgency of these questions enforced by the well-known and rather alarming fact that only good people are ever bothered by a bad conscience whereas it is a very rare phenomenon among real criminals? A good conscience does not exist except as the absence of a bad one.

Such were the questions. To put it differently and use Kantian language, after having been struck by a phenomenon—the *quaestio facti*—which willy-nilly “put me into the possession of a concept” (the banality of evil), I could not help raising the *quaestio juris* and asked myself “with what right did I possess and use it.”

To raise such questions as “What is thinking?” “What is evil?” has its difficulties. They belong to philosophy or metaphysics, terms that designate a field of inquiry which, as we all know, has fallen into disrepute. If this were merely a matter of positivist and neopositivist assaults, we need perhaps not be concerned. Our difficulty with raising such questions is caused less by those to whom they are “meaningless” anyhow than by those who are under attack. Just as the crisis in religion reached its climax

when theologians, as distinguished from the old crowd of nonbelievers, began to talk about the “God is dead” propositions, the crisis in philosophy and metaphysics came into the open when philosophers themselves began to declare the end of philosophy and metaphysics. Now, this could have its advantage; I trust it will once it has been understood what these “ends” actually mean, not that God has “died”—an obvious absurdity in every respect—but that the way God has been thought of for thousands of years is no longer convincing; and not that the old questions which are coeval with the appearance of men on earth have become “meaningless,” but that the way they were framed and answered has lost plausibility.

What has come to an end is the basic distinction between the sensual and the supersensual, together with the notion, at least as old as Parmenides, that whatever is not given to the senses—God or Being or the First Principles and Causes (*archai*) or the Ideas—is more real, more truthful, more meaningful than what appears, that it is not just *beyond* sense perception but *above* the world of the senses. What is “dead” is not only the localization of such “eternal truths” but the distinction itself. Meanwhile, in increasingly strident voices the few defenders of metaphysics have warned us of the danger of nihilism inherent in this development; and although they themselves seldom invoke it, they have an important argument in their favor: it is indeed true that once the suprasensual realm is discarded, its opposite, the world of appearances as understood for so many centuries, is also annihilated. The sensual, as still understood by the positivists, cannot survive the death of the supersensual. No one knew this better than Nietzsche, who, with his poetic and metaphoric description of the assassination of God in *Zarathustra*, has caused so much confusion in these matters. In a significant passage in *The Twilight of Idols*, he clarifies what the word *God* meant in *Zarathustra*. It was merely a symbol for the suprasensual realm, as understood by metaphysics; he now uses instead of *God* the [expression] *true world* and says: “We have abolished the true world. What has remained? The apparent one perhaps? Oh no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.”

These modern “deaths” of God, of metaphysics, of philosophy, and, by implication, of positivism may be events of great importance, but they are after all thought events, and though they concern most intimately our ways of thinking, they do not concern our ability to think, the sheer fact that man is a thinking being. By this, I mean that man has an inclination and, unless pressed by more urgent needs of living, even a need (Kant’s “need of reason”) to think beyond the limitations of knowledge, to do more with his intellectual abilities, his brain power, than to use them as instruments for knowing and doing. Our desire to know, whether arising out of practical necessities, theoretical perplexities, or sheer curiosity, can be fulfilled by reaching its intended goal; and while our thirst for knowledge may be

unquenchable because of the immensity of the unknown, so that every region of knowledge opens up further horizons of knowables, the activity itself leaves behind a growing treasure of knowledge that is retained and kept in store by every civilization as part and parcel of its world. The activity of knowing is no less a world-building activity than the building of houses. The inclination or the need to think, on the contrary, even if aroused by none of the time-honored metaphysical, unanswerable "ultimate questions," leaves nothing so tangible behind, nor can it be stilled by allegedly definite insights of "wise men." The need to think can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts which I had yesterday will be satisfying this need today only to the extent that I can think them anew.

We owe to Kant the distinction between thinking and knowing, between reason, the urge to think and to understand, and the intellect, which desires and is capable of certain, verifiable knowledge. Kant himself believed that the need to think beyond the limitations of knowledge was aroused only by the old metaphysical questions of God, freedom, and immortality and that he had "found it necessary to deny knowledge to make room for faith"; by doing so he had thrown the foundations of a future "systematic metaphysics" as a "bequest to posterity." But this shows only that Kant, still bound by the tradition of metaphysics, never became fully aware of what he had done, and his "bequest to posterity" turned out to be the destruction of all possible foundations of metaphysical systems. For the ability and the need to think are by no means restricted to any specific subject matter, such as the questions which reason raises and knows it will never be able to answer. Kant has not "denied knowledge" but separated knowing from thinking, and he has made room not for faith but for thought. He has indeed, as he once suggested, "eliminated the obstacles by which reason hinders itself."

In our context and for our purposes, this distinction between knowing and thinking is crucial. If the ability to tell right from wrong should have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to "demand" its exercise in every sane person no matter how erudite or ignorant, how intelligent or stupid he may prove to be. Kant, in this respect almost alone among the philosophers, was much bothered by the common opinion that philosophy is only for the few precisely because of this opinion's moral implications. In this vein, he once remarked, "Stupidity is caused by a wicked heart," a statement which in this form is not true. Inability to think is not stupidity; it can be found in highly intelligent people, and wickedness is hardly its cause, if only because thoughtlessness as well as stupidity are much more frequent phenomena than wickedness. The trouble is precisely that no wicked heart, a relatively rare phenomenon, is necessary to cause great evil. Hence, in Kantian terms, one would need philosophy, the exercise of reason as the faculty of thought, to prevent evil.

And this is demanding a great deal, even if we assume and welcome the decline of those disciplines, philosophy and metaphysics, which for so many centuries have monopolized this faculty. For thinking's chief characteristic is that it interrupts all doing, all ordinary activities no matter what they happen to be. Whatever the fallacies of the two-world theories might have been, they arose out of genuine experiences. For it is true that the moment we start thinking on no matter what issue we stop everything else, and this everything else, again whatever it may happen to be, interrupts the thinking process; it is as though we moved into a different world. Doing and living in the most general sense of *inter homines esse*, "being among my fellowmen"—the Latin equivalent for being alive—positively prevents thinking. As Valéry once put it: "*Tantôt je suis, tantôt je pense*," now I am, now I think.



## ORDINARY PEOPLE AND EXTRAORDINARY VICES

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Tzvetan Todorov

### EXPLAINING EVIL

We usually associate the extremity that is the concentration camp not with acts of virtue but rather with the outbreak of evil unprecedented in magnitude. I have tried to go beyond this conventional picture, but there is no escaping the fact that, in the literature of the concentration camp, evil is the main character. As a project, interpreting evil appeals less to me than does understanding goodness, yet I feel I cannot avoid this task, inasmuch as the evil we are concerned with here is not only extreme but also, it would seem, particularly resistant to explanation. Or perhaps I should say, the traditional explanations that come so readily to mind when we face evil in its usual guises are of little help to us here.

First of all, we cannot understand the evils of the concentration camps by interpreting them in terms of abnormality unless we define abnormality—tautologically—as the behavior in question: nothing about the personalities or actions of the authors of evil, apart from this behavior, allows us

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to classify them as pathological beings—in other words, as monsters, whatever our definition of the terms *pathological* and *normal*. It is for this reason no doubt that studies of concentration camps by psychoanalysts or psychiatrists are somewhat disappointing, even when their authors write from firsthand experience; almost without exception, these studies use the language of pathology when discussing either the inmates or the guards (or both). Clearly such characterizations are inadequate. This is not an a priori judgment on my part but the nearly unanimous opinion of the survivors themselves.

Camp survivors seem to agree on the following point: only a small minority of guards, on the order of five or ten percent, could legitimately be called sadists (and thus abnormal). This type of individual, moreover, was not appreciated by those in the higher echelons. Writing of his experiences as a prisoner in Auschwitz, Benedikt Kautsky says, “Nothing would be more mistaken than to see the SS as a sadistic horde driven to abuse and torture thousands of human beings by instinct, passion, or some thirst for pleasure. Those who acted in this way were a small minority” (Langbein 274). Himmler supposedly even gave instructions to remove from duty any SS man who appeared to take pleasure in hurting others (Fénelon, *Playing* 182). Similarly at Buchenwald, Bruno Bettelheim writes, “only a small minority were actually perverted, willing to kill and injure when so ordered” (*Heart* 224). Germaine Tillion recalls that the staff of the medical experimentation unit at Ravensbrück showed themselves to be “not a very inspiring lot but, on the whole, not too different from what might be found in any hospital” (77). Prisoners in the Soviet gulags voiced much the same impressions: “There are not many dedicated sadists among the jailers, after all; the majority of them are none too bright but cunning functionaries” (Ratushinskaya 149). Ginzburg seconds that opinion in her description of the men who sent her to Kolyma: they were “merely functionaries,” she writes, “earning their pay” (*Journey* 171).

Who were these five or ten percent? The exceptions? For the most part, they were individuals scarred by physical defect, grave psychological handicap, or simply vicious fate. As Tillion remarks of the Ravensbrück SS, “Their ranks included a large number of physical misfits whose bodies seemed thrown together and who could have had personal grudges to take out on the female sex in general” (61). At Auschwitz the most brutal guards were not the *Reichsdeutscher* but the *Volksdeutscher*, Germans born outside Germany, who felt they needed to prove themselves true Germans. Scholars have pored over the personal histories of the Nazi leaders, hoping no doubt to discover the causes of the evil they created and so banish its specter: Reinhard Heydrich, for instance, deputy chief of the Gestapo, who initially presided over the “final solution,” may have been part Jewish, and Hitler, too; they had to compensate, the story goes. Goebbels walked with

a limp; Himmler and Hitler had bizarre sex lives. Apart from the fact that there is nothing particularly pathological or exceptional about such traits, they apply to only a few individuals, whereas the evil that needs to be explained was the affair of millions. As Primo Levi says, "Monsters exist, but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the common men" (Afterword 214).

If the concept of monstrosity is of limited utility in helping us understand evil, positing some reversion to bestial or primitive instincts takes us no further. We all know the popular expressions: in every human breast there lurks a wild beast, ready to strike out the moment circumstances permit, or each of us harbors within him- or herself a primitive being, a savage awaiting the chance to shatter the thin veneer of civilization and satisfy the most primal urges. As far as the camps themselves are concerned, we have already noted that many people, seeing in them a collapse of the social order, believe they represent the reversion to a Hobbesian state of nature, to the "war of all against all." Yet one need only look at the facts themselves to see how far off the mark these explanations truly are. In the first place, torture and extermination have not even the remotest equivalent in the animal kingdom. Nor was there any breakdown of the social contract in the camps: the guards who tortured and killed were obeying the laws of their country and the orders of their superiors. As Dwight MacDonald remarked shortly after the war, what the crimes of the Nazis teach us is that those who enforce the law are more dangerous than those who break it. If only the guards had given themselves over to their instincts! Unfortunately, they followed the rules.

The last of the more familiar explanations, ultimately no more useful than the first two, holds that concentration camps are a direct outgrowth of ideological fanaticism. There were indeed fanatical Communists among the guards of the gulags, just as there were fanatical Nazis among the concentration camp guards, but proportionally the fanatics were no more prevalent than the sadists. The predominant type was a different sort altogether: a conformist, willing to serve whoever wielded power and more concerned with his own welfare than with the triumph of doctrine. Up and down the ladder of power, one finds only "pragmatists" and cynics. For such men, especially after they seize power, ideology (although not irrelevant) is a pretext rather than a motive. Those who knew Mengele used to say of him that he was a cynic, not an ideologue. Albert Speer spoke similarly of Hitler, that he was a pragmatist, not a fanatic. No doubt this was true of Beria as well. Vasily Grossman remarks that "The new state did not require holy apostles, fanatic, inspired builders, faithful, devout disciples. The new state did not even require servants—just clerks" (*Forever Flowing* 193). It has often been pointed out that in the single most intense moment of anti-Semitic fanaticism in Germany—*Kristallnacht* of 1938—about one hundred people

lost their lives. If the extermination of the Jews had proceeded at that pace, the Nazis would have needed 140 years to kill as many as they managed to in five.

## TOTALITARIAN CRIMES

Traditional explanations, then, shed little light on the crimes of totalitarianism, on the extremity of the camps; these crimes were new, right down to the principle on which they were based, and thus require new explanatory concepts. Hannah Arendt's use of the phrase "the banality of evil" in reference to Eichmann represents one attempt in that direction. Judging from the number of misunderstandings that this coinage has provoked, it was perhaps less than felicitous. Nevertheless, the idea remains an important one.

Sitting among the spectators at the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and faced with Adolph Eichmann the individual, Arendt had to acknowledge that despite the prosecutor's efforts to demonize him, this man who was responsible for one of the most devastating evils in the history of humanity stood before the court a profoundly mediocre, indeed common, human being. "The trouble with Eichmann," Arendt writes, "was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal" (*Eichmann* 276). It is in this—and only in this—sense that the evil that Eichmann represents is "banal" and not "radical" or inhuman. (Note that, for Arendt, "radical" and "extreme" are not the same.) To call this evil banal is not to trivialize it: precisely what made this evil so dangerous was that it was so easy, that no exceptional human qualities were required for it to come into being. The wind had only to blow in the right direction, and the evil spread like wildfire. The paradox of this concept, according to which an evil can be extreme without being radically different from its less virulent forms, is doubtless responsible for the misunderstandings surrounding it; it must be said, however, that the facts are themselves paradoxical, the evil in question being at once ordinary and exceptional.

Still, the notion of the banality of evil is less an explanation than a way of putting aside the usual formulas and indicating a direction for further inquiry. Arthur Seyss-Inquart, the Nazi governor of Austria and then Holland and one of those convicted at Nuremberg, long ago said in response to Höss's testimony about the exterminations at Auschwitz that "there is a limit to the number of people you can kill out of hatred or a lust for slaughter"—so much for fanaticism and sadism—"but there is no limit to the number you can kill in the cold, systematic manner of the military 'categorical imperative'" (Gilbert, *Psychology* 256). In order to explain an evil of this

magnitude, we must thus look not to the character of the individual but to that of the society that imposes such categorical imperatives. The explanation will be political and social, not psychological or individual.

What attributes of a society make possible the commission of such crimes? For me, the answer is a point of departure, not an end point: the societal trait that allows such crimes to be carried out is totalitarianism, the only attribute that Nazi Germany shares with the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, and China. The Germans, the Russians, and all the others who committed these unspeakable crimes are human beings no different from any others; what sets them apart is the political regime under which they lived. This is not to argue that national differences are altogether irrelevant. We do not have to accept Nazi notions of inferior races and culpable peoples to ask why totalitarianism took hold in Germany, for example, but not France, in China but not India, and to seek causal factors in such things as one country's tradition of militarism, another's history of brutal repression, or even the "slave mentality" of yet another. My aim, however, is not to analyze cultural and national traditions, and I subscribe to Germaine Tillion's conclusion that "no 'people' is immune to [this] kind of collective moral disaster" (188). In this opinion, she concurs with Buchenwald survivor David Rousset, who warned just after the war that "it would be duplicity, and criminal duplicity, to pretend that it is impossible for other nations to try a similar experiment because it would be contrary to their nature" (112).

Tillion's conclusion is all the more invaluable because upon her liberation from Ravensbrück she could not make so impartial a statement. In the first version of her book, she was prepared to accept a historical explanation for the disaster and to rely on such notions as the German and Polish "national characters." Later, she revised her opinion: "I hasten to say that today, I am ashamed of this judgment," she wrote in 1972, "for I am convinced that in a similar situation, any other national group would have committed similar abuses" (28). For the French, at least, blaming the German national character by comparing it to their own is all the more dubious a proposition for their having been among the most zealous collaborators in the implementation of the final solution. The totalitarian machine absorbed the "lessons" of Russian czarism, Prussian militarism, and Chinese despotism, but it also made of them something quite new, and it is this entity that acted on the minds of individuals. Primo Levi shares this conclusion. "Certainly," he writes, "the greatest responsibility lies with the system, the very structure of the totalitarian state" (*Drowned* 44).

What interests me here, however, is not totalitarianism as such but rather its influence on individual moral behavior. In this context, some characteristics of totalitarianism are of more importance than others. The first of these characteristics has to do with the place totalitarianism assigns to the enemy. All extremist doctrines invoke the principle (found, sadly, in

the Gospels) that “he who is not with me is against me.” Not all of them, however, take up its corollary, that “all who are against me shall perish.” Nor do all extremisms have at their disposal the means of the totalitarian state to carry out the threat implicit in this principle. What characterizes totalitarianism more specifically is that the enemy is an internal one. Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union pursued aggressive foreign policies, it is true, but in that respect they behaved like any other imperialist powers. It is the notion of an internal enemy—or the extension of the principle of warfare to relations between groups within the country itself—that sets these two apart from the rest. In a speech he made to the commandants of the concentration camps at the beginning of the war, Theodor Eicke, the great inspiration behind the camps and one of their most aggressive promoters, echoed an idea that Lenin had already formulated in the wake of the October Revolution. “The obligation to destroy an internal enemy of the State,” Eicke said, “is in no way different from the obligation to kill your adversary on the battlefield” (Höss 101).

The generalization of the idea of war leads inevitably to the conclusion that internal enemies should be killed. Totalitarian doctrines always divide humanity into two groups of unequal worth (which are not coincident with the categories of “our country” and “other countries,” for here we are not dealing with simple nationalism) and maintain that the inferior beings must be punished, even annihilated. Totalitarian doctrines, then, are never universalist in character; under them, all men do not have same rights. In Nazi doctrine, that fact is obvious: the “inferior races”—Jews, Gypsies, and others—are all subhumans, parasites. But it is just as true of Soviet discourse (to say nothing of Soviet methods), which throughout the purges of the 1930s was identical to that of the Nazis; slogans such as “Dogs must die like dogs” or “Crush the vermin” were the order of the day. According to Stalinist doctrine, moreover, the internal struggle was supposed to intensify as the day of true Communism approached. A class enemy in one case, a race enemy in the other; under both regimes, however, this much is the same: the enemy is necessarily an extreme enemy, against whom a war of extermination is justified.

The second characteristic of totalitarian systems, like the first, is also bound up with the repudiation of universality: the state becomes the custodian of society’s ultimate aims. The supreme values that are supposed to govern the individual’s conduct are no longer accessible to him; the individual can no longer think of himself as one of humanity’s many representatives and consult his conscience to determine which goals to pursue and according to which criteria to judge the actions of others. Imposing itself as an intermediary between the individual and his values, the state replaces humanity as the standard by which to distinguish good from evil and thus determines the direction in which society will evolve. Through this

usurpation of society's and the individual's ultimate aims, the totalitarian state becomes indistinguishable from those aims, both from its own perspective and in the eyes of its subjects.

A third characteristic of totalitarian systems is one to which the adjective specifically refers: the state aspires to control the totality of an individual's social existence. The party (Communist or National Socialist) is not content to seize political power in the narrow sense (as a classical dictatorship would) by eliminating the opposition and taking over the government. Rather, it extends its control over the entire public sphere of each person's life and encroaches substantially on his private life as well. It controls what work the individual does, where he lives, what he owns, his children's education and leisure, even his family life and his love affairs. In this way the state secures its subjects' submission; in a totalitarian system, there is no refuge, no escaping the state's control. During periods of hard-line totalitarianism (in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union under Stalin, in Germany under Hitler during the Second World War), obedience is obtained by direct threat of physical violence and death; in more "relaxed" times, the totalitarian state is content to deport its subjects, deny them work, prevent them from traveling abroad or owning property, keep their children out of the university, and so on.

Each of these characteristics of the totalitarian system is at the root of certain moral behaviors specific to the totalitarian subject. Inasmuch as the totalitarian regime requires an absolute enemy, an embodiment of evil, hostile acts against that enemy become not only permissible but also commendable. This is no more than the extension of the principle of war: the soldier is honored for his determination in confronting the enemy, that is, for his capacity to kill; what is forbidden during peacetime becomes laudable in times of war. One must be strong, stronger than the enemy, above all. Inevitably those who under totalitarianism heed this injunction enjoy—in both senses of the word—power over their enemy.

The fact that the state appropriates all societal goals, making itself sole arbiter of which ends are to be pursued, has a twofold effect. The subjects of the totalitarian regime can take comfort in being relieved of personal responsibility for their decisions. At the same time, the totalitarian power demands that its subjects restrict themselves in thought and deed to instrumentality and treat every action as a means to something else rather than as an end in itself. In the realm of material production, the fulfillment of that demand does not yield particularly brilliant results, as expanding bureaucracies and the loss of personal initiative present formidable obstacles. In the domain of moral conduct, however, the demand is far more productive. The question is often asked how "ordinary people," "decent husbands and fathers," could have committed so many atrocities. Where was their conscience in all this? The answer is that by usurping social goals and

restricting people to instrumentalist thinking, the totalitarian power manages to have its subjects accomplish whatever tasks they are assigned without its having to disturb the individual's moral structure at all. Guards who committed atrocities never stopped distinguishing between good and evil. Their moral faculty had not withered away. They simply believed that the "atrocities" was in fact a good thing and thus not an atrocity at all—because the state, custodian of the standards of good and evil, told them so. The guards were not deprived of a moral sensibility but provided with a new one.

Individuals caught up in so total a web ultimately become docile, submitting to orders passively. The fact is that totalitarian subjects believe there is a way out for them: by deciding to submit "only" in their outward behavior, in their public words and gestures, they console themselves with the thought that they remain masters of their consciences, faithful to themselves in their private lives. In reality, this sort of social schizophrenia is no solution at all and tends to work against those who try to make it one. Whatever pains the totalitarian regime may take to indoctrinate its subjects, it is quite satisfied with "merely" public docility, because it needs no more than that to remain firmly in power. At the same time, its subjects live in the comforting illusion that "in their innermost selves" they remain honorable and pure. Social schizophrenia thus becomes a weapon in the hands of those in power; it lulls to sleep the conscience of the totalitarian subject, reassures him, and lets him underestimate the seriousness of his public deeds. Master of his heart of hearts, the subject no longer pays much attention to what he does in the world.

The submissiveness of totalitarian subjects has another, still more tragic consequence for any subject unfortunate enough to be considered one of the internal enemy. The totalitarian state obtains the submission of all its subjects, including its victims, by combining total control of sources of information and means of coercion (the police) with the threat of physical violence and death. The fact that the victims are so numerous counts for little; because they cannot organize, each victim stands alone and thus powerless before an infinitely superior force. As everyone knows, during and after World War II certain Jewish writers reproached entire Jewish populations for having allowed themselves to be led "like sheep to the slaughter," for having failed to take up arms and fight back. (This argument was made by men as different from each other as Bruno Bettelheim and Raul Hilberg, Jean Améry and Vasily Grossman; but it was first employed by resistance leaders, as a way of spurring people to action.) Other writers later contested this charge by stressing those acts of Jewish resistance that did take place here and there. The debate, however, is a spurious one. There is only one answer to the question of why the Jews did not revolt more vigorously: such revolt is impossible in a totalitarian regime.

Why did Soviet prisoners of war in Germany not revolt? Why did five million Ukrainian peasants passively submit to starvation by Stalin in the early 1930s? Why are a billion Chinese not in revolt right now? Obviously one cannot, in these cases, speak of Jewish tradition or the ghetto mentality.

Totalitarian crimes are crimes of a new species altogether and we must recognize their specificity, but doing so does not oblige us to revise our notions about “human nature.” There is nothing either extrahuman or subhuman about these crimes, and yet something historically unprecedented has clearly occurred. Their cause resides neither in individuals nor in nations but in the political regime under which they are committed. Once the totalitarian system is in place, the vast majority of the population—people like you and me—are at risk of becoming accomplices in its crimes; that is all it takes. Indeed, that it should be such a simple matter for people to fall into behaviors they understand are evil is one of the lessons of these tragic events, as Germaine Tillon points out, calling our attention to “the tragic easiness with which ‘decent people’ could become the most callous executioners without seeming to notice what was happening to them” (189). To say that the cause of totalitarian crimes resides not in the individual but in the political regime does not mean the individual bears no responsibility for its crimes, a point to which I shall return.

## ORDINARY VICES

Having suffered the persecutions and humiliations they did, it was important for the victims to be able to say, We too are human beings like you. Both Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz (If This Is a Man)* and Robert Antelme’s *The Human Race* are pleas for the recognition of the victims’ humanity, for it is in this common humanity that the victims’ hope resides. “It’s because we’re men like them,” Antelme writes, “that the SS will finally prove powerless before us. . . . The executioner . . . can kill a man, but he can’t change him into something else” (219–20). Today, however, when everyone recognizes the humanity of the victims, it is not enough to be able to say, “We are human like them.” We must also grapple with the more problematic comparison, between ourselves and the executioners, and be prepared to say, “They are human beings like us.” Those who took an active part in the perpetration of evil were ordinary people, and so are we: they are like us, and we are like them.

A statement like this may not mean much at all in the mouth of someone who was not directly affected by the events in question, but for those who experienced them in the flesh, it is not an easy thing to admit. One former Auschwitz inmate recounts how he and his friends constantly asked

one another whether “the German was a human being like everyone else. Each time, the response was a categorical ‘No, the German is not a man. The German is a *Boche*, a monster, and what’s more, a monster conscious of his monstrosity’” (Laks and Coudy 157). Thus it is with even greater admiration that I read Etty Hillesum’s journal entry for Thursday, February 19, 1942, in which she relates a discussion she has with a friend while waiting at an Amsterdam tram stop. “What is it in human beings that makes them want to destroy others?” her friend asks. And Hillesum replies, “Human beings, you say, but remember that you’re one yourself. . . . All the appalling things that happen are no mysterious threats from afar, but arise from fellow beings very close to us” (*Interrupted* 70–71, 72).

Others took a number of years to make the same discovery. In the 1946 edition of *If This Is a Man*, Levi defends the humanity of the inmate, but not until forty years later can he write, in *The Drowned and the Saved*: “They were made of the same cloth as we, they were average human beings, averagely intelligent, averagely wicked: save the exceptions, they were not monsters, they had our faces” (202). Solzhenitsyn recalls the years when he was an officer of the Red Army and was leading his company across a ravaged Prussia; he remembers the criminal acts he found himself capable of committing. We know now that this self-knowledge is the requisite starting point for moral action; as Solzhenitsyn says, “There is nothing that so aids and assists the awakening of omniscience within us as insistent thoughts about one’s own transgressions, errors, mistakes.” Thirty years later, after his imprisonment and deportation, he comes to the following conclusion: “Gradually it was disclosed to me,” he writes, “that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts” (615–16). If the others had been in our place, they would have behaved like us; had we been in theirs, we could have become like them.

In general, we find this truth a very hard one to accept. It is infinitely easier for each of us to believe that the evil lies outside of us, that we have nothing in common with the monsters who perpetrated it. (We respond in much the same way to those particularly monstrous crimes that every now and then seem to capture the attention of the media.) If we prefer to forget Kolyma and Auschwitz, it is because we fear discovering that the evil of the camps is not alien to the human race; this same fear makes us prefer the (rare) story in which good triumphs. Psychoanalysts like Alexander Mitscherlich and Bruno Bettelheim, who have studied the concentration camp experience, are right to insist on this point: these evils are not as foreign to us as we might wish, which is precisely why we refuse to admit the fact and instead gravitate so readily to explanations rooted in the notion of monstrosity.

Let there be no mistake about what this assertion does or does not mean. In no case should we (or could we) infer from it that there is no difference between the guilty and the innocent, between the executioners and the victims. In her writings on the banality of evil, Arendt repeatedly warns us not to interpret this phrase to mean that there is a little Eichmann in each of us and therefore that we are all the same. To do so would be to ignore the distinction, basic to the notion of justice, between the capacity to act and the action itself; it would be to turn a blind eye to degrees of difference of one and the same trait. Primo Levi stresses this point: the fact that the executioners were human like us in no way allows us to conclude—as Liliانا Cavani seems to have done in her film *The Night Porter*—that “we are all victims or murderers” (*Drowned* 48). If we draw that conclusion, we obliterate with a single stroke of the pen the guilt of some and the suffering of others and renounce all justice in the name of some caricatured notion of the unconscious. To be sure, perpetrators and victims are not different by nature, but the law punishes only acts that have been committed and nothing else. In this respect, justice differs not only from compassion, whose object is the entire human being, but also and to a greater degree from anthropology, which concerns itself with human dispositions rather than any particular action. Anthropology seeks to understand; the law makes it possible to judge.

Here, we are obviously treading a narrow path with pitfalls on either side; misunderstandings are easy under these circumstances. Much is at stake, however, for we must reject not only Manichaean conceptions of evil but too rigid an application of the principle of the excluded middle. We must try to grasp the whole situation, to articulate two propositions which only *seem* to contradict each other: first, that the crimes are inhuman but the criminals are not and, second, that some ordinary people committed some extraordinary acts.

Philip Hallie studied in detail one of the rare examples of goodness during those dark years, that of André Trocmé and his neighbors, who rescued Jews in the southern French region of the Cévennes. Hallie writes that “there is an unbridgeable difference between those who can torture and destroy children and those who can only save them” (225). Instinctively, one wants him to be right; there is, one hopes, a wide abyss between “them” and “us.” Indeed, I take as honest a look at myself as I can, and I believe I can say in all good faith that I could never throw living children into a furnace. Yet this way of putting it seems to me to obscure the issue in two ways: first, by taking only the two extremes of what is really a continuum and, second, by eliminating any consideration of the particular circumstances surrounding the act and of such processes as habituation and inurement. Accounts that attest to the power of these processes speak in near unanimity. Rudolf Vrba—an Auschwitz escapee,

a member of the resistance, and a thoroughly admirable human being—describes how it sometimes felt to witness a beating: “I grew used to the sight of these punishments that first day. I began almost to welcome them indeed, for when Koenig and Graff were busy (with the beatings), I could steal, which meant I could survive” (130). Margarete Buber-Neumann makes a similar admission, recalling a visit to the camp infirmary in 1944: “Making my way down corridors filled with the death rattles of dying women, I was obsessed with a single thought—never to see this sight again, never again to hear these cries” (*Ravensbrück* 42). Bettelheim is correct, I feel, when he concludes, “A few screams evoke in us deep anxiety and a desire to help. Hours of screaming without end lead us only to wish that the screamer would shut up” (*Survival* 260).

Let us return to the essentials. Etty Hillesum, one of Eichmann’s victims, would never, in any circumstance, have acted as he did, but she is able to understand Eichmann and those like him by looking at herself. Mendel, the Jewish protagonist in Primo Levi’s *If Not Now, When?*, is a victim of persecutions, yet when he looks within himself, he says, “Maybe each of us is Cain to some Abel, and slays him in the field without knowing it” (83). And it is in speaking of himself and his fellow prisoners that Levi concludes: “We . . . had the potential to construct an infinite enormity of pain. . . . It is enough not to see, not to listen, not to act” (*Drowned* 86). For evil to come into being, the actions of a few are not sufficient; it is also necessary that the vast majority stand aside, indifferent; of such behavior, as we know well, we are all of us capable.

What have Kolyma and Auschwitz taught us about human nature that we did not know before? Is man fundamentally evil? Is he, as Hobbes would have us believe, a wolf toward his fellowman? Or is he by nature good, as Rousseau insisted? For my part, I do not think we can derive from these experiences any new lessons about the nature of man, neither optimistic theories of progress nor apocalyptic theories of decline. Totalitarianism is incontestably worse than democracy, that much is (now) clear; as for people, they are by nature neither good nor evil, or else they are both at once: selfishness and altruism are equally innate. “Does human nature undergo a true change in the cauldron of totalitarian violence? Does [man] lose his innate yearning for freedom?” Grossman asks (pondering in this instance the alternative of freedom or submission, not that of good or evil). He answers in the negative. “Condemned to slavery,” he writes, “man is made a slave by fate, and not by nature” (*Life and Fate* 216). Evil is not accidental; it is always there at hand, ready to manifest itself. All it needs to emerge is for us to do nothing. Nor is good an illusion; it persists, even in the most desperate circumstances. There is no more reason to resign ourselves to cynicism than there is to indulge in naive dreams.

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## ARE WARS INEVITABLE?

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An Exchange between Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud

Caputh near Potsdam, 30th July, 1932

Dear Professor Freud,

The proposal of the League of Nations and its International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation at Paris that I should invite a person, to be chosen by myself, to a frank exchange of views on any problem that I might select affords me a very welcome opportunity of conferring with you upon a question which, as things now are, seems the most insistent of all the problems civilization has to face. This is the problem: Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war? It is common knowledge that, with the advance of modern science, this issue has come to mean a matter of life and death for civilization as we know it; nevertheless, for all the zeal displayed, every attempt at its solution has ended in a lamentable breakdown.

I believe, moreover, that those whose duty it is to tackle the problem professionally and practically are growing only too aware of their impotence

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to deal with it, and have now a very lively desire to learn the views of men who, absorbed in the pursuit of science, can see world-problems in the perspective distance lends. As for me, the normal objective of my thought affords no insight into the dark places of human will and feeling. Thus, in the enquiry now proposed, I can do little more than seek to clarify the question at issue and, clearing the ground of the more obvious solutions, enable you to bring the light of your far-reaching knowledge of man's instinctive life to bear upon the problem. There are certain psychological obstacles whose existence a layman in the mental sciences may dimly surmise, but whose interrelations and vagaries he is incompetent to fathom; you, I am convinced, will be able to suggest educative methods, lying more or less outside the scope of politics, which will eliminate these obstacles.

As one immune from nationalist bias, I personally see a simple way of dealing with the superficial (i.e., administrative) aspect of the problem: the setting up, by international consent, of a legislative and judicial body to settle every conflict arising between nations. Each nation would undertake to abide by the orders issued by this legislative body, to invoke its decision in every dispute, to accept its judgments unreservedly and to carry out every measure the tribunal deems necessary for the execution of its decrees. But here, at the outset, I come up against a difficulty; a tribunal is a human institution which, in proportion as the power at its disposal is inadequate to enforce its verdicts, is all the more prone to suffer these to be deflected by extrajudicial pressure. This is a fact with which we have to reckon; law and might inevitably go hand in hand, and juridical decisions approach more nearly the ideal justice demanded by the community (in whose name and interests these verdicts are pronounced) in so far as the community has effective power to compel respect of its juridical ideal. But at present we are far from possessing any supranational organization competent to render verdicts of incontestable authority and enforce absolute submission to the execution of its verdicts. Thus I am led to my first axiom: the quest of international security involves the unconditional surrender by every nation, in a certain measure, of its liberty of action, its sovereignty that is to say, and it is clear beyond all doubt that no other road can lead to such security.

The ill-success, despite their obvious sincerity, of all the efforts made during the last decade to reach this goal leaves us no room to doubt that strong psychological factors are at work, which paralyze these efforts. Some of these factors are not far to seek. The craving for power which characterizes the governing class in every nation is hostile to any limitation of the national sovereignty. This political power-hunger is wont to batten on the activities of another group, whose aspirations are on purely mercenary, economic lines. I have specially in mind that small but determined group, active in every nation, composed of individuals who, indifferent to social

considerations and restraints, regard warfare, the manufacture and sale of arms, simply as an occasion to advance their personal interests and enlarge their personal authority.

But recognition of this obvious fact is merely the first step towards an appreciation of the actual state of affairs. Another question follows hard upon it: How is it possible for this small clique to bend the will of the majority, who stand to lose and suffer by a state of war, to the service of their ambitions? (In speaking of the majority, I do not exclude soldiers of every rank who have chosen war as their profession, in the belief that they are serving to defend the highest interests of their race, and that attack is often the best method of defense.) An obvious answer to this question would seem to be that the minority, the ruling class at present, has the schools and press, usually the Church as well, under its thumb. This enables it to organize and sway the motions of the masses, and make its tool of them.

Yet even this answer does not provide a complete solution. Another question arises from it: How is it these devices succeed so well in rousing men to such wild enthusiasm, even to sacrifice their lives? Only one answer is possible. Because man has within him a lust for hatred and destruction. In normal times this passion exists in a latent state, it emerges only in unusual circumstances; but it is a comparatively easy task to call it into play and raise it to the power of a collective psychosis. Here lies, perhaps, the crux of all the complex of factors we are considering, an enigma that only the expert in the lore of human instincts can resolve.

And so we come to our last question. Is it possible to control man's mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychoses of hate and destructiveness? Here I am thinking by no means only of the so-called uncultured masses. Experience proves that it is rather the so-called "Intelligentsia" that is most apt to yield to these disastrous collective suggestions, since the intellectual has no direct contact with life in the raw, but encounters it in its easiest synthetic form—upon the printed page.

To conclude: I have so far been speaking only of wars between nations; what are known as international conflicts. But I am well aware that the aggressive instinct operates under other forms and in other circumstances. (I am thinking of civil wars, for instance, due in earlier days to religious zeal, but nowadays to social factors; or, again, the persecution of racial minorities.) But my insistence on what is the most typical, most cruel and extravagant form of conflict between man and man was deliberate, for here we have the best occasion of discovering ways and means to render all armed conflicts impossible.

I know that in your writings we may find answers, explicit or implied, to all the issues of this urgent and absorbing problem. But it would be of the greatest service to us all were you to present the problem of world

peace in the light of your most recent discoveries, for such a presentation well might blaze the trail for new and fruitful modes of action.

Yours very sincerely,  
A. Einstein

\* \* \*

Vienna, September, 1932

Dear Professor Einstein,

When I heard that you intended to invite me to an exchange of views on some subject that interested you and that seemed to deserve the interest of others besides yourself, I readily agreed. I expected you to choose a problem on the frontiers of what is knowable to-day, a problem to which each of us, a physicist and a psychologist, might have our own particular angle of approach and where we might come together from different directions upon the same ground. You have taken me by surprise, however, by posing the question of what can be done to protect mankind from the curse of war. I was scared at first by the thought of my—I had almost written “our”—incapacity for dealing with what seemed to be a practical problem, a concern for statesmen. But I then realized that you had raised the question not as a natural scientist and physicist but as a philanthropist: you were following the promptings of the League of Nations just as Fridtjof Nansen, the polar explorer, took on the work of bringing help to the starving and homeless victims of the World War. I reflected, moreover, that I was not being asked to make practical proposals but only to set out the problem of avoiding war as it appears to a psychological observer. Here again you yourself have said almost all there is to say on the subject. But though you have taken the wind out of my sails I shall be glad to follow in your wake and content myself with confirming all you have said by amplifying it to the best of my knowledge—or conjecture.

You begin with the relation between Right and Might. There can be no doubt that that is the correct starting-point for our investigation. But may I replace the world “might” by the balder and harsher world “violence”? To-day right and violence appear to us as antitheses. It can easily be shown, however, that the one has developed out of the other; and, if we go back to the earliest beginnings and see how that first came about, the problem is easily solved. You must forgive me if in what follows I go over familiar and commonly accepted ground as though it were new, but the thread of my argument requires it.

It is a general principle, then, that conflicts of interest between men are settled by the use of violence. This is true of the whole animal kingdom,

from which men have no business to exclude themselves. In the case of men, no doubt, conflicts of *opinion* occur as well which may reach the highest pitch of abstraction and which seem to demand some other technique for their settlement. That, however, is a later complication. To begin with, in a small human horde, it was superior muscular strength which decided who owned things or whose will should prevail. Muscular strength was soon supplemented and replaced by the use of tools: the winner was the one who had the better weapons or who used them the more skillfully. From the moment at which weapons were introduced, intellectual superiority already began to replace brute muscular strength; but the final purpose of the fight remained the same—one side or the other was to be compelled to abandon his claim or his objection by the damage inflicted on him and by the crippling of his strength. That purpose was most completely achieved if the victor's violence eliminated his opponent permanently—that is to say, killed him. This had two advantages: he could not renew his opposition and his fate deterred others from following his example. In addition to this, killing an enemy satisfied an instinctual inclination which I shall have to mention later. The intention to kill might be countered by a reflection that the enemy could be employed in performing useful services if he were left alive in an intimidated condition. In that case the victor's violence was content with subjugating him instead of killing him. This was a first beginning of the idea of sparing an enemy's life, but thereafter the victor had to reckon with his defeated opponent's lurking thirst for revenge and sacrificed some of his own security.

Such, then, was the original state of things: domination by whoever had the greater might—domination by brute violence or by violence supported by intellect. As we know, this regime was altered in the course of evolution. There was a path that led from violence to right or law. What was that path? It is my belief that there was only one: the path which led by way of the fact that the superior strength of a single individual could be rivaled by the union of several weak ones. "*L'union fait la force.*" Violence could be broken by union, and the power of those who were united now represented law in contrast to the violence of the single individual. Thus we see that right is the might of a community. It is still violence, ready to be directed against any individual who resists it; it works by the same methods and follows the same purposes. The only real difference lies in the fact that what prevails is no longer the violence of an individual but that of a community. But in order that the transition from violence to this new right or justice may be effected, one psychological condition must be fulfilled. The union of the majority must be a stable and lasting one. If it were only brought about for the purpose of combating a single dominant individual and were dissolved after his defeat, nothing would have been accomplished. The next person who thought himself superior in strength would

once more seek to set up a dominion by violence and the game would be repeated *ad infinitum*. The community must be maintained permanently, must be organized, must draw up regulations to anticipate the risk of rebellion and must institute authorities to see that those regulations—the laws—are respected and to superintend the execution of legal acts of violence. The recognition of a community of interests such as these leads to the growth of emotional ties between the members of a united group of people—communal feelings which are the true source of its strength.

Here, I believe, we already have all the essentials: violence overcome by the transference of power to a larger unity, which is held together by emotional ties between its members. What remains to be said is no more than an expansion and a repetition of this.

The situation is simple so long as the community consists only of a number of equally strong individuals. The laws of such an association will determine the extent to which, if the security of communal life is to be guaranteed, each individual must surrender his personal liberty to turn his strength to violent uses. But a state of rest of that kind is only theoretically conceivable. In actuality the position is complicated by the fact that from its very beginning the community comprises elements of unequal strength—men and women, parents and children—and soon, as a result of war and conquest, it also comes to include victors and vanquished, who turn into masters and slaves. The justice of the community then becomes an expression of the unequal degrees of power obtaining within it; the laws are made by and for the ruling members and find little room for the rights of those in subjection. From that time forward there are two factors at work in the community which are sources of unrest over matters of law but tend at the same time to a further growth of law. First, attempts are made by certain of the rulers to set themselves above the prohibitions which apply to everyone—they seek, that is, to go back from a dominion of law to a dominion of violence. Secondly, the oppressed members of the group make constant efforts to obtain more power and to have any changes that are brought about in that direction recognized in the laws—they press forward, that is, from unequal justice to equal justice for all. This second tendency becomes especially important if a real shift of power occurs within a community, as may happen as a result of a number of historical factors. In that case right may gradually adapt itself to the new distribution of power; or, as is more frequent, the ruling class is unwilling to recognize the change, and rebellion and civil war follow, with a temporary suspension of law and new attempts at a solution by violence, ending in the establishment of a fresh rule of law. There is yet another source from which modifications of law may arise, and one of which the expression is invariably peaceful: it lies in the cultural transformation of the members of the community. This, however, belongs properly in another connection and must be considered later.

Thus we see that the violent solution of conflicts of interest is not avoided even inside a community. But the everyday necessities and common concerns that are inevitable where people live together in one place tend to bring such struggles to a swift conclusion and under such conditions there is an increasing probability that a peaceful solution will be found. Yet a glance at the history of the human race reveals an endless series of conflicts between one community and another or several others, between larger and smaller units—between cities, provinces, races, nations, empires—which have almost always been settled by force of arms. Wars of this kind end either in the spoliation or in the complete overthrow and conquest of one of the parties. It is impossible to make any sweeping judgment upon wars of conquest. Some, such as those waged by the Mongols and Turks, have brought nothing but evil. Others, on the contrary, have contributed to the transformation of violence into law by establishing larger units within which the use of violence was made impossible and in which a fresh system of law led to the solution of conflicts. In this way the conquests of the Romans gave the countries round the Mediterranean the priceless *pax Romana*, and the greed of the French kings to extend their dominions created a peacefully united and flourishing France. Paradoxical as it may sound, it must be admitted that war might be a far from inappropriate means of establishing the eagerly desired reign of “everlasting” peace, since it is in a position to create the large units within which a powerful central government makes further wars impossible. Nevertheless it fails in this purpose, for the results of conquest are as a rule short-lived: the newly created units fall apart once again, usually owing to a lack of cohesion between the portions that have been united by violence. Hitherto, moreover, the unifications created by conquest, though of considerable extent, have only been *partial*, and the conflicts between these have called out more than ever for violent solution. Thus the result of all these warlike efforts has only been that the human race has exchanged numerous, and indeed unending, minor wars for wars on a grand scale that are rare but all the more destructive.

If we turn to our own times, we arrive at the same conclusion which you have reached by a shorter path. Wars will only be prevented with certainty if mankind unites in setting up a central authority to which the right of giving judgment upon all conflicts of interest shall be handed over. There are clearly two separate requirements involved in this: the creation of supreme agency and its endowment with the necessary power. One without the other would be useless. The League of Nations is designed as an agency of this kind, but the second condition has not been fulfilled: the League of Nations has no power of its own and can only acquire it if the members of the new union, the separate States, are ready to resign it. And at the moment there seems very little prospect of this. The institution of the League of Nations would, however, be wholly unintelligible if one ignored

the fact that here was a bold attempt such as has seldom (perhaps, indeed, never on such a scale) been made before. It is an attempt to base upon an appeal to certain idealistic attitudes of mind the authority (that is, the coercive influence) which otherwise rests on the possession of power. We have seen that a community is held together by two things: the compelling force of violence and the emotional ties (identification is the technical name) between its members. If one of the factors is absent, the community may possibly be held together by the other. The ideas that are appealed to can, of course, only have any significance if they give expression to important affinities between the members, and the question arises of how much strength such ideas can exert. History teaches us that they have been to some extent effective. For instance, the Panhellenic idea, the sense of being superior to the surrounding barbarians—an idea which was so powerfully expressed in the Amphictyonic Council, the Oracles and the Games—was sufficiently strong to mitigate the customs of war among Greeks, though evidently not sufficiently strong to prevent warlike disputes between the different sections of the Greek nation or even to restrain a city or confederation of cities from allying itself with the Persian foe in order to gain an advantage over a rival. The community of feeling among Christians, powerful though it was, was equally unable at the time of the Renaissance to deter Christian States, whether large or small, from seeking the Sultan's aid in their wars with one another. Nor does any idea exist to-day which could be expected to exert a unifying authority of the sort. Indeed it is all too clear that the national ideals by which nations are at present swayed operate in a contrary direction. Some people are inclined to prophesy that it will not be possible to make an end of war until Communist ways of thinking have found universal acceptance. But that aim is in any case a very remote one to-day, and perhaps it could only be reached after the most fearful civil wars. Thus the attempt to replace actual force by the force of ideas seems at present to be doomed to failure. We shall be making a false calculation if we disregard the fact that law was originally brute violence and that even to-day it cannot do without the support of violence.

I can now proceed to add a gloss to another of your remarks. You express astonishment at the fact that it is so easy to make men enthusiastic about a war and add your suspicions that there is something at work in them—an instinct for hatred and destruction—which goes halfway to meet the efforts of the warmongers. Once again, I can only express my entire agreement. We believe in the existence of an instinct of that kind and have in fact been occupied during the last few years in studying its manifestations. Will you allow me to take this opportunity of putting before you a portion of the theory of the instincts which, after much tentative groping and many fluctuations of opinion, has been reached by workers in the field of psycho-analysis?

According to our hypothesis human instincts are of only two kinds: those which seek to preserve and unite—which we call “erotic,” exactly in the sense in which Plato uses the word “Eros” in his *Symposium*, or “sexual,” with a deliberate extension of the popular conception of “sexuality”—and those which seek to destroy and kill and which we group together as the aggressive or destructive instinct. As you see, this is in fact no more than a theoretical clarification of the universally familiar opposition between Love and Hate which may perhaps have some fundamental relation to the polarity of attraction and repulsion that plays a part in your own field of knowledge. But we must not be too hasty in introducing ethical judgments of good and evil. Neither of these instincts is any less essential than the other; the phenomena of life arise from the concurrent or mutually opposing action of both. Now it seems as though an instinct of the one sort can scarcely ever operate in isolation; it is always accompanied—or, as we say, alloyed—with a certain quota from the other side, which modifies its aim or is, in some cases, what enables it to achieve that aim. Thus, for instance, the instinct of self-preservation is certainly of an erotic kind, but it must nevertheless have aggressiveness at its disposal if it is to fulfill its purpose. So, too, the instinct of love, when it is directed towards an object, stands in need of some contribution from the instinct for mastery if it is in any way to obtain possession of that object. The difficulty of isolating the two classes of instinct in their actual manifestations is indeed what has so long prevented us from recognizing them.

If you will follow me a little further, you will see that human actions are subject to another complication of a different kind. It is very rarely that an action is the work of a *single* instinctual impulse (which must in itself be compounded of Eros and destructiveness). In order to make an action possible there must be as a rule a combination of such compounded motives. . . . [W]hen human beings are incited to war they may have a whole number of motives for assenting—some noble and some base, some which are openly declared and others which are never mentioned. There is no need to enumerate them all. A lust for aggression and destruction is certainly among them: the countless cruelties in history and in our everyday lives vouch for its existence and its strength. The satisfaction of these destructive impulses is of course facilitated by their admixture with others of an erotic and idealistic kind. When we read of the atrocities of the past, it sometimes seems as though the idealistic motives served only as an excuse for the destructive appetites; and sometimes—in the case, for instance, of the cruelties of the Inquisition—it seems as though the idealistic motives had pushed themselves forward in consciousness, while the destructive ones lent them an unconscious reinforcement. Both may be true.

I fear I may be abusing your interest, which is after all concerned with the prevention of war and not with our theories. Nevertheless I should like

to linger for a moment over our destructive instinct, whose popularity is by no means equal to its importance. As a result of a little speculation, we have come to suppose that this instinct is at work in every living creature and is striving to bring it to ruin and to reduce life to its original condition of inanimate matter. Thus it quite seriously deserves to be called a death instinct, while the erotic instincts represent the effort to live. The death instinct turns into the destructive instinct when, with the help of special organs, it is directed outwards, on to objects. The organism preserves its own life, so to say, by destroying an extraneous one. Some portion of the death instinct, however, remains operative *within* the organism, and we have sought to trace quite a number of normal and pathological phenomena to this internalization of the destructive instinct. We have even been guilty of the heresy of attributing the origin of conscience to this diversion inwards of aggressiveness. You will notice that it is by no means a trivial matter if this process is carried too far: it is positively unhealthy. On the other hand if these forces are turned to destruction in the external world, the organism will be relieved and the effect must be beneficial. This would serve as a biological justification for all the ugly and dangerous impulses against which we are struggling. It must be admitted that they stand nearer to Nature than does our resistance to them for which an explanation also needs to be found. It may perhaps seem to you as though our theories are a kind of mythology and, in the present case, not even an agreeable one. But does not every science come in the end to a kind of mythology like this? Cannot the same be said to-day of your own Physics?

For our immediate purpose then, this much follows from what has been said: there is no use in trying to get rid of men's aggressive inclinations. We are told that in certain happy regions of the earth, where nature provides in abundance everything that man requires, there are races whose life is passed in tranquility and who know neither coercion nor aggression. I can scarcely believe it and I should be glad to hear more of these fortunate beings. The Russian Communists, too, hope to be able to cause human aggressiveness to disappear by guaranteeing the satisfaction of all material needs and by establishing equality in other respects among all the members of the community. That, in my opinion, is an illusion. They themselves are armed to-day with the most scrupulous care and not the least important of the methods by which they keep their supporters together is hatred of everyone beyond their frontiers. In any case, as you yourself have remarked, there is no question of getting rid entirely of human aggressive impulses; it is enough to try to divert them to such an extent that they need not find expression in war.

Our mythological theory of instincts makes it easy for us to find a formula for *indirect* methods of combating war. If willingness to engage in war is an effect of the destructive instinct, the most obvious plan will be to bring Eros, its antagonist, into play against it. Anything that encourages the

growth of emotional ties between men must operate against war. These ties may be of two kinds. In the first place they may be relations resembling those towards a loved object, though without having a sexual aim. There is no need for psycho-analysis to be ashamed to speak of love in this connection, for religion itself uses the same words: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." This, however, is more easily said than done. The second kind of emotional tie is by means of identification. Whatever leads men to share important interests produces this community of feeling, these identifications. And the structure of human society is to a large extent based on them.

A complaint which you make about the abuse of authority brings me to another suggestion for the indirect combating of the propensity to war. One instance of the innate and ineradicable inequality of men is their tendency to fall into the two classes of leaders and followers. The latter constitute the vast majority; they stand in need of an authority which will make decisions for them and to which they for the most part offer an unqualified submission. This suggests that more care should be taken than hitherto to educate an upper stratum of men with independent minds, not open to intimidation and eager in the pursuit of truth, whose business it would be to give direction to the dependent masses. It goes without saying that the encroachments made by the executive power of the State and the prohibition laid by the Church upon freedom of thought are far from propitious for the production of a class of this kind. The ideal condition of things would of course be a community of men who had subordinated their instinctual life to the dictatorship of reason. Nothing else could unite men so completely and so tenaciously, even if there were no emotional ties between them. But in all probability that is a Utopian expectation. No doubt the other indirect methods of preventing war are more practicable, though they promise no rapid success. An unpleasant picture comes to one's mind of mills that grind so slowly that people may starve before they get their flour.

The result, as you see, is not very fruitful when an unworldly theoretician is called in to advise on an urgent practical problem. It is a better plan to devote oneself in every particular case to meeting the danger with whatever means lie to hand. I should like, however, to discuss one more question, which you do not mention in your letter but which specially interests me. Why do you and I and so many other people rebel so violently against war? Why do we not accept it as another of the many painful calamities of life? After all, it seems to be quite a natural thing, to have a good biological basis and in practice to be scarcely avoidable. There is no need to be shocked at my raising this question. For the purpose of an investigation such as this, one may perhaps be allowed to wear a mask of assumed detachment. The answer to my question will be that we react to war in this way because everyone has a right to his own life, because war puts an end

to human lives that are full of hope, because it brings individual men into humiliating situations, because it compels them against their will to murder other men, and because it destroys precious material objects which have been produced by the labors of humanity. Other reasons besides might be given, such as that in its present-day form war is no longer an opportunity for achieving the old ideals of heroism and that owing to the perfection of instruments of destruction a future war might involve the extermination of one or perhaps both of the antagonists. All this is true, and so incontestably true that one can only feel astonished that the waging of war has not yet been unanimously repudiated. No doubt debate is possible upon one or two of these points. It may be questioned whether a community ought not to have a right to dispose of individual lives; every war is not open to condemnation to an equal degree; so long as there exist countries and nations that are prepared for the ruthless destruction of others, those others must be armed for war. But I will not linger over any of these issues; they are not what you want to discuss with me, and I have something different in mind. It is my opinion that the main reason why we rebel against war is that we cannot help doing so. We are pacifists because we are obliged to be for organic reasons. And we then find no difficulty in producing arguments to justify our attitude.

No doubt this requires some explanation. My belief is this. For incalculable ages mankind has been passing through a process of evolution of culture. (Some people, I know, prefer to use the term "civilization.") We owe to that process the best of what we have become, as well as a good part of what we suffer from. Though its causes and beginnings are obscure and its outcome uncertain, some of its characteristics are easy to perceive. It may perhaps be leading to the extinction of the human race, for in more than one way it impairs the sexual function; uncultivated races and backward strata of the population are already multiplying more rapidly than highly cultivated ones. The process is perhaps comparable to the domestication of certain species of animals and it is undoubtedly accompanied by physical alterations; but we are still unfamiliar with the notion that the evolution of civilization is an organic process of this kind. The *psychical* modifications that go along with the process of civilization are striking and unambiguous. They consist in a progressive displacement of instinctual aims and a restriction of instinctual impulses. Sensations which were pleasurable to our ancestors have become indifferent or even intolerable to ourselves; there are organic grounds for the changes in our ethical and aesthetic ideals. Of the psychological characteristics of civilization two appear to be the most important: a strengthening of the intellect, which is beginning to govern instinctual life, and an internalization of the aggressive impulses, with all its consequent advantages and perils. Now war is in the crassest opposition to the psychical attitude imposed on us by the process of civilization, and for

that reason we are bound to rebel against it; we simply cannot any longer put up with it. This is not merely an intellectual and emotional repudiation; we pacifists have a *constitutional* intolerance of war, an idiosyncrasy magnified, as it were, to the highest degree. It seems, indeed, as though the lowering of aesthetic standards in war plays a scarcely smaller part in our rebellion than do its cruelties.

And how long shall we have to wait before the rest of mankind become pacifists too? There is no telling. But it may not be Utopian to hope that these two factors, the cultural attitude and the justified dread of the consequences of a future war, may result within a measurable time in putting an end to the waging of war. By what paths or by what side-tracks this will come about we cannot guess. But one thing we *can* say: whatever fosters the growth of civilization works at the same time against war.

I trust you will forgive me if what I have said has disappointed you, and I remain, with kindest regards,

Sincerely yours,  
Sigm. Freud



## FROM RELATIVE TO ABSOLUTE EVIL

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Svetozar Stojanović

### 1

The possibility and even likelihood of the self-destruction of humanity constitutes now its most specific and basic characteristic.<sup>1</sup> Since 1945 the apocalyptic possibility and likelihood have highly increased. I am not referring solely to a catastrophe caused by a nuclear war but also to one caused by chemical, biological, cybernetic, radiological and other (we do not know which ones will arise in future) apocalyptic means. I am also having in mind apocalyptic terrorists, apocalyptic suicides and apocalyptic lunatics and not only apocalyptic war conflagrations between states. I believe that terrorist fanaticism is a greater apocalyptic danger than a “clash of civilizations.” To this list of possible apocalyptic accidents should also be added one more: human beings have never been capable of creating perfect technological means.

Humanity is playing an apocalyptic roulette. This danger is irreversible. Humanity finds itself in a race with apocalyptic time. The metaphor I have been using is the ship “Humanic” (I have coined this word from “Titanic”) on which humanity is sailing. At the same time humankind is showing a monumental “ability” to delude itself and (more or less) passively await its “fate,” an “ability” that is inherent in its auto-apocalyptic disposition. However, the objective state of humanity is such that its entire existence must be divided into the period before and the period after its “empowerment” to self-destruct.

### 2

If I am right, it follows that auto-apocalypse must be separated from the categorical and epochal dichotomy between modernity and post-modernity,

as well as between modernism and post-modernism, and given an absolute priority, both theoretical and practical. I call this break “post-postmodernity” and reflection upon it “post-postmodernism.”

Here are my reasons for the deconstruction of the post-modernist deconstruction of modernism. The threat of the self-destruction of humanity cannot be adequately treated by post-modernist: de-totalization, radical de-construction, de-subjectization of humans, fragmentation, differentiation, heterogeneity, de-foundation, individual and group perspectivism, small and local narratives, relativization of all truths, including scientific ones, and all values, even those most humanistic ones. Rather, in order to survive we need exactly the opposite ideas: theoretical and practical re-totalization, radical re-construction, re-subjectization of humans, globalization, equalization, homogeneity, re-foundation, a universal human perspective, a great and central narrative, absolutization of the truth of the threatening auto-apocalypse and absolutization of the value of the survival of human species.

History represents the progress of freedom and the progress of awareness of freedom—on this point liberals, Hegelians, Marxists and other modernists would surely agree. But since recently we have been forced to define history as “progress” in enabling humanity to self-destruct and become aware of it. Post-modernists claim that ours is the time of the “end of all great narratives” (meta-narratives). My post-postmodernism starts from the necessity of a super meta-narrative (a narrative of all narratives), that of preventing an auto-apocalypse.

Post-modernists deny any meaning to history. I claim that at least one meaning of history still exists—it is the struggle for humanity’s survival. Its survival was earlier tacitly assumed as an absolute precondition of progress and progress was measured with indicators other than this survival. But now we are forced to take the reduction of the probability of humanity’s self-destruction as the meta-criterion of progress. It is exactly by this reduction that humanity as long as it persists will essentially have to measure its global progress and determine the meaning of the remaining history! Naturally, within the framework of this over-determination (the possibility and probability of auto-apocalypse), we should continue trying to improve our lives with a number of “small” meanings and types of progress; we may get enthusiastic about them but at the same time we are likely to use them to delude ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

### 3

Hegel left us some valuable insights about the relationship between master and servant, i.e., about their mutual struggle for recognition. In the

mid-twentieth century, however, the relation between humans and their creativity began imposing itself as the central problem. The main emphasis can no longer be on the struggle for recognition between master and servant; it must be on the struggle for humanity's survival. Our chief concern ought to be the prospect of the absolute alienation of human creativity, and along with it the possibility and probability of the self-destruction of humankind. It goes way beyond "negative dialectics" into what I call "absolute negative dialectics." The expanded reproduction of the means to the self-destruction of humankind has become a characteristic inherent in techno-scientific creativity and not its "collateral result." Still worse: as if this problem were not difficult enough, in trying to prevent auto-apocalypse from happening, we have to paradoxically rely on that very creativity.

The sources of evil are usually sought in the animal side of human nature. But the possibility and probability of absolute evil (the self-destruction of the human species) is rooted in our peculiarity rather than in our animality. Destructive potential is no external opposition to human creativity, but is inherent in it. At its "peak," human creativity itself shows it has the potential, even the tendency, to be auto-apocalyptic. As if a collective Thanatos, together with collective Eros, were built into our creativity.

What we have here is a compound of infinite eagerness-to-know (as well as eagerness-to-do and eagerness-to-make), hubris, and nonchalance—a compound characteristic of humanity's "generic being." Combining two myths, I would say that because of reaching beyond the permitted boundaries Prometheus's human being is punished not only with Sisyphus's task of incessantly and repeatedly pushing a stone toward the summit of a hill, but also with the real danger that the stone may at any moment tumble down right on his head. To make things worse, deep in our hearts we know that we live under the shadow of a self-inflicted apocalypse, but we repress this knowledge, living a carefree, easygoing, light-hearted life, and we do almost nothing to change that state of affairs.

The abyss before us is further deepened by the already enormous disproportion between short- and far-sightedness, retrospectiveness and prospectiveness, as attributes of our intelligence.

Isn't it very significant that there are no mass movements for the survival of humankind? Shall we be capable of undertaking anything at all serious before a part of humanity is destroyed?

The possibility and likelihood of the self-destruction of humankind has become the over-determination of all other over-determinations in history. All future social formations, not excluding the informatic one that is now being entered by the developed world, no matter how creative and progressive, will remain potentially auto-apocalyptic. Even under the far-fetched assumption of a universal and total discarding of the existing apocalyptic means, humanity will unfortunately never forget how to (re)create them.

The possible criticism that I am overstressing the apocalyptic potential of the today's technology is ultimately irrelevant since even if it were true now, it certainly will not be true in the future—in fifty, one hundred or even more years from now—and that is in the long-run philosophically speaking more important.

To avoid a misunderstanding: I do not have in mind any fatalistic determinism but only probabilistic determinism of contemporary technology. On the other hand, it is not a sufficient consolation to us that auto-apocalypse is not fatally predetermined but rather “solely” very probable.

#### 4

Our basic concepts, practices and institutions are not adequate to come to grips with the auto-apocalyptic threat. I am thinking, for example, of politics as a struggle for power; power as a competitive, asymmetrical and violent “zero-sum game”; the state, its sovereignty and security; democracy as a procedure for the election of leaders and authorities; the market as a system for transactions founded on short-term preferences; and even the best existing morality.

The gap between *Realpolitik* and *Moralpolitik* in international relations is oftentimes still emphasized although “*Realpolitik*” has also become one of the forms of “*Irrealpolitik*,” the politics of fatal self-deception. While such politics are obsessed with the struggle for power, we are in desperate need of *Metapolitik*, the essential characteristic of which would be the struggle for the survival of humankind. Its motto cannot be: “Think Globally, Act Locally,” but: “Think and Act Globally.” In that respect the division into the Right and the Left has been totally transcended. There remains only a sharp differentiation between those that actively work for the survival of humankind and those that could not care less about it.

Our concept of power and our practice of power still stem from intra-state and inter-state competition and struggle, and not from the ability of humanity to join together in trying to come to grips with apocalyptic threats.

What is then the meaning of the sovereignty and security of existing states, even dominant states, when there is no common security and no sovereignty of humankind over its own survival? Apocalyptic dangers cannot be avoided if we remain within the framework of “national security states.”

The opposition of the open society versus the closed society pales in the face of the choice between humankind surviving or humankind destroying itself. From the hypothesis of the natural state of war of all against all Hobbes drew the conclusion of the need for a social contract,

whereby people would transfer part of their power to the sovereign state in order to survive. On the basis of the actually possible and probable auto-apocalyptic state of affairs, however, we have to work for a contract of the human race. The vital prerequisite is an anti-apocalyptic organization of both individual states and of humankind as a whole. We have no choice other than to work to create an anti-apocalyptic oriented world confederation, perhaps even federation. We must, of course, make a more modest start with global partnership for the survival of humankind.

The main problems leading to potentially apocalyptic consequences are the following: the deeper and deeper gap between the rich and the poor, the comfortably inhabited and the over-inhabited, those that enjoy the fruits of super-scientific and super-technological development (including the emergent means to correct genetic deficiencies and radically extend lives) and those that are far below that level, the powerful and the powerless. . . . And all this is accompanied by ecological degradation that is getting worse and worse. In combination with apocalyptic technology, these problems make up a true “satanic” syndrome.

What will, however, happen when the passengers on the lowest deck of the “Humanic” get hold of apocalyptic means to blackmail those on the upper decks? Possession of those means will render irrelevant the division of the world into those on the margins of society and the others. Much is being globalized today, even apocalyptic inter-dependence.

We are light-years away from a state of affairs in which global solidarity would be an effective moral and political precept, not to speak of a radical global redistribution of goods. But, nonetheless, there is still hope that, motivated by rational egoism, the “golden” and powerful billion will agree to a radical redistribution while there is still time. Surely we can count at least on the humanism of fear, if nothing better.

How are we to survive as a species if we do not replace our present statespersons and politicians with new types of visionaries and power holders that would be guided by democratic, (con)federalist, solidaristic and ecological mondialism (that does not erase but respects cultural-ethnic differences)?

## 5

Stressing that “existence” precedes the “essence” of humans and not vice-versa, existentialist philosophers rightly criticized essentialists in philosophy. However, the newly created “essence” of human beings’ auto-apocalyptic potential is now bringing their very existence into danger. Can there be a greater reason for collective existential concern, terror, horror . . . ? That is why I have been calling for a new humanist philosophy of

humankind's existence. While earlier existentialist philosophy dealt as a rule with individual and group limit situations, we have to deal with an absolute limit situation.

For those who, in the spirit of secular humanism, look on the human race and its survival as the absolute prerequisite and measure of all values—auto-apocalypse would mean the triumph of absolute and definitive evil.

On the other hand, for religious humanists, auto-apocalypse would have to represent a triumph of the absolute temptation, absolute hubris and absolute sin. André Malraux warned that the twenty-first century would be the age of religion or that humanity would cease to exist. The actual meaning of what he said is not quite clear, but he was certainly right if he wanted to suggest that humanity has no prospects for survival without urgent universal religious ecumenism.

I doubt, however, that existing religions are able, emotively and intellectually, to integrate auto-apocalypticism into their corpus. One cannot see, for example, how Christianity, which is the religion of the scientifically and technologically still dominant part of the world, could abandon its fixation on hope in salvation by repentance of "original sin" and turn all its strength towards the conceptualization, emotionalization and avoidance of absolutely irreversible sin (an expression of my own coining), that is, the self-destruction of humankind. And how could one believe that when the God gave the commandment: "You shall not kill!" He meant: "You shall not kill human kin." At the same time, it is also difficult to believe that an eventual quasi-religion of humankind could displace Christianity and the other great religions, and, instead of them, take root in the mass of the world population. If, however, we cannot hope for the quasi-sacralization of human existence in the cosmos, at least its poetization (instead of its potentially fatal profanation) would be of great assistance.

The creators of the atom bomb, both believers and non-believers, still felt the need to use religious language. That is why the word "Trinity" was the code name for the testing of the first atom bomb. Faced with that spectacle, Oppenheimer even exclaimed: "We have seen the sin." It would seem that the language of sciences and discursive language in general is not sufficient to make quite vivid the state of affairs to which we have brought ourselves. If they will not communicate exclusively among themselves, or at least communicate sufficiently convincingly among themselves, scientists, philosophers and thinkers in general must also seek means of expression in religion, myth, art, negative utopia, science fiction . . .

Reality has, nonetheless, surpassed even these means of expression. Thus, their picture of hell is quite pale in comparison to the scenes of destruction in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even the science fiction we have to date is not enough; a separate apocalyptic fiction must be fostered. The

same is also true of distopia—an absolute distopia is vital to make auto-apocalypse fully vivid. Perhaps such new fiction and such new distopia would represent forms of myth suitable for auto-apocalyptic humans.

Even in the greatest works of literature, descriptions of the *condition humaine* are nothing in comparison with what awaits us. Perhaps even preventive apocalyptic interventions will be necessary in order to prevent total apocalypse (and the saving of Noah's Ark from the "Humanic"). Instead of Kant's "kingdom of ends," we are now closer to the "kingdom of means." For secular humanists, the only absolute end in itself must be the continued existence of humankind to which, as a means, the existence of individuals and groups must be subordinated.

## 6

All forms of morality and moral philosophy to date, our notions of good and right, have been developed in human communities which were incapable of putting the survival of the species in question. Accordingly, they have been incapable of practically imagining, let alone preparing themselves for such a situation. And we now have to plead for a super-categorical imperative whereby the concern for human survival is prescribed as "the duty of duties." Hans Jonas said: "For me, I admit, this imperative is the only one which really fits the Kantian sense of categorical, that is unconditional."<sup>3</sup> At first it sounds very strange, but it is nevertheless true that from now on our moral community in some sense will have to consist more of the still unborn than of the living.

In an imagined (anti)apocalyptic situation where a part of humanity would have to be sacrificed in order for humanity to survive, it is not helpful to adopt a humanism that declares "*Fiat justitia, pereat mundus.*" Of course, such a dilemma never occurred to moral philosophers, including Kant.

A consequentialist moral philosophy, in my mind, would be less inappropriate for the suggested apocalyptic dilemma than a principalist ethics. Of course, this consequentialism would have to be phrased in radically negative terms: preventing absolute evil (destruction of entire humanity) at the price of inevitable colossal evil (destruction of a portion of humanity), rather than in terms of producing optimal consequences.

And if we imagine a still more extreme situation, so that the survival of the human species becomes impossible unless almost all of humanity is sacrificed, then I doubt that even consequentialism, no matter how it is defined, would be morally relevant.

In order to underscore the un-humaneness of the choice described in the absolute limit situation I confront God with it. I assume: that humanity

has ruined itself by some catastrophic radiation, biological weapons, artificially provoked genetic change, and so on; that the only exception is a small group of men, women, and children on an island; and that God can enable the continuation of the human species if He spares this small group of that plague, but He can do it only at the cost of destroying all other people. And then I ask what God would do in such a dilemma—would God be a principalist or a consequentialist? Naturally, I imagine only an infinitely good God, not an omnipotent one: if He wished the human species to continue, He would have to destroy almost all of humanity. In such a situation, God would be sure to suffer from the most “unhappy consciousness” possible since He would be forced to choose between absolute evil (complete disappearance of humanity) and almost absolute evil (destruction of almost all humanity).

## Notes

1. What follows is in essence a further elaboration of my views outlined already some thirty years ago in the chapter “Dialectics of Alienation and the Utopia of De-alienation” of my book *Between Ideals and Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), the original of which was published in Serbo-Croatian in 1969. I would like to quote my conclusion from that book:

But today the greatest and most important form of alienation is encountered not in the production of means to life, but rather of means to death. We are all witness to super-alienation: human creations are now revolving around the earth, threatening not only individuals or classes, but humanity as a whole. The apocalyptic “revolt of things” against their creator—the anthropological form of the Last Judgment—is in sight. A cynic might say that the definitive disappearance of alienation may coincide with its irreversible triumph (34).

Those ideas are still further developed in the section “In the Shadow of Apocalypse” of my book *Perestroika: From Marxism and Bolshevism to Gorbachov* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988), in the section “Between Triumph and Apocalypse” of my book *The Fall of Yugoslavia: Why Communism Failed* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1997), and finally in the section “Humanic?” of my book *Serbia: The Democratic Revolution* (Buffalo: Humanity Books, 2003).

2. To avoid a misunderstanding, I should say that post-postmodernism ought to include all-important lessons drawn from the postmodernist critique of modernism. In other words, post-postmodernism cannot be a simple return to modernism and its alleged solid foundation.

3. Hans Jonas, “The Imperative of Responsibility,” in *Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 43.

## KILLING IN VIETNAM: WHAT HAVE WE DONE TO OUR SOLDIERS?

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Lt. Col. Dave Grossman

### “NOBODY UNDERSTOOD”: AN INCIDENT IN A VFW HALL

As I conducted interviews for this study in a VFW hall in Florida in the summer of 1989, a Vietnam vet named Roger started talking about his experiences over a beer. It was still early in the afternoon, but down the bar an older woman already began to attack him. “You got no right to snivel about your little pish-ant war. World War Two was a real war. Were you even alive then? *Hub?* I lost a brother in World War Two.”

We tried to ignore her; she was only a local character. But finally Roger had had enough. He looked at her and calmly, coldly, said: “Have you ever had to kill anyone?”

“Well no!” she answered belligerently.

“Then what right have *you* got to tell *me* anything?”

There was a long, painful silence throughout the VFW hall, as would occur in a home where a guest had just witnessed an embarrassing family argument.

Then I asked quietly, “Roger, when you got pushed just now, you came back with the fact that you had to kill in Vietnam. Was that the worst of it for you?”

"Yah," he said. "That's half of it."

I waited for a very long time, but he didn't go on. He only stared into his beer. Finally I had to ask, "What was the other half?"

"The other half was that when we got home, nobody understood."

## WHAT HAPPENED OVER THERE, AND WHAT HAPPENED OVER HERE

As discussed earlier, there is a profound resistance to killing one's fellow man. In World War II, 75 to 80 percent of riflemen did not fire their weapons at an exposed enemy, even to save their lives and the lives of their friends. In previous wars nonfiring rates were similar.

In Vietnam the nonfiring rate was close to 5 percent.

The ability to increase this firing rate, though, comes with a hidden cost. Severe psychological trauma becomes a distinct possibility when psychological safeguards of such magnitude are overridden. Psychological conditioning was applied *en masse* to a body of soldiers, who, in previous wars, were shown to be unwilling or unable to engage in killing activities. When these soldiers, already inwardly shaken by their inner killing experiences, returned to be condemned and attacked by their own nation, the result was often further psychological trauma and long-term psychic damage.

## OVERCOMING THE RESISTANCE TO KILLING: THE PROBLEM

But for the infantry, the problem of persuading soldiers to kill is now a major one. . . . That an infantry company in World War II could wreak such havoc with only about one seventh of the soldiers willing to use their weapons is a testimony to the lethal effects of modern firepower, but once armies realized what was actually going on, they at once set about to raise the average.

Soldiers had to be taught, very specifically, to kill. "We are reluctant to admit that essentially war is the business of killing," Marshall wrote in 1947, but it is readily enough admitted now.

—Gwynne Dyer, *War*

At the end of World War II the problem became obvious: Johnny can't kill.

A firing rate of 15 to 20 percent among soldiers is like having a literacy rate of 15 to 20 percent among proofreaders. Once those in authority realized

the existence and magnitude of the problem, it was only a matter of time until they solved it.

## THE ANSWER

And thus, since World War II, a new era has quietly dawned in modern warfare: an era of psychological warfare—psychological warfare conducted not upon the enemy, but upon one's own troops. Propaganda and various other crude forms of psychological enabling have always been present in warfare, but in the second half of this century psychology has had an impact as great as that of technology on the modern battlefield.

When S. L. A. Marshall was sent to the Korean War to make the same kind of investigation that he had done in World War II, he found that (as a result of new training techniques initiated in response to his earlier findings) 55 percent of infantrymen were firing their weapons—and in some perimeter-defense crises, almost everyone was. These training techniques were further perfected, and in Vietnam the firing rate appears to have been around 90 to 95 percent. The triad of methods used to achieve this remarkable increase in killing are desensitization, conditioning, and denial defense mechanisms.

## DESENSITIZATION: THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE

The Vietnam era was, of course then at its peak, you know, the kill thing. We'd run PT [physical training] in the morning and every time your left foot hit the deck you'd have to chant "kill, kill, kill, kill." It was drilled into your mind so much that it seemed like when it actually came down to it, it didn't bother you, you know? Of course the first one always does, but it seems to get easier—not easier, because it still bothers you with every one that, you know, that you actually kill and you know you've killed.

—USMC sergeant and Vietnam veteran, 1982, quoted in  
Gwynne Dyer, *War*

This interview from Dyer's book provides an insight into that aspect of our modern training programs that is clearly and distinctly different from those of the past. Men have always used a variety of mechanisms to convince themselves that the enemy was different, that he did not have a family, or that he was not even human. Most primitive tribes took names that translate as "man" or "human being," thereby automatically defining those outside of the tribe as simply another breed of animal to be hunted and killed. We

have done something similar when we call the enemy Japs, Krauts, gooks, slopes, dinks, and Commies.

Authors such as Dyer and Holmes have traced the development of this boot-camp deification of killing as having been almost unheard of in World War I, rare in World War II, increasingly present in Korea, and thoroughly institutionalized in Vietnam. Here Dyer explains exactly how this institutionalization of violent ideation in Vietnam differs from the experiences of previous generations:

Most of the language used in Parris Island to describe the joys of killing people is bloodthirsty but meaningless hyperbole, and the recruits realize that even as they enjoy it. Nevertheless, it does help to *desensitize* them to the suffering of an "enemy," and at the same time they are being indoctrinated in the most explicit fashion (as previous generations were not) with the notion that their purpose is not just to be brave or to fight well; it is to kill people.

## CONDITIONING: DOING THE UNTHINKABLE

But desensitization by itself is probably not sufficient to overcome the average individual's deep-seated-resistance to killing. Indeed, this desensitization process is almost a smoke screen for what I believe is the most important aspect of modern training. What Dyer and many other observers have missed is the role of (1) Pavlovian classical conditioning and (2) Skinnerian operant conditioning in modern training.

In 1904, I. P. Pavlov was awarded the Nobel Prize for his development of the concepts of conditioning and association in dogs. In its simplest form, what Pavlov did was ring a bell just before feeding a dog. Over time, the dog learned to associate the sound of the bell with eating and would salivate when he heard the bell, even if no food was present. The conditioned stimulus was the bell, the conditioned response was salivation: the dog had been conditioned to salivate upon hearing a bell ring. This process of associating reward with a particular kind of behavior is the foundation of most successful animal training. During the middle of the twentieth century B. F. Skinner further refined this process into what he called behavioral engineering. Skinner and the behaviorist school represent one of the most scientific and potentially powerful areas of the field of psychology.

The method used to train today's—and the Vietnam era's—U.S. Army and USMC soldiers is nothing more than an application of conditioning techniques to develop a reflexive "quick shoot" ability. It is entirely possible that no one intentionally sat down to use operant conditioning or behavior

modification techniques to train soldiers in this area. In my two decades of military service not a single soldier, sergeant, or officer, nor a single official or unofficial reference, has communicated an understanding that conditioning was occurring during marksmanship training. But from the standpoint of a psychologist who is also a historian and a career soldier, it has become increasingly obvious to me that this is exactly what has been achieved.

Instead of lying prone on a grassy field calmly shooting at a bull's-eye target, the modern soldier spends many hours standing in a foxhole, with full combat equipment draped about his body, looking over an area of lightly wooded rolling terrain. At periodic intervals one or two olive-drab, man-shaped targets at varying ranges will pop up in front of him for a brief time, and the soldier must instantly aim and shoot at the target(s). When he hits a target it provides immediate feedback by instantly and very satisfyingly dropping backward—just as a living target would. Soldiers are highly rewarded and recognized for success in this skill and suffer mild punishment (in the form of retraining, peer pressure, and failure to graduate from boot camp) for failure to quickly and accurately “engage” the targets—a standard euphemism for “kill.”

In addition to traditional marksmanship, what is being taught in this environment is the ability to shoot reflexively and instantly and a precise mimicry of the act of killing on the modern battlefield. In behavioral terms, the man shape popping up in the soldier's field of fire is the “conditioned stimulus,” the immediate engaging of the target is the “target behavior.” “Positive reinforcement” is given in the form of immediate feedback when the target drops if it is hit. In a form of “token economy” these hits are then exchanged for marksmanship badges that usually have some form of privilege or reward (praise, public recognition, three-day passes, and so on) associated with them.

Every aspect of killing on the battlefield is rehearsed, visualized, and conditioned. On special occasions even more realistic and complex targets are used. Balloon-filled uniforms moving across the kill zone (pop the balloon and the target drops to the ground), red-paint-filled milk jugs, and many other ingenious devices are used. These make the training more interesting, the conditioned stimuli more realistic, and the conditioned response more assured under a variety of different circumstances.

Snipers use such techniques extensively. In Vietnam it took an average of 50,000 rounds of ammunition to kill one enemy soldier. But the U.S. Army and USMC snipers in Vietnam expended only 1.39 rounds per kill. Carlos Hathcock, with ninety-three confirmed sniper kills in Vietnam, became involved in police and military sniper training after the war. He firmly believed that snipers should train on targets that look like people—not bull's-eyes. A typical command to one of his students (who is firing from one hundred yards at a life-sized photograph of a man holding a

pistol to a woman's head) would be "Put three rounds inside the inside corner of the right eye of the bad guy."

In the same way, Chuck Cramer, the trainer for an Israeli Defense Force antiterrorist sniper course, tried to design his course in such a way that practicing to kill was as realistic as possible. "I made the targets as human as possible," said Cramer.

I changed the standard firing targets to full-size, anatomically correct figures because no Syrian runs around with a big white square on his chest with numbers on it. I put clothes on these targets and polyurethane heads. I cut up a cabbage and poured catsup into it and put it back together. I said, "When you look through that scope, I want you to see a head blowing up."

—Dale Dye, "Chuck Cramer: IDFs Master Sniper"

This is all common practice in most of the world's best armies. Most modern infantry leaders understand that realistic training with immediate feedback to the soldier works, and they know that it is essential for success and survival on the modern battlefield. But the military is not, as a rule, a particularly introspective organization, and it has been my experience that those ordering, conducting, and participating in this training do not understand or even wonder (1) what makes it work or (2) what its psychological and sociological side effects might be. It works, and for them that is good enough.

What makes this training process work is the same thing that made Pavlov's dogs salivate and B. F. Skinner's rats press their bars. What makes it work is the single most powerful and reliable behavior modification process yet discovered by the field of psychology, and now applied to the field of warfare: operant conditioning.

## DENIAL DEFENSE MECHANISMS: DENYING THE UNTHINKABLE

An additional aspect of this process that deserves consideration here is the development of a denial defense mechanism. Denial and defense mechanisms are unconscious methods for dealing with traumatic experiences. Prepackaged denial defense mechanisms are a remarkable contribution from modern U.S. Army training.

Basically the soldier has rehearsed the process so many times that when he does kill in combat he is able to, at one level, deny to himself that he is actually killing another human being. This careful rehearsal and realistic mimicry of the act of killing permit the soldier to convince himself

that he has only “engaged” another target. One British veteran of the Falklands, trained in the modern method, told Holmes that he “thought of the enemy as nothing more or less than Figure II [man-shaped] targets.” In the same way, an American soldier can convince himself that he is shooting at an E-type silhouette (a man-shaped, olive-drab target), and not a human being.

Bill Jordan, law-enforcement expert, career U.S. Border Patrol officer, and veteran of many a gunfight, combines this denial process with desensitization in his advice to young law-enforcement officers:

[There is] a natural disinclination to pull the trigger . . . when your weapon is pointed at a human. Even though their own life was at stake, most officers report having this trouble in their first fight. To aid in overcoming this resistance it is helpful if you can will yourself to think of your opponent as a mere target and not as a human being. In this connection you should go further and pick a spot on the target. This will allow better concentration and further remove the human element from your thinking. If this works for you, try to continue this thought in allowing yourself no remorse. A man who will resist an officer with weapons has no respect for the rules by which decent people are governed. He is an outlaw who has no place in world society. His removal is completely justified, and should be accomplished dispassionately and without regret.

Jordan calls this process manufactured contempt, and the combination of denial of, and contempt for, the victim’s role in society (desensitization), along with the psychological denial of, and contempt for, the victim’s humanity (developing a denial defense mechanism), is a mental process that is tied in and reinforced every time the officer fires a round at a target. And, of course, police, like the military, no longer fire at bull’s-eyes; they “practice” on man-shaped silhouettes.

The success of this conditioning and desensitization is obvious and undeniable. It can be seen and recognized both in individuals and in the performance of nations and armies.

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CONDITIONING

Bob, a U.S. Army colonel, knew of Marshall’s study and accepted that Marshall’s World War II firing rates were probably correct. He was not sure what mechanism was responsible for increasing the firing rate in Vietnam, but he realized that somehow the rate had been increased. When I suggested the conditioning effects of modern training, he immediately recognized that

process in himself. His head snapped up, his eyes widened slightly, and he said, "Two shots. Bam-bam. Just like we had been trained in 'quick kill'. When I killed, I did it just like that. Just like I'd been trained. Without even thinking."

Jerry, another veteran who survived six six-month tours in Cambodia as an officer with Special Forces (Green Berets), when asked how he was able to do the things that he did, acknowledged simply that he had been "programmed" to kill, and he accepted it as necessary for his survival and success.

One interviewee, an ex-CIA agent named Duane, who was then working as a high-level security executive in a major aerospace corporation, had conducted a remarkable number of successful interrogations during his lifetime, and he considered himself to be an expert on the process known popularly as brainwashing. He felt that he had been "to some extent brainwashed" by the CIA and that the soldiers receiving modern combat training were being similarly brainwashed. Like every other veteran whom I have discussed the matter with, he had no objections to this, understanding that psychological conditioning was essential to his survival and an effective method of mission accomplishment. He felt that a very similar and equally powerful process was taking place in the shoot-no shoot program, which federal and local law-enforcement agencies all over the nation conduct. In this program the officer selectively fires blanks at a movie screen depicting various tactical situations, thereby mimicking and rehearsing the process of deciding when and when not to kill.

The incredible effectiveness of modern training techniques can be seen in the lopsided close-combat kill ratios between the British and Argentinean forces during the Falklands War and the U.S. and Panamanian forces during the 1989 Panama Invasion. During his interviews with British veterans of the Falklands War, Holmes described Marshall's observations in World War II and asked if they had seen a similar incidence of nonfirers in their own forces. Their response was that they had seen no such thing occur with their soldiers, but there was "immediate recognition that it applied to the Argentineans, whose snipers and machine-gunners had been very effective while their individual riflemen had not." Here we see an excellent comparison between the highly effective and competent British riflemen, trained by the most modern methods, and the remarkably ineffective Argentinean riflemen, who had been given old-style, World War II-vintage training.

Similarly, Rhodesia's army during the 1970s was one of the best trained in the world, going up against a very poorly trained but well-equipped insurgent force. The security forces in Rhodesia maintained an overall kill ratio of about eight-to-one in their favor throughout the guerrilla war. And the highly trained Rhodesian Light Infantry achieved kill ratios ranging from thirty-five-to-one to fifty-to-one.

One of the best examples in recent American history involved a company of U.S. Army Rangers who were ambushed and trapped while attempting to capture Mohammed Aidid, a Somali warlord sought by the United Nations. In this circumstance no artillery or air strikes were used, and no tanks, armored vehicles, or other heavy weapons were available to the American forces, which makes this an excellent assessment of the relative effectiveness of modern small-arms training techniques. The score? Eighteen U.S. troops killed, against an estimated 364 Somali who died that night.

And we might remember that American forces were never once defeated in any major engagement in Vietnam. Harry Summers says that when this was pointed out to a high-ranking North Vietnamese soldier after the war, the answer was "That may be true, but it is also irrelevant." Perhaps so, but it does reflect the individual close-combat superiority of the U.S. soldier in Vietnam.

Even with allowance for unintentional error and deliberate exaggeration, this superior training and killing ability in Vietnam, Panama, Argentina, and Rhodesia amounts to nothing less than a technological revolution on the battlefield, a revolution that represents total superiority in close combat.

## A SIDE EFFECT OF THE CONDITIONING

Duane, the CIA veteran, told of one incident that provides some insight into a side effect of this conditioning or brainwashing. He was guarding a Communist defector in a safe house in West Germany during the mid-1950s. The defector was a very large, strong, and particularly murderous member of the Stalinist regime then in power. By all accounts he was quite insane. Having defected because he had lost favor among his Soviet masters, he was now beginning to have second thoughts about his new masters and was trying to escape.

Alone for days in a locked and barred house with this man, the young CIA agent assigned to watch him was subject to a series of attacks. The defector would charge at him with a club or a piece of furniture, and each time he would break off the attack at the last minute as Duane pointed his weapon at him. The agent called his superiors over the phone and was ordered to draw an imaginary line on the floor and shoot this unarmed (though very hostile and dangerous) individual if he crossed that line. Duane felt certain that this line was going to be crossed and mustered up all of his conditioning. "He was a dead man. I knew I would kill him. Mentally I *had* killed him, and the physical part was going to be easy." But the defector (apparently not quite as crazy or desperate as he appeared to be) never crossed that line.

Still, some aspect of the trauma of the kill was there. "In my mind," Duane told me, "I have always felt that I had killed that man." Most Vietnam veterans did not necessarily execute a personal kill in Vietnam. But they had participated in dehumanizing the enemy in training, and the vast majority of them *did* fire, or knew in their hearts that they were prepared to fire, and the very fact that they were prepared and able to fire ("Mentally I *had* killed him") denied them an important form of escape from the burden of responsibility that they brought back from that war. Although they had not killed, they had been taught to think the unthinkable and had thereby been introduced to a part of themselves that under ordinary circumstances only the killer knows. The point is that *this program of desensitization, conditioning, and denial defense mechanisms, combined with subsequent participation in a war, may make it possible to share the guilt of killing without ever having killed.*

THOU SHALT NOT KILL

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Hermann Hesse

The taming of man, his development from gorilla to civilized being, is a long, slow process. The advances thus far embodied in law and custom are fragile; time and again what seemed to be definitive achievements are negated by an atavistic gnashing of teeth. If we see our provisional goal in the fulfillment of the spiritual imperatives put forth by the spiritual leaders of mankind from Zoroaster and Lao-tzu down, we are compelled to say that present-day mankind is still far closer to the gorilla than to man. We are not yet human, we are on the way to humanity.

A few thousand years ago the religious law of a superior people handed down the fundamental maxim: "Thou shalt not kill." In the spring of 1919 Baron Wrangel, addressing a small international gathering of idealists in Bern, put forward the demand that in future no man must be compelled to kill another man—"not even in the service of his country." And this was felt to be a significant step forward. That is how far we have come. Some thousands of years after Moses formulated the commandment on Mount Sinai, it is restated very cautiously and with restrictions by a small group of well-intended men. Not a single civilized people has embodied it without restriction in its legal code. Everywhere men are still timidly discussing this simplest and soundest of all imperatives. Every student of

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"Thou Shalt Not Kill" (pages 123–27) from IF THE WAR GOES ON by Herman Hesse, translated by Ralph Manheim. Translation copyright © 1971 by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. Copyright renewed 2000 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, LLC.

Lao-tzu, every disciple of Jesus, every follower of Francis of Assisi was centuries in advance of the law and reason of the present-day civilized world.

This would seem to argue against the value of such lofty demands and to demonstrate purely and simply that man is incapable of progress. A hundred other examples might be cited in support of the same contention. Actually, our dismal experience does not detract from the value of such humanitarian imperatives and insights. For thousands of years the maxim "Thou shalt not kill" has been honored and faithfully followed. After the Old Testament came a New Testament; Christ was possible, the partial emancipation of the Jews was possible, mankind produced Goethe, Mozart, and Dostoevsky. At all times there has been a minority of men of good will, who believed in the future and obeyed laws that are inscribed in no secular legal code. And during this horrible war, thousands of men acted in accordance with unwritten higher laws; soldiers treated enemies with mercy and respect, while others suffered imprisonment and torture because they staunchly rejected the duty of murdering and hating.

In order to esteem such men and deeds at their full worth, in order to overcome our doubt in the progress of man from animal to human being, we must live in faith. We must learn to value ideas as highly as bullets or gold pieces, to love possibilities and cultivate them in ourselves; we must gain intimations of the future and of the future in our own hearts.

The "practical" man, who is always right in committee meetings, is invariably wrong outside of his committees. Ideals and faith in the future are always right. They are the one source from which the world draws strength. And anyone who disposes of humanitarian ideas as idle talk and fuzzy thinking or of strivings for the future as literature is still a gorilla and has a long way to go before becoming a man.

A good example that even our "practical" men will appreciate: In his colonial reminiscences Carl Peters relates how he once ordered some African natives to plant coconut palms. The natives refused to do anything so fatiguing and pointless. Peters explained to them that in eight or ten years the trees planted today would be full-grown and reward their pains a hundredfold. Of that the natives were well aware, they were far from stupid. But it struck them as sheer madness that a man should work his fingers to the bone for a reward that would be forthcoming only in ten years. White men had such comical ideas!

It is we men of the spirit, we poets, seers, fools, and dreamers, who plant trees for later. Many of our trees will not thrive, many of our seeds will be sterile, many of our dreams will turn out to be mistakes, delusions, and false hopes. Where is the harm in that?

But there is no point in trying to make practical men out of poets, calculators out of believers, organizers out of dreamers. During the war, artists, writers, and intellectuals were transformed into soldiers and farm

workers. Now efforts are being made to “politicize” them and turn them into organs of material change. That is like trying to drive a nail with a barometer. Because today the times are hard, it is thought that all energies should be directed to our daily needs, every will harnessed to the practical work of the hour.

But though the need cries out to high heaven, fuss and bustle are useless. The world will not progress any faster if you turn poets into street speakers and philosophers into cabinet ministers. It will progress wherever men do what they were made for, what their nature demands of them, what they consequently do willingly and well. And even if practical men regard such things as luxuries, concern for the future, faith in man as he will be some day, and groping play with remote possibilities will always be every bit as important as political organization, the building of houses, and the baking of bread.

And we believers in the future will never cease to concern ourselves with the old commandment: “Thou shalt not kill.” Even if some day all the legal codes in the world forbid killing (inclusive of killing in war and killing by executioners), that imperative will never lose its cogency. It is the foundation of all progress, all human development. We kill so much! Not only in our stupid battles, the stupid street fighting of our revolution, our stupid executions—no, we kill at every step. We kill when circumstances force us to drive gifted young people into occupations for which they are not suited. We kill when we close our eyes to poverty, affliction, or infamy. We kill when, because it is easier, we countenance or even pretend to approve of atrophied social, political, educational, and religious institutions, instead of resolutely combating them. Just as a consistent socialist looks on property as theft, so those who hold consistently to our kind of faith regard all contempt for human life, all cruelty and indifference, as tantamount to killing. And not only things present can be killed, but the things of the future as well. A great deal of future in a young man can be killed by a little mordant skepticism. Everywhere life is waiting, everywhere the future holds promise, and we see so little, we trample so much. We kill at every step.

In respect to mankind we all of us have but one task. To help mankind as a whole make some small advance, to better a particular institution, to do away with one particular mode of killing—all these are commendable, but they are not my task and yours. Our task as men is this: in our own unique personal lives, to take a short step on the road from animal to man.



## PART III

### FACING THE DARKNESS WITHIN: ON OUR SPIRITUAL CRISIS

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## SEARCHING FOR SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND DIVINE WHOLENESS

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Carl Gustav Jung

What is remarkable about Christianity is that in its system of dogma it anticipates a metamorphosis in the divinity, a process of historic change on the “other side.” It does this in the form of the new myth of dissension in heaven, first alluded to in the creation myth in which a serpent-like antagonist of the Creator appears, and lures man to disobedience by the promise of increased conscious knowledge (*scientes bonum et malum*). The second allusion is to the fall of the angels, a premature invasion of the human world by unconscious contents. The angels are a strange genus: they are precisely what they are and cannot be anything else. They are in themselves soulless beings who represent nothing but the thoughts and intuitions of their Lord. Angels who fall, then, are exclusively “bad” angels. These release the well-known effect of “inflation,” which we can also observe nowadays in the megalomania of dictators: the angels beget with men a *race of giants* which ends by threatening to devour mankind, as is told in the book of Enoch.

The third and decisive stage of the myth, however, is the self-realization of God in human form, in fulfillment of the Old Testament idea of the divine marriage and its consequences. As early as the period of primitive

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Christianity, the idea of the incarnation had been refined to include the intuition of "Christ within us." Thus the unconscious wholeness penetrated into the psychic realm of inner experience, and man was made aware of all that entered into his true configuration. This was a decisive step, not only for man, but also for the Creator—Who, in the eyes of those who had been delivered from darkness, cast off His dark qualities and became the *sum-mum bonum*.

This myth remained unassailably vital for a millennium—until the first signs of a further transformation of consciousness began appearing in the eleventh century. From then on, the symptoms of unrest and doubt increased, until at the end of the second millennium the outlines of a universal catastrophe became apparent, at first in the form of a threat to consciousness. This threat consists in giantism—in other words, a hubris of consciousness—in the assertion: "Nothing is greater than man and his deeds." The otherworldliness, the transcendence of the Christian myth was lost, and with it the view that wholeness is achieved in the other world.

Light is followed by shadow, the other side of the Creator. This development reached its peak in the twentieth century. The Christian world is now truly confronted by the principle of evil, by naked injustice, tyranny, lies, slavery, and coercion of conscience. This manifestation of naked evil has assumed apparently permanent form in the Russian nation; but its first violent eruption came in Germany. That outpouring of evil revealed to what extent Christianity has been undermined in the twentieth century. In the face of that, evil can no longer be minimized by the euphemism of the *privatio boni*. Evil has become a determinant reality. It can no longer be dismissed from the world by a circumlocution. We must learn how to handle it, since it is here to stay. How we can live with it without terrible consequences cannot for the present be conceived.

In any case, we stand in need of a reorientation, a *metanoia*. Touching evil brings with it the grave peril of succumbing to it. We must, therefore, no longer succumb to anything at all, not even to good. A so-called good to which we succumb loses its ethical character. Not that there is anything bad in it on that score, but to have succumbed to it may breed trouble. Every form of addiction is bad, no matter whether the narcotic be alcohol or morphine or idealism. We must beware of thinking of good and evil as absolute opposites. The criterion of ethical action can no longer consist in the simple view that good has the force of a categorical imperative, while so-called evil can resolutely be shunned. Recognition of the reality of evil necessarily relativizes the good, and the evil likewise, converting both into halves of a paradoxical whole.

In practical terms, this means that good and evil are no longer so self-evident. We have to realize that each represents a *judgment*. In view of the fallibility of all human judgment, we cannot believe that we will always

judge rightly. We might so easily be the victims of misjudgment. The ethical problem is affected by this principle only to the extent that we become somewhat uncertain about moral evaluations. Nevertheless we have to make ethical decisions. The relativity of "good" and "evil" by no means signifies that these categories are invalid, or do not exist. Moral judgment is always present and carries with it characteristic psychological consequences. I have pointed out many times that as in the past, so in the future the wrong we have done, thought, or intended will wreak its vengeance on our souls. Only the contents of judgment are subject to the differing conditions of time and place and, therefore, take correspondingly different forms. For moral evaluation is always founded upon the apparent certitudes of a moral code which pretends to know precisely what is good and what evil. But once we know how uncertain the foundation is, ethical decision becomes a subjective, creative act. We can convince ourselves of its validity only *Deo concedente*—that is, there must be a spontaneous and decisive impulse on the part of the unconscious. Ethics itself, the decision between good and evil, is not affected by this impulse, only made more difficult for us. Nothing can spare us the torment of ethical decision. Nevertheless, harsh as it may sound, we must have the freedom in some circumstances to avoid the known moral good and do what is considered to be evil, if our ethical decision so requires. In other words, again: we must not succumb to either of the opposites. A useful pattern is provided by the *neti-neti* of Indian philosophy. In given cases, the moral code is undeniably abrogated and ethical choice is left to the individual. In itself there is nothing new about this idea; in pre-psychology days such difficult choices were also known and came under the heading of "conflict of duties."

As a rule, however, the individual is so unconscious that he altogether fails to see his own potentialities for decision. Instead he is constantly and anxiously looking around for external rules and regulations which can guide him in his perplexity. Aside from general human inadequacy, a good deal of the blame for this rests with education, which promulgates the old generalizations and says nothing about the secrets of private experience. Thus, every effort is made to teach idealistic beliefs or conduct which people know in their hearts they can never live up to, and such ideals are preached by officials who know that they themselves have never lived up to these high standards and never will. What is more, nobody ever questions the value of this kind of teaching.

Therefore the individual who wishes to have an answer to the problem of evil, as it is posed today, has need, first and foremost, of *self-knowledge*, that is, the utmost possible knowledge of his own wholeness. He must know relentlessly how much good he can do, and what crimes he is capable of, and must beware of regarding the one as real and the other as illusion. Both are elements within his nature, and both are bound to come

to light in him, should he wish—as he ought—to live without self-deception or self-delusion.

In general, however, most people are hopelessly ill-equipped for living on this level, although there are also many persons today who have the capacity for profounder insight into themselves. Such self-knowledge is of prime importance, because through it we approach that fundamental stratum or core of human nature where the instincts dwell. Here are those preexistent dynamic factors which ultimately govern the ethical decisions of our consciousness. This core is the unconscious and its contents, concerning which we cannot pass any final judgment. Our ideas about it are bound to be inadequate, for we are unable to comprehend its essence cognitively and set rational limits to it. We achieve knowledge of nature only through science, which enlarges consciousness; hence deepened self-knowledge also requires science, that is, psychology. No one builds a telescope or microscope with one turn of the wrist, out of good will alone, without a knowledge of optics.

Today we need psychology for reasons that involve our very existence. We stand perplexed and stupefied before the phenomenon of Nazism and Bolshevism because we know nothing about man, or at any rate have only a lopsided and distorted picture of him. If we had self-knowledge, that would not be the case. We stand face to face with the terrible question of evil and do not even know what is before us, let alone what to pit against it. And even if we did know, we still could not understand “how it could happen here.” With glorious naïveté a statesman comes out with the proud declaration that he has no “imagination for evil.” Quite right: *we* have no imagination for evil, but evil *has us in its grip*. Some do not want to know this, and others are identified with evil. That is the psychological situation in the world today: some call themselves Christian and imagine that they can trample so-called evil underfoot by merely willing to; others have succumbed to it and no longer see the good. Evil today has become a visible Great Power. One half of humanity battens and grows strong on a doctrine fabricated by human ratiocination; the other half sickens from the lack of a myth commensurate with the situation. The Christian nations have come to a sorry pass; their Christianity slumbers and has neglected to develop its myth further in the course of the centuries.

Those who gave expression to the dark stirrings of growth in mythic ideas were refused a hearing; Gioacchino da Fiore, Meister Eckhart, Jacob Boehme, and many others have remained obscurantists for the majority. The only ray of light is Pius XII and his dogma. But people do not even know what I am referring to when I say this. They do not realize that a myth is dead if it no longer lives and grows.

Our myth has become mute, and gives no answers. The fault lies not in it as it is set down in the Scriptures, but solely in us, who have not

developed it further, who, rather, have suppressed any such attempts. The original version of the myth offers ample points of departure and possibilities of development. For example, the words are put into Christ's mouth: "Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." For what purpose do men need the cunning of serpents? And what is the link between this cunning and the innocence of the dove? "Except ye become as little children . . ." Who gives thought to what children are like in reality? By what morality did the Lord justify the taking of the ass which he needed in order to ride in triumph into Jerusalem? How was it that, shortly afterward, he put on a display of childish bad temper and cursed the fig tree? What kind of morality emerges from the parable of the unjust steward, and what profound insight, of such far-reaching significance for our own predicament, from the apocryphal logion: "Man, if thou knowest what thou dost, thou art blessed; but if thou knowest not, thou art accursed and a transgressor of the law"? What, finally, does it mean when St. Paul confesses: "The evil which I would not, that I do"? I will not discuss the transparent prophecies of the Book of Revelation, because no one believes in them and the whole subject is felt to be an embarrassing one.

The old question posed by the Gnostics, "Whence comes evil?" has been given no answer by the Christian world, and Origen's cautious suggestion of a possible redemption of the devil was termed a heresy. Today we are compelled to meet that question; but we stand empty-handed, bewildered, and perplexed, and cannot even get it into our heads that no myth will come to our aid although we have such urgent need of one. As the result of the political situation and the frightful, not to say diabolic, triumphs of science, we are shaken by secret shudders and dark forebodings; but we know no way out, and very few persons indeed draw the conclusion that this time the issue is the long since-forgotten *soul of man*.

A further development of myth might well begin with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, by which they were made into sons of God, and not only they, but all others who through them and after them received the *filiatio*—sonship of God—and thus partook of the certainty that they were more than autochthonous *animalia* sprung from the earth, that as the twice-born they had their roots in the divinity itself. Their visible, physical life was on this earth; but the invisible inner man had come from and would return to the primordial image of wholeness, to the eternal Father, as the Christian myth of salvation puts it.

Just as the Creator is whole, so His creature, His son, ought to be whole. Nothing can take away from the concept of divine wholeness. But unbeknownst to all, a splitting of that wholeness ensued; there emerged a realm of light and a realm of darkness. This outcome, even before Christ appeared, was clearly pre-figured, as we may observe *inter alia* in the experience of Job, or in the widely disseminated Book of Enoch, which

belongs to immediate pre-Christian times. In Christianity, too, this meta-physical split was plainly perpetuated: Satan, who in the Old Testament still belonged to the intimate entourage of Yahweh, now formed the diametrical and eternal opposite of the divine world. He could not be uprooted. It is therefore not surprising that as early as the beginning of the eleventh century the belief arose that the devil, not God, had created the world. Thus the keynote was struck for the second half of the Christian aeon, after the myth of the fall of the angels had already explained that these fallen angels had taught men a dangerous knowledge of science and the arts. What would these old storytellers have to say about Hiroshima?

## LOVE AND CRUELTY: A BLUE SPOT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HURRICANE

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Philip Paul Hallie

It just so happened that early on I discovered perhaps the greatest nonfiction book of the nineteenth century in America, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Somehow that was the beginning of understanding the facts of life for me. The facts of life had to be cruel because life was joyously cruel for me (we were victoriously cruel: we Allies won World War II and as a kid I kept bringing the Silvercup bread home). The involvement with this, in my opinion, one of the greatest works of the nineteenth century in America, taught me a few things about this crushing and grinding. The first thing *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* taught me is that cruelty is not to be understood in terms of its origins—etymological, word origins. In Latin, it comes from *crudus*, which means bloody or bleeding or something physical.

What I learned from Frederick Douglass was that cruelty—this crushing and grinding, this destruction of the soul—need not involve bloodshed at all, not at all. Let me read you an advertisement in the New Orleans *Bee*: “Negroes for sale. A Negro woman, twenty-four years of age, and her two children, one eight and the other three years old. Said Negroes will be sold separately or together as desired. The woman is a good seamstress. She will be sold low for cash or exchanged for groceries. For terms apply to

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Matthew Bliss and Company, 1 Front Levy.” It fit the laws. It fit the customs. It fit a way of life. Quiet, peaceful, genteel.

The second thing Frederick Douglass’s life and times and my other work in slavery taught me was just about as important: that if you want to find out what cruelty is or when it’s happening, don’t ask the victimizer. Don’t ask the one who’s doing it. Don’t get zeroed in on the victimizer. Ask the victim.

Maya Angelou says there is the unknowing majority, “it,” and the knowing minority, “you.” *Victims know when they’re being cruelly treated and victimizers are usually the unknowing majority.* The sword does not feel the wound. The flesh on which that sword strikes does. The empirical, skeptical authority for cruelty is the victim and the victim alone. There are moments when the victim—by various devices of custom, law, habit, or uses of language—is blinded or numbed to the actual humiliation and crushing that is happening, but those moments are rare, much more rare than people think. The victim is the authority on it. When Frederick Douglass talked about his life as a slave struggling for freedom (and not only struggling from a slavery technically but also afterward in all sorts of ways), he was speaking as the authority.

Finally, I learned from Frederick Douglass that there is a power relationship between the victim and the victimizer, between the unknowing majority and the knowing minority. This relationship makes cruelty happen the way a spark jumps from a higher to a lower voltage in an appropriate conductive atmosphere. When you have a majority with overwhelming economic, political, or legal power and a minority with much less power, cruelty can happen, and it does. What Frederick Douglass taught me throughout the whole of his book, but especially in the last three-quarters of his expanded version of *Life and Times*, was that only when the victim equalizes the power in some sense does the spark stop leaping the gap—because there is no gap to leap. This equalization is like my being able to walk down the streets because I would kick people in the groin if they came too close, or like my firing at people in the last world war.

In Frederick Douglass’s case, it was an entirely different mode of power. It was a whole range, a symphonic range, the powers that I’m not going to go into now. It began with fighting Covey the slavebreaker. The range of his idea of power was so great that after Frederick’s emancipation, he went back to his old master and saw him just before the master died. His power was immense at that moment. He was loving. These are the three things that I learned about this crushing and grinding.

I did my book on cruelty and then I noticed this law of mimicry. You mimic what interests you. You imitate what you love, the way I wanted to imitate Frederick Douglass. I noticed that I hadn’t really studied the kind of cruelty that I had somewhat experienced when I was in Europe in the last world war: namely, the experience of the concentration camps, the *facts*,

because I am a skeptic. I started looking into the medical experiments. I spent a lot of time studying just exactly how white-coated doctors would cut gypsy, Jewish, or Jehovah's Witness children's eyeballs out or parts of their rib cages or members of their bodies—often without anesthesia. I learned how they would put children and adults in hot water and cold water, and low air pressure and high air pressure experiments, and so on.

I studied those experiments, and a curious thing started happening because of this law of mimicry. I found that I wanted to kill the victimizers. I was going to imitate them; or I felt as if I was the victim and I was imitating *them*. But worst of all, I found that when I wasn't feeling like killing the victimizers, or wasn't feeling identified or thinking of my children as lying on these dissecting tables, I was indifferent—and that was the worst. I was as indifferent as the monsters who were doing and ordering it done. Ask my poor wife, Doris. I became one of the indifferent monsters myself, when I wasn't becoming a fantasizing murderer or victim.

One day, I was sitting in my office reading about these horrors and I couldn't bear it anymore. I really didn't want to live. I didn't want to kill anybody as I went out. I just wanted to go. The world was simply unbearable. And so I thought I'd take a look at some of the things I'd been trained in the Army to investigate, mainly the story of the French Resistance. As I opened a page and started reading, my cheeks began itching. I reached up, and my cheeks were covered with tears. I was reading about the little village of Le Chambon, the way it saved lives without killing or hurting or hating anybody. I realized that this might be my salvation, that by becoming interested in it—assimilating it, imitating it, mimicking it—I might be saved.

This village of love gradually taught me about this force, which I found so clearly exemplified in my own life and so much more vastly exemplified in the life of Frederick Douglass than I even knew then. (It took me years to understand just exactly the range of power in Frederick Douglass.) I learned that his kind of reaction to cruelty by love, by hospitality, by kindness—this has its own power. It has its own power. And then the range of power Frederick Douglass had that opened up to me. It was not clear to me before—the power of love. Their gray little church that they had in this tiny little mountain village was perched on a plateau on a high mountain in south-eastern France. This tiny little church was like a battery, charged with love, charged with such a power of love that the Germans were disarmed in the literal sense. Their arms weren't relevant. It was like a disarmingly innocent child. The village wanted to save the Germans as much as it wanted to save the kids. They wanted to save the Germans from doing more evil.

I wrote *Let Innocent Blood Be Shed* and became converted, a different person for awhile. Then I said to myself, "Wait a minute, something in your heart resents the village." They didn't stop Hitler. They did nothing to stop Hitler. A thousand Le Chambons would not have stopped Hitler. It took

decent murderers like me to it. Murderers who had compunctions, but murdered nonetheless. The cruelty that I perpetrated willingly was the only way to stop the cruel march that I and others like me were facing.

How could I begin to deal with cruelty in my mind? I had, on the one hand, the idea that you could, first of all, stop its march and then harness its power by force, by equalizing power, and, on the other hand, by love. How could I take these two such different forces and turn them against the cruelty I was growing to hate, especially after my work in Le Chambon, with such an intensity that it was unclouded by any skeptical doubts?

The result was a vision, and this is where I now stand. I feel—in line with everything that has been said so far in our conference—that we are in the condition of cruelty. We are in the food web. We eat whatever we can eat and whatever can eat us eats us. We are in the food web. We are killers, if only of plants, and we are killed. Yet in the food web, there is room. There are spaces in the food web.

We had a hurricane in Middletown, Connecticut a couple of years ago. We watched it uproot our favorite chestnut tree. Then, all of a sudden, the sky was blue overhead. Even little birds were just living it up, up there—singing, doing all sorts of acrobatics, and having a wonderful time—right there in the middle of the hurricane. Around this blue was a vast raging hurricane. But in the blue, peace: beauty and space—room.

George Santayana, in one of his sonnets, says, “As in the midst of battle, there is room for thoughts of love.” In the midst of that blind, agonizing, destructive force, there were those little birds. My mother, when she talked about the kids who were killed in the Holocaust, called them “little *Faygeleh*”—little birds, whirling inside the blue.

I feel now that we can push back and expand the blue, the eye, but it's the hurricane we're in. Don't forget it. We can push back the eye. Some people don't push it back very far. For instance, according to the writer Albert Camus, Heinrich Himmler used to come in the back door of his house after work, and he would come in quietly. He'd come in very quietly and not make a lot of noise. Why? Because he didn't want to wake up his canary. He was the murderer of millions, but he loved his canary. Then there was Frederick Douglass, and there was the village of Le Chambon. There was the blue. All of us had it, this moment, this space of blue. We have to make room for love, even the most vicious, destructive of us—perhaps especially the most vicious and destructive. Some people make a larger space for blue, for peace, for love. The making of that space takes power as well as love. It takes force of will. It takes assertion and commitment. The people of Le Chambon made a large space in the middle of the hurricane, and so did Frederick Douglass.

I mentioned at lunch today that I don't like ethics anymore. I've really had it with ethics. Why have I had it, after three or four decades of working

in it? Why am I retiring? I can get good Social Security, that's one of the reasons. But another reason I am retiring is that I feel ethics is irrelevant. Let's put it this way: it's a means. A means of joy. Joy, the joy Maya Angelou is always expressing in every line she writes. The joy of living itself. There are even the joys we have in pain, because we still have that tiny thread of the joy of living. If you do not have joy, then your ethics is a blinding, puritanical, dried up, self-destructive and life-destructive force. If you do have that joy, your life is as wide as you can make it.

I am convinced that we can express a larger need for joy, and a larger capacity for joy than we have ever done. Each of us, every next moment, can do so. The way we can do this is to get interested in people who have it. To get interested, not in the evil ones, not in the ones with that tiny eye of the hurricane that looks so tiny, like Himmler's, because it's made so tiny by the vastness of the storm around it. Not that way, but by being interested in—if you can, by falling in love with—people who love the lives of others as much as they love their own lives. That's an unbelievable mystery for me. I'm from Chicago—how can I believe it—that there are people who love the lives of others as much as they love their own lives? But if you love such lovers or at least are interested in them enough, you begin to mimic them. You begin to love life the way they do and you begin to love the larger life, the life of those who are beyond you and connected with you. You begin to love them with passion and lucidity. By choosing such people to care for, we choose life, the breath of life. And in that choice, we will find joy, the very breath of joy, the joy of living together.



## GOODNESS AT THE HEART OF BEING

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An Interview with Rabbi Michael Lerner

*Predrag Cicovacki:* How do you approach the issues of good and evil?

*Rabbi Michael Lerner:* I start by turning to the Bible, turning to Torah, and trying to understand the human experience in part through its framework. The first things I come across in the Bible in relationship to the human experience, or to this world, is in the first chapter of Genesis that when God has finished her creation and she looks out at the world and says: “Behold, it was very good (*tov m’od*).” The notion that the world is “very good,” that there is goodness at the center, at the core of being is not real popular today and I want to talk about my own experience and intellectual development in trying to understand that.

I’ll actually begin with another reference to the Bible about goodness. There is a psalm that is read every *Shabbat*. It is a song that the psalmists had dedicated to *Shabbat*—*Mizmore shir l’om ha-Shabbat*, a song for the Sabbath Day—*Tov l’hodot l’adonai u’l’zameir l’shimcha elyon, l’haggid baboker chasdecha v’emunatcha baleilot*. “*Tov*” is the first word of the psalm. Good. Good. Then it goes on—*l’hodot l’Adonai; U’l’zameir l’shimcha elyon*—to sing praises to the transformative power of the universe and to give thanks to the transformative power of the universe and to sing praises to your name; you were on high. *L’Haggid baboker chasdecha*—to pronounce your loving kindness, *chesed*, your goodness, your love in the morning. *Vemunatcha baleilot*—your faithfulness, your steadiness in the night. The Rabbi commenting on this psalm said, well, first of all, what’s this difference between morning and night. They said, well, the psalm really refers to “in the morning,” which means when things look bright, it’s good to give thanks because your faithfulness, your *chesed*, your love and kindness, is clearly showing through. But in the night, in the dark times, in

the times when things aren't so good, when it's very difficult, that's when *emunah*, faith, is necessary, when there is a faithfulness that is necessary.

I want to give a reading of this particular psalm. It says that the good is what you can see when you are able to give thanks, that is, when you are able to be in a place of thankfulness for the world, when you are able to not only appreciate the *chesed*, the love that is present in the good times, but to have faith in the evening; then and only then can you recognize the fundamental reality of the universe, the goodness of it. So the *tov*, you want to get to good, then here's the path. The path is to focus in on this way, to give thanks, acknowledge love and the presence of love when it's there and to have faith in the moments when it's not.

Now, I have to tell you that growing up in a Jewish family—I was born in 1943 and a good part of my family was wiped out in the Holocaust—goodness was not the main theme I heard as a child. On the contrary, I heard the word “evil” from a very young time, and the focus on the evil was the dominant discourse not only in my family but in my community. Evil was a major reality of the universe, I was told, and that evil was really a central fact governing the reality of people's lives. It was an understandable perception. Significant parts of my family had been murdered, and so for my mother, my father, for their families, the tragedy was very deep. Yet, I have to say that even from an early age, there was a conflict for me because in my actual experience of the world even as a young child, I was seeing some incredible amounts of beauty all around me. I was seeing the beauty in the physical world, I was seeing the joyfulness in other kids that I was with. I was seeing many acts of kindness that were being brought by my parents, my teachers and other adults. So, it was hard to put that together in conceptual framework with the dominant word that was continually being used to describe what the larger world was like: namely, filled with evil.

I remember particularly being struck when I came across a prayer which was an essential Jewish prayer that was based on a quote from Isaiah which said: “Holy, holy, holy the Lord of Hosts, the Earth is full of her glory, or of her majesty.” This was surprising, for I had the impression the world was filled with evil, not with God's glory or majesty. It was very striking to hear these allusions in a religious tradition to some view other than pure evil because it seemed as if the debate that was dominant in my family and in the families of virtually everyone else I knew in the Jewish world. And then, as I grew up a little bit more, this became true for the larger American society as well, about where all this evil was coming from and how it was possible for evil to triumph and how come there was so much evil in the world.

*P. C.:* What were some of the answers to these questions to which you were exposed while you were growing up?

*M. L.*: The debate raged most intensely in the Jewish community and then in various intellectual communities and there was a variety of different approaches. One of the approaches was to say, well, this Holocaust evil comes from Christians, that's where it comes from, from the non-Jews. The non-Jews are just filled with this evil. They have been doing this to us for the past 2000 years and, finally, it has gotten to a point where it got out of control as the Holocaust; but, really, the Holocaust is simply a culmination of the hatefulness of non-Jews. They can't stop killing us. They are offended by anything decent in the human race and so the non-Jews have this in the core of their being. Then, of course, the question became: Why did God create so many of them? This was one of the difficult issues to figure out, if this was core to their being.

Another less global explanation of the Holocaust was that this was not only the perversity of the non-Jewish world, it was specifically the perversity of Germany; there was this particular society and it had developed a particular perversity inside itself, and then this society had gotten too much power. I think there still is in many people I know a belief that there is something wrong with the German character and the German national entity. Even in a very progressive community where I'm the Rabbi in San Francisco, it still wouldn't be acceptable for me to buy a German car. There is still this sense that there is some kind of intrinsic thing about Germans that made it happen. So again, the evil now is localized in a more particular national structure rather than in the entirety of the Christian world.

As I was growing up, I learned about a much more complex explanation that talked about a certain kind of character structure: there some people who had peculiar kinds of character structure that made them particularly amenable to acting in ways that were susceptible to the attractions of evil and acting in evil ways. The character structure argument was developed in a book called *The Authoritarian Personality*, by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. This book was actually popular in the post-war years. Again, I found it troubling to think that, whatever this evil force was, it was explainable in terms of a character structure because I still didn't understand the nature of that character structure. How come some people have that character structure? Was this some perversion? Was the character structure sufficient to explain evil? Why was there this character structure?

The most prevalent although the least refined of the explanations, but nevertheless really the most prevalent explanation which was that evil had suddenly descended into the world in 1933, just as it had occasionally descended before. And, then, it as if magically disappeared in 1945. This view was particularly accepted among people who ran in and out of my household, because I was growing up in a family that was both Zionists but also very involved in American politics.

I remember having this argument in my bedroom when I was 17 with Adlai Stevenson who was a guest at our house and who had decided to use my bedroom to take a nap. I was insistent that he would talk to me about Germany: Why in 1960 he was one of the advocates of the reunification of Germany when there had never been any serious attempt to figure out what this evil was that happened in Germany and to figure out a way to make sure that it wouldn't happen again. So I was very much against the reunification of Germany at that point and was asking him for an explanation of this. He was one of many people whose explanation basically was that this evil had gone away in 1945, that once America had conquered it, it had been cured and now we needed to mobilize people for a new crusade against evil. This new crusade was the anti-Communist crusade. It even looked as if many of the people who were Nazis in the last manifestation of evil had suddenly become quite good and were to be employed by our CIA and by our nuclear agencies in order to become part of a new kind of struggle and that they've changed. Apparently that happened in some mysterious way which I couldn't get anybody to explain to me.

This view temporarily receded in popularity in the 1960s when the United States became involved in murdering some three million Vietnamese. There were groups of us who began to say that we don't know exactly what this evil thing is, but it seems like it might be applicable to our society as well. Then many of us started realizing that evil may have something to do with the social and psychological conditions which have developed in the society and which lead people to act in these particular kinds of ways. By the 1960s there was already developing a whole industry dealing with the problem of evil. At one point you could call it the Holocaust industry, and at another point you could say it was the industry invested in showing that there is no evil like our evil. We tried to distinguish between the two by insisting that our society is not like the Holocaust, but it seemed to fit this word "evil" pretty closely. We were trying to historicize the evil in various ways, to understand the historical and specific roots of it, the psychological, social and economic roots of the behavior that we saw was leading people to engage in mass murder and justify it to themselves in a whole variety of ways which seemed to have no rational justification.

*P. C.:* What were some of the implications of this new approach?

*M. L.:* The main implication was that many intellectuals came to see that the evil that we were seeing in the world was changeable, that it wasn't ontological, that it wasn't built into the structure of society, that it was something that could be overcome and transformed. Very quickly, however, lots

of people who were engaged in that movement got disappointed. Their puzzlement was that, once we were pointing out how irrational the arguments were for the Vietnam war and for the murders that were being committed in its name, how come more people weren't joining us. There was a big struggle that went on in the late 1960s and those of us who were social change activists at the time, about that question. Why weren't more people joining us? Amazingly, some of the same issues started to reappear in our movement that had been part of earlier discussions about the nature of evil transformed into this context. There were those of us who said, well, let's try to find some explanation in circumstances that are changeable, and there were many who were not convinced that there is an ontological condition which is explaining that.

Now, there was one group—the Weathermen—that became very important because those who supported the war or those who wanted to support the mainstream way of doing business in American society focused on them a great deal. The Weathermen supported some sort of violence and their argument was this: The reason why Americans were not able to respond to rational arguments about the nature of American imperialism is because Americans were benefiting from what they called “white skin privilege.” There was something about that white skin privilege which had so deeply sunk into the psychic structure of American society that people could never respond to the suffering and pain of others. Because of this white skin privilege the consciousness of the American people was fundamentally screwed up, and the only way that it could be repaired would be for the rest of the peoples of the world to succeed in the liberation struggle and eventually take over America: Whatever were America's historical and psychological roots originally, they had sunk to such a deep level that it was a fact about the world that cannot be changed. Therefore, there was no point in trying to appeal to the American public to change its views on anything as they were locked into white skin privilege and would always be supporters of imperialism and the special privileges that it brought to the American public at the expense of the rest of the world. They had no capacity for empathy, that is, they had lost the capacity for empathy, and this was the triumph, internally for them, of an evil being.

The proponents of this view didn't have a good explanation for why some of us didn't go that route, but for those who hadn't gone that route, the only hope was to identify with peoples of the third world and the struggle against white skin privilege by recognizing there was no possibility of winning people over through argument, or through empathic connection, but only through violent struggle.

That was one route. The other one—that was in my view equally requiring an ontological explanation of the evil—was the view that there is evil in the world, but it's not rooted in these psychological structures which

are inherent in all white people. It's not that evil is inherent in our psychological structure, but rather that any of us could be taken over by it at any moment. Therefore, what we need to do is, instead of working externally on social change, we need to work on ourselves, to build up the internal barriers to the way that we ourselves can become evil. The classic statement of this was the famous logo that said: "I have met the enemy and it is us." The enemy *was* us, meaning that we were potentially always in the state of internalizing whatever was destructive, and that consequently the appropriate response was to build our internal defenses against the possibility of evil coming in to us at any particular moment. The way to do that was then a realm of various practices that ranged from: let's build a communal life together, let's focus on our psychological development, let's go through various spiritual growth processes, etc., to protect ourselves from this eruption that might happen because we are indistinguishable from all those who are doing the killing in Vietnam and so forth. It could happen to us too, but we can protect ourselves from it by an internal struggle.

*P. C.:* What was your position in all this confusion? Were you torn between these two approaches?

*M. L.:* I noticed that in our discussions of that time there is something very similar to what had happened before, that is, in the discussions of the Holocaust. Instead of focusing on what were the sources of evil in the social, psychological, and historical specifics of a social order that generates the behavior, there was an ontologizing of evil but with the added elements of the possibility of protection from it by a particular kind of internalizing practice. So, I was watching all of this and wasn't convinced. Then I decided, together with a group of other people who were social change activists at that point, to try to do a concrete empirical study of American society, just as had been done in some form by Horkheimer and Adorno about authoritarian personalities, but using somewhat different tools.

I engaged with a group of social change activists, psychologists, union activists, and social theorists in creating an organization that we called the Institute for Labor and Mental Health. Our goal was to study the psychodynamics of American society and to understand through that study what was going on that made it possible for so many people to not respond to what we thought was obviously rational argumentation and to not respond to the highest elements within themselves.

Our study went on and it continues to go on for the past twenty-five years, but what we discovered was striking because we came at this question with a set of assumptions about the nature of reality that basically

I could sum up in the following way. We were typical intellectual, liberal elitists in that we thought we had a certain set of needs: spiritual needs, needs for a moral life, and so forth. We set out to try and figure out what were the other needs that the rest of the population had since they obviously weren't hearing the same tune we were hearing, so there had to be something wrong and perverse there. We basically had the assumption that most intellectuals have or use as a defense mechanism, namely that the rest of the population doesn't have these same needs, that really what counts for most people is their material needs, and their ethical and spiritual needs are not very central. And what was striking to us in our study was that we began to discover that the assumption we had in the way we had been trained and socialized as social scientists, psychologists, and theorists, and we began to recognize that the people that we were talking to, ordinary Americans, had the exact same spiritual and ethical needs that we had. In fact, it was the frustration of those ethical and spiritual needs which was leading them to behaviors that at first we thought were totally irrational and could not be understood except through the imposition of categories like evil.

*P. C.* So, what was your study indicating as the source of evil? And how could you figure out why evil is so overwhelmingly present in our society?

*M. L.* Let me answer your questions by offering you a slightly more complicated story of what we discovered. The work we did was with middle income working people. We saw over ten thousand persons in the course of our study. It was very broad. It was funded by the National Institute for Mental Health. People told us the following story about their lives. Most of them spend most of their waking hours in the world of work and in the travel to and from the world of work. They learned a certain way of viewing the universe and that way was that there is a bottom line. This bottom line was to maximize wealth and power. If they want to advance themselves, they have to advance the firm, the corporation, the group they are working for, and in so doing they have to learn that the fundamental truth of the world is: everybody is out for himself or herself. Looking out for number one is the common sense of the society, and in fact it was the name of the most popular book of the 1980s. People bought it because they felt they didn't know how to do it well enough, and they wanted to learn the techniques because they could clearly see that the people who were the most successful were the ones that were really good at that. With looking out for number one came a view about others, well expressed in one book called *Winning through Intimidation* and other books of this sort. This view was beautifully captured by my teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel at the Jewish Theological Seminary in the 1950s when he said that the ethics of America could be summed up in the following phrase: "Suspect your neighbor as

yourself.” That is to say, everybody was out to advance himself or herself, that you were an island in isolation, and unless you defended yourself against their advancing themselves at your expense they would do so. The only way you could defend yourself is by advancing yourself at their expense. This became the common sense of a particular social order, and as it became the common sense of that particular social order, more and more people viewed the world, including what was philosophically appropriate through that framework, that the world really is this way.

What they were learning was how to see everybody as a potential enemy, a group that could replace them or hurt them in some way, and saw the other person primarily in terms of: “How can you be of use to me in advancing my own career or my own path?” In the process of doing that, they were internalizing a world view, a way of thinking about reality, and that world view then would make certain kinds of language and certain kinds of assumptions about the nature of reality; it even made certain kinds of philosophical approaches to the world to seem intuitive, or obvious, or corresponding to our ordinary language. On the basis of a rational expectation of what will return to you was one instantiation of a central formula of the market place that people didn’t necessarily learn in this language, but they had internalized. This formula is: I am a rational maximizer of self-interest and, as a rational maximizer of self-interest, the rational thing to do is to take care of myself by engaging in contracts with others, either formal or informal, and interchange with others to the extent that I believe that I will get back a reasonable return on my investment of energy with the other person.

So here you have a people increasingly seeing friendships in those terms, and decreasingly seeing friendships in terms of an element that had been there in the past, namely, *solidarity*. The value of solidarity was expressed through the saying: “I am with you whether or not you will be able to return my investment in time and energy.” As that decreased, people who were sicker or older became more and more scared in this society because, the sicker you are or the older you are, the less other people can make an assumption that it’s worth their while to put the investment of time and energy based on the likelihood that you will respond and give back an equal amount. You may, for instance, not be around long enough, or you may not be strong enough to be able to respond to that. People report feeling more and more isolated as they grow older, or less and less cared for as they get sicker; just at the moments when in traditional societies there seems to be much more solidarity, there is decreasing solidarity in this society. This spiritual crisis manifests itself also most intensely in loving relationships, because increasingly—as the ethos marketplace saturates and permeates people’s consciousness—more and more relationships are framed within the context of marketplace consciousness in which people are seen as valuable to the extent that they can satisfy your desires or needs. There’s a

marketplace of relationships that go from one to another, like going to a supermarket. I go from one relationship to another to another, taste this one, taste that one, taste the next one, see which one tastes good and then, since there are lots of opportunities, try more and more and more.

This goes on for a variety of people for different lengths of time, but eventually many people decide that they are tired of this and want to get the goodies that will come from a committed relationship. But when I enter into a committed relationship, the commitments are very often either consciously or unconsciously based on something like this. I need somebody who will satisfy my needs, and I'm looking for the person amongst those people I know who is likely to fall for me in the short run.

Now, what's the problem with all this? Well, the problem is, as people make relationships within this context with the market consciousness shaping people's choices, more and more people come to recognize that their partners are also rational maximizers of self-interest. How else could you be in this social order if you have been socialized appropriately? And as rational maximizers of self-interest, there's a tremendous insecurity that starts to develop in relationships. Now, I'm not just talking about the 50% of marriages that end up in divorce; I'm talking about the other 50% that don't end up in divorce also, because what happens is that more and more people begin to feel that they can't really be sure that their partner will not at some point in his or her life be able to make a better deal. If they can cut a better deal, then why as rational maximizers of self-interest would they possibly be staying in a relationship that wasn't going to satisfy as many of their needs as this other relationship that could potentially satisfy more of their needs? Well, knowing that that is the case and knowing that virtually everybody in this society has been socialized in this way to be a rational maximizer of self-interest, how can you then count on commitments when commitments are made precisely within the same framework? I'm making this commitment with you because, amongst those people who are likely to fall for me within the short run, you will satisfy more of my needs than anybody else, but there may be a time in my life when somebody else will satisfy more of my needs. Then, of course, unless I'm crazy by the standards of rational maximization of self-interest, I will go with that one. Not that everybody does this, it's that knowing you are in that social order generates a tremendous amount of insecurity even amongst people for whom it never plays out in this way.

*P. C.:* Who is responsible for this horrifying formula of the rational maximization of self-interest? Who are you blaming for this approach?

*M. L.:* I'm not putting anyone down for this; I'm not criticizing anybody. All I'm telling you is that it is almost impossible to live in this kind of a social

order without thinking this way. It's almost impossible, but I want to emphasize the word "almost." It's almost impossible, because there actually is a different way of thinking and we call it a spiritual way of thinking. This spiritual way of thinking says that there is a different way of orienting toward other human beings. I can look at you and see you not primarily in terms of what I can get from you, what you will deliver, but I can see you as an embodiment of the sacred, as a being who desires to be cared for and loved and cherished, just because of who you are.

This way of thinking is very different because in it I am not calculating the return on my investment with you. I am seeing you as fundamentally valuable and the time and energy spent with you as fundamentally valuable because you are a valuable being for in and of yourself. And this spiritual consciousness, when applied to the rest of the world, means that, looking at the physical world, I no longer look at it primarily in terms of: "I wonder if I can turn this into a commodity which I could sell or in some other way make use in this physical world." Rather, it means looking at the world from the standpoint of wonder and radical amazement at the grandeur of creation.

These are not terms that you hear a lot in this social order; they are not the terms of public discourse on wonder and radical amazement at the grandeur of creation. They belong to a different frame, a spiritual frame, but they speak to a deep hunger and need in people, a set of spiritual needs that have been fundamentally repressed and denied in this social order, and the repression and the denial of them has had dramatic and devastating consequences for the past several hundred years. One of the consequences has been that they have allowed for the emergence of social movements that are extremely hurtful and destructive. Let me first use an example. In the Western world in the past one hundred years, there has been a resurgence of right wing political discourse that essentially says there is a spiritual crisis in the world, and that that spiritual crisis is causing a great deal of pain. That part of the discourse of the right wing force that I'm talking about is entirely true and accurate. There really is a spiritual crisis in the world, and it is very deep and very real.

I don't mean to criticize everybody on the right, I don't want to generalize in that way. A typical move, though not everyone on the right does it, is that many right wing forces then move in the following direction. They claim that our spiritual crisis is due to the ethos of selfishness that has been introduced into our society by special interest groups. These special interest groups are the groups that only care about their own self-interests; they have introduced that ethos of self-interest, and have thereby undermined the otherwise existing social solidarity that would be there. What the right then does is to point to whoever happens to be the demeaned other of the society at that time. In the last thirty or forty years of American society, such

groups are usually those that sought to rectify a previous history of discrimination against themselves by asking for a transformation of the social order in such a way that they be included and given a fair chance. But that attempt to rectify a history of unfair discrimination against a particular group is identified as the special interests seeking its own narrow selfish interests; the reason why we don't have social solidarity is because these groups are looking at just for themselves. We come to first and foremost African Americans, secondly, gays and lesbians, immigrants of various sorts, Jews, labor movement, and you can fill this in the same analysis in other countries with different "who are the others," because different countries will fill this in different ways. If you go to England, it may be the Indians who have come there, or the Pakistanis who have come there. If you go to France, it will be the people from Algeria, the Muslims. In each country who's filling this role is different, but the structure of the argument works the same way.

These "others" are the problem and the reason why this works is because there really is a spiritual crisis and because there really is an ethos of selfishness and materialism. I've always found it quite amazing that the right is the one that articulates this because the right is the same force which politically in our world plays the primary role of being a champion of the ethos of selfishness and materialism in the world of work. Because in the world of work the right consistently maintains that every individual and every corporation ought to be pursuing its own self-interests without regard to the social consequences for others and stalwartly opposes any attempt by the society to restrict corporate power in the name of some form of social responsibility. Now you might ask: How could a political force that champions the ethos of selfishness and materialism in the world of work and refuses to allow the society to impose restraints on corporations pursuing their own self-interests without regard to the consequences for "others" be the same force that is championing the pain that people experience in their private lives when this ethos which they have been living with all day in the world of work is brought home, as it inevitably will be? How do they get away with this? The answer is they get away with it because the liberal and progressive forces in this society don't have a clue about the spiritual crisis. They have no understanding whatsoever about the spiritual crisis in the society and, in fact, almost always cede this issue to the right, that is they say: "Spiritual crisis, oh, that's just code word for . . .," and then they point to the sexism, racism, homophobia that has existed in the right's analysis of the spiritual crisis. What I'm trying to explain is that, no, it's not just code words; there is a deep, deep spiritual crisis in the society and it is rooted in this fundamental set of human needs which are not being met.

*P. C.:* Let's agree that you are right and there is indeed a deep spiritual crisis. Where do we go from there?

*M. L.:* If that is the case, then I think we can move from there to an explanation of some of the forms of evil that have triumphed in the past several hundred years, because these forms of evil—many of the forms of evil that we are talking about—are ones which can be understood and explained. The problem with the liberal political agenda when it dealt with evil is that it tried to explain these in terms of the deprivation of material needs and said, well, people are acting in these ways because their material needs have been deprived. But it had very little understanding of the spiritual dimension of human needs and hence could not account for what seemed to be otherwise inexplicable behavior on the part of people who were responding to hateful agendas. Why were they responding to hateful agendas? Because those hateful agendas were articulating some framework for understanding a deep pain that people were in, and there was no alternative explanation being put forward in a progressive or a hopeful way.

I have been trying to talk about a form of evil and an explanation for a dimension of evil in the contemporary world that seems to me to at least broaden our understanding of the ways in which one would go with an account which is a non-ontological account of evil, that is, an account that tries to explain conditions which generate the evil.

I want to step back from the level that I've been talking to go to a broader level and say that I am aware that I have restricted evil in my discussion to that kind of evil that is unnecessary pain inflicted on others by human beings. I haven't attempted to address the issues of what people talk about when they sometimes apply the word evil to natural events as, for example, the earthquake of Lisbon.

So sitting in my jail cell yesterday with my co-conspirator, Cornell West, we were talking this stuff out. He then said to me: "Yes, but Michael, all of this hopeful vision that you have that can explain various forms of evil, isn't it at the end defeated by the possibility of death and the death of individuals and the suffering of individuals?" My response is: "No, because it's only defeated if it turns out that the highest good is the survival of the individual at all costs. In a social order in which social solidarity is broken down, each of us seems to fall back into a way of viewing the world in which the only good is satisfaction of our own individual needs. But the maximization of my own individual ego is not an intrinsic value. Spiritual traditions in fact have been trying to teach us that there are other goods. It may be good, for instance, to move toward transcending the ego and recognizing ourselves as part of a community, or some larger force in the development of the consciousness and goodness of the universe, that transcends our individual selves. In this case the personal death may not be the total refutation of my optimism."

Cornell said in response: “Yes, but what about the whole human race? What if we find that the ice age comes back and we are all wiped out? Won’t that be then a good argument against?”

Our arguments went on and on like that, but what I want to say in reply is that, ultimately, we came down to acknowledging that the notion that the world is potentially movable in a way that would make it possible for us to say, “*tov*,” and that God would say: “Yes, behold, it is very good.” Fundamentally, this is a metaphysical stance. It is a stance that will never be ultimately verified through any set of experiences in the world because there is no set of experiences that will finally verify that path. There will always be the potential of an alternative discourse of what will happen in the future in which there will be a triumph of death and destruction and hurtfulness, but, similarly, there is no set of empirical conditions that will be sufficient to verify the view that there is an evil that transcends the historical possibilities of transformation that we can act on in the world to transform the world in various ways. This is what we call *tikkun* in Hebrew. *Tikkun* is the Hebrew word for healing and transformation. There is no set of empirical observations that would ever be sufficient to empirically prove that *tikkun* is impossible and that evil will triumph. In the end, it becomes a matter of “*tov*,” if you want to get to a vision of the good. It is first to respond to *l’hodot l’Adonai*, to give praises to the transformative power of the universe. *L’zameir l’Shimcha*—To sing praises to you. *L’Chaggid baboker chasdecha*—To say in the morning, to affirm in the light moments, the good moments, the love and in the dark moments to affirm with faithfulness that love can triumph. There will be no ultimate determination of this question on ontological grounds; it will ultimately and always be a faith commitment. I’ve made my own commitment in a way that I was trying to describe.

*P. C.*: Thank you.



## WE ARE PRODIGALS IN A DISTANT LAND: AN ESSAY ON THOMAS MERTON

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John P. Collins

The purpose of this paper is to render a modest response to the query by St. Augustine: “Whence then comes evil?”<sup>1</sup> I will approach this task by examining the insights of Thomas Merton contained in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*.<sup>2</sup> This work deals with the roots of evil within the individual, rather than to offer a graphic treatise of the massive forces of evil so prevalent in our contemporary society. *New Seeds of Contemplation* is not meant to be a primer for evil—quite the contrary; as the book describes so beautifully, those seeds or “germs of spiritual vitality . . . come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men.”<sup>3</sup> My thesis, then, is to begin with fallen man, an alienated man trying to journey away from the forces of evil within himself. As Merton describes the journey: “We are prodigals in a distant country, the ‘region of unlikeness’, and we must seem to travel far in that region before we seem to reach our own land (and yet secretly we are in our own land all the time!).”<sup>4</sup>

Published in 1962, *New Seeds of Contemplation* is a revision of Merton’s earlier book published in 1949 and entitled *Seeds of Contemplation*. The first book was extremely popular and was translated into thirteen languages. However, Merton was not happy with parts of it and subsequently added and revised some chapters, and wrote a new Author’s Note to the revised book. Between the period of 1949 and 1962, Merton evolved as a spiritual person and writer. The infamous epiphany on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, KY, on March 18, 1958 was a turning point for Merton as he now realized he was, in fact, part of the world.<sup>5</sup> His previous writings, including *Seeds of Contemplation*, reflected Merton’s distance from the world and a propensity for a dogmatic point of view. *New Seeds of*

*Contemplation* reflected Merton's emerging perception of the "experiential and existential."<sup>6</sup> The key difference between the two Mertons, if you will, is his evolution from a unity with others "discovered in prayer" to a "grasp of solidarity with other men brought to prayer, so that unity can be experienced at a deeper level."<sup>7</sup>

The treatise on evil by Merton in *New Seeds of Contemplation* can be examined through three broad themes: (i) the false-true self, (ii) disunion and division leading to hatred, and (iii) hell as a locus of hatred and a culmination of man's alienation from self and others.

"He that loveth not abideth in death."<sup>8</sup> This scriptural passage goes to the very heart of Merton's centerpiece in his exposition of evil. Merton explains in Thomistic terms that "evil is not a positive entity but the absence of perfection that ought to be there."<sup>9</sup> God did not create evil, nor can any thing be an obstacle to our union with God except ourselves who create or cause the evil by maintaining "our separate, external, egotistic will."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, our alienation from God is a referral of all things to a false self which is "our god, and we love everything for the sake of this self."<sup>11</sup> The false self is the external self or the superficial self "which we commonly identify with the first person singular."<sup>12</sup> This is the self that we show the world and perhaps many times to our family and friends. Merton explains that this "superficial self is not eternal, not spiritual"; it is "the mask, the disguise of that mysterious and unknown 'self' whom most of us never discover until we are dead."<sup>13</sup>

In the process of worshipping the idol of "our imaginary self" we corrupt things and relationships so that the imprint of evil in fact enhances our "attachment to our illusory self."<sup>14</sup> Some have identified the body with "false self," but "the body is neither evil nor unreal."<sup>15</sup> The body should not be misused or desecrated by a division of the soul against the body as if the body was evil and the soul was good. This false division of body and soul leads to the destruction of the person and "there is no longer a living, subsisting reality made in the image and likeness of God."<sup>16</sup>

We came into the world with the mask of the false self and subsequently we are "shadowed by an illusory person." Merton continues: "A life devoted to the cult of this shadow is what is called a life of sin." We believe the "fundamental reality of life" is the "egocentric desires" for "power, honor, knowledge" and "pleasures" which consume our daily existence. As man persists with the false self he becomes, in fact, alienated from himself.

Merton cautions against confusing the "*person*—the spiritual and hidden self, united with God—and the *ego*, the exterior, empirical self, the psychological individuality which forms a kind of mask for the inner and hidden self." The outer self is only a veiled veneer which terminates with death whereas the inner self has no end. The outer self can, in fact, "enjoy much and accomplish much but in the end all its possessions, joys, and

accomplishments are nothing, and the outer self is, itself, nothing: a shadow, a garment that is cast off and consumed by decay." The *ego*, according to Merton, "is a self-constructed illusion that 'has' our body and part of our soul at its disposal because it has 'taken over' the functions of the inner self, as a result of what we call man's 'fall'." The effects of the fall have caused man's alienation "from his inner self which is the image of God."<sup>17</sup>

The facade of the false self leads to division, to man distancing himself from others because of a perceived superiority attained through power, knowledge, or the accumulation of material possessions. The man living in division "is living in death," and upon his death the man "will discover that he long ago ceased to exist because God . . . will say to him: 'I know you not'." Merton extends the concept of division to the disease of spiritual pride which is the "worm in the hearts of all religious men." When something is accomplished by these men who know it "to be good in the eyes of God," it is destroyed because of their claim of values which, in fact, "belong to God." As the religious man continues with his habits of "fortitude and self-sacrifice," he tells himself: "I am a saint." He is different, he is divided from others; in fact, he may be admired by others. There is a fire inside him and "he burns with self-admiration and thinks: 'It is the fire of the love of God'." There is more praying, more fasting, more writing of books, the building of hospitals and churches and the start of many organizations. He thinks the inward feeling of satisfaction and the warm feeling "is the unction of the Holy Spirit . . . (I am not like other men)." The evil of the religious man's self-satisfaction is limitless as he performs acts in the name of God. No longer can he obey or tolerate the commands of a superior and he views himself as a prophet, or a messenger of God, or a man with a mission to reform the world. As a result, the religious man "is capable of destroying religion and making the name of God odious to men."<sup>18</sup>

Hatred is a symptom of division as it "refuses the pain of reunion." As Merton explains:

Hatred is the sign and the expression of loneliness, of unworthiness, of insufficiency. And in so far as each one of us is lonely, is unworthy, each one hates himself. Some of us are aware of this self-hatred, and because of it we reproach ourselves and punish ourselves needlessly. . . . Others, who are less conscious of their own self-hatred, realize it in a different form by projecting it onto others.<sup>19</sup>

Those who hate try to remedy disunion by destroying all who are not with us. This resonates with a recent statement by a senior State Department official: "You're either 100% with us or 100% against us."<sup>20</sup> A way to seek peace is "the elimination of everybody else but ourselves."<sup>21</sup> The hatred of

others and ourselves prompts us to see evil in others but not in ourselves. Subsequently, we can easily pass off the “burden of guilt” to someone else, which allows us to minimize our own sins and exaggerate “the faults of others.” It is an easy next step to scapegoat others with “whom we have invested all the evil in the world.” If we can destroy these evil people, “conflict will cease, evil will be done with, there will be no more war.” The scapegoating and blaming others is dangerous “when it operates in the vague, fluid, confused and unprincipled opportunism which substitutes in the West for religion, for philosophy and even for mature thought.”<sup>22</sup>

The projection of evil onto others and scapegoating leads to war. Merton emphasizes the hypocrisy of our western culture whereby we “pray for peace” and insert peace slogans on our stamps, while at the same time build massive weapons of war to annihilate the evil ones. Man’s disunity and propensity for hatred in this world will create fear of others and subsequently war to annihilate “the other evil one.” Merton does, however, admit that our prayers for peace can include “the simultaneous use of ordinary human means to accomplish a naturally good and justifiable end.” But the massive accumulation and use of weapons will invite annihilation of ourselves.<sup>23</sup>

The hatred in the world will continue in hell. Merton defines hell as a place “where no one has anything in common with anybody else except the fact that they all hate one another and cannot get away from one another and from themselves.”<sup>24</sup>

Merton states that “‘hell’ can be described as a perpetual alienation from our true being, our true self, which is in God.”<sup>25</sup> All persons in hell not only hate others but hate what they see in themselves—“selfishness and impotence, agony, terror and despair.”<sup>26</sup> Sinners, as a reflection of their false self, “hate everything, because their world is necessarily full of betrayal, full of illusion, full of deception.”<sup>27</sup> Hell is thus a culmination of our earthly illusions of false self, disunity from ourselves and others. Hatred and evil are the outward manifestations of these divisions.

Merton describes the devil as the chief architect of evil and hell. The chapter entitled “The Moral Theology of the Devil” attempts to explain the whole system of theology and philosophy of the devil. The main tenant of the system is that “created things are evil, that men are evil, that God created evil and that He directly wills that men should suffer evil.” Within this system of theology God wills and plans the misery and suffering of mankind. Man as the sinner is predestined within this environment so that God “would have an opportunity to manifest His justice.” With the enactment of God’s justice the Law is “fulfilled” and there is an absence of mercy which explains why God is not present in hell.<sup>28</sup>

Man as a sinner is a great opportunity for those “who preach most vehemently about evil and the punishment of evil, so that they seem to

have practically nothing else on their minds except sin,” and “are really unconscious haters of other men.” According to Merton, this theology of the devil is not theology but magic which uses faith as an energy to exert “a persuasive force even on God Himself and bend His will to one’s own will.” This “sorcery” of the holy “medicine men” instills within one a faith which will render us the “charmed life.” After finding disillusionment with this false faith, man will then turn to the “Totalitarian Mass Movement that will pick us up on the rebound and make us happy with war, with the persecution of ‘inferior races’ or of enemy classes, or generally speaking, with actively punishing someone who is different from ourselves.”<sup>29</sup> This mindset leads to division among men and enhances the feeling that we are “absolutely right” and those against us are “absolutely wrong.”<sup>30</sup> “You’re either 100% with us or 100% against us.”

As prodigals in a distant land, our return “to God and ourselves” begins with the alienated self. God respects our “ego” and “outer self” and allows us to perform the necessary functions which cannot be fulfilled yet by the “inner self.” We must realize that this “outer self” will soon “disappear into nothingness,” and we must not believe that the “cultivation of this ego” is the reason for existence; it is rather an illusion fired by the cult of the so-called “successful personality.” The return to our “inner self”—our “true self”—our “hidden identity,” is through humility. Merton states: “the way to reality is the way of humility which brings us to reject the illusory self and accept the ‘empty’ self that is ‘nothing’ in our eyes and in the eyes of men, but is our true reality in the eyes of God.”<sup>31</sup>

Merton thus suggests that as prodigals in a distant land far from our true inner self we have become, in fact, alienated from ourselves and others fueling the flames of hatred. To return from the distant land we must seek unity because man “is the image of One God.”<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, our flight from disunity and separation will lead us “to unity and peace in the love of other men.”<sup>33</sup>

In the final chapter of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton sounds an optimistic note when he reminds us once again that the “external self” is “not by nature evil” and, “as long it does not isolate itself in a lie, it is blessed by the mercy and the love of Christ . . . The mask that each man wears may well be a disguise not only for that man’s inner self but for God, wandering as a pilgrim and exile in His own creation.”<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, the evils of the twentieth century are a blot on the world and its creatures, but there is hope if we watch and then listen. Let us listen carefully to Merton:

[T]he Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear

His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance. We do not have to go very far to catch echoes of that game, and of that dancing. When we are alone on a starlight night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our hearts; or when, like the Japanese poet Basho we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash. . . . [They all] provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance.<sup>35</sup>

It is the misunderstanding and distortion of God's creation that leads to "despair" and "sadness" and evil. But, as Merton concludes, the "reality of things" cannot be tarnished by misguided actions of man because "the joy of the cosmic dance . . . is always there." We are all invited by God to join in this dance.

## Notes

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1943), p. 137.

2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961). Merton has referred to twentieth-century evil in other works. He wrote an essay entitled, "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann," published in Merton's *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 45–49. See also his poems "The Guns at Fort Knox," "Chant to Be Used in Procession around a Site with Furnaces," and "Original Child Bomb," published in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 228–29, 345–49, and 293–302.

3. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 14.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 280–81.

5. For a detailed account of Merton's development in this relevant period, see Donald Grayson's book *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985). See also books by William H. Shannon, *"Something of a Rebel": Thomas Merton, His Life and Works—An Introduction* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1997), and *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* (New York: Penguin, 1981).

6. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*, p. 145.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

8. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 77.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 125. It is instructive to note that Merton was influenced early in his development as a Catholic by the works of St. Thomas Aquinas through the influence of Dan Walsh. Question 49 in the *Summa Theologiae* addresses the question of "the cause of evil." St. Thomas states in a reply to the cause of evil: "We cannot but hold that in some way every evil has a cause. . . . Now to be a cause belongs only to a good; nothing can be a cause except in so far as it is a being, and every

being as such is a good. . . . Evil has no formal cause, rather is it instead a privation of form. Likewise it has no final cause, rather is it instead a privation of direction to a due end; and the quality of being is shown not only by an end, but also by a means to it. Yet evil has an efficient cause, but it is one that acts indirectly, not directly. . . . The truth is that the only cause evil has is incidental, and in this way a good is the cause of evil . . . and evil admits of an indirect cause merely. And so it is impossible to take it back to anything that is the direct cause of evil. . . . There is no going back indefinitely in the series of causes of evil. Instead all evils are to be resolved into some cause which is good, and from which evil results indirectly.” St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. and ed. Thomas Gilby, O.P. (New York: Blackfriars in conjunction with McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), pp. 133–47.

10. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 21.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 7.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., p. 22.
15. Ibid., p. 26.
16. Ibid., p. 27.
17. Ibid., pp. 279–80.
18. Ibid., pp. 48–51.
19. Ibid., pp. 72–73.
20. Quoted from Michael Elliot, “Retaliation,” *Time* (Special Issue, September 24, 2001, 40–47), p. 44.
21. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 75.
22. Ibid., pp. 112–14.
23. Ibid., pp. 119–20.
24. Ibid., p. 123.
25. Ibid., note on p. 7.
26. Ibid., p. 123.
27. Ibid., p. 125.
28. Ibid., pp. 90–91.
29. Elliot, “Retaliation.”
30. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 93–96.
31. Ibid., pp. 280–81.
32. Ibid., p. 52.
33. Ibid., p. 78.
34. Ibid., pp. 295–96.
35. Ibid., pp. 296–97.



## RECOVERING PARADISE: THOMAS MERTON ON THE SELF AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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Thomas Del Prete

Thomas Merton does not approach the problem of evil either as a systematic theologian or as an analytic philosopher. He is neither a biblical scholar in the strict sense, nor is he by any means an ethicist. In fact, Merton regarded ethics with some measure of uneasiness, concerned for the potential they contained to “devalue and reject life,” that is, to put abstraction above people.<sup>1</sup>

Merton would shun the notion of spiritual master as a way of introducing him. For all his writing on the spiritual life, he was suspicious of an overly self-conscious or zealous approach to it. Merton regarded inward spiritual pride as misleading and ineffectual in terms of saving our souls as an outward show of virtue. Accordingly, he wrote to those interested in how he lived: “The spiritual life is something that people worry about when they are so busy with something else they think they ought to be spiritual.”<sup>2</sup> While teaching in the monastery, he asserted: “There’s no point in becoming spiritual—[that’s] a waste of time.”<sup>3</sup> To those who suspected him of being a practitioner of Zen, he coolly advised: “If you see a meditation, kill it.”<sup>4</sup>

Merton renounced the man who wrote a best-selling autobiography with the same name as his. The secular idea of success carried no more weight for him than its spiritual counterpart. In explaining his response to someone who had sought his contribution to a kind of Chicken Soup for the Soul book focused on how to be a success, Merton wrote: “I swore I had spent my life strenuously avoiding success. . . . If I had a message to my contemporaries, I said, it was surely this: Be anything you like, be madmen, drunks, and bastards of every shape and form, but at all costs avoid one thing: success.”<sup>5</sup>

When asked to describe his life, Merton responded: "What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breath."<sup>6</sup> This is not a mocking or evasive statement. It is rather one through which he dissolves the duality of mind and self, or self and the image of self. It is Merton confounding what are largely social expectations or social constructions about who he is, and, by implication, who we think that we are. At the same time and more importantly, it is Merton emphatically affirming the value of his own existence and of life itself. He is asking us to shed our notions of how we think we should be so that we might find and discover the value and meaning of our ordinary irreducible naked selves.

Merton speaks to us, then, with an existentialist and contemplative voice. But he is also a spiritual theologian, using concepts to refer to what only experience can reveal to us, and deeply Christian in his contemplative orientation. Thus Merton says that at the point of discovering our inmost naked self, we actually discover our unique Christ-self. This Christian mystical perspective is the ground of his thought and underlies all that I will say.

Our inmost naked self does not belong to us—it is not an object that we can control. To talk about it as if apart from us is a contradiction—it is the living whole of us, "the very self that finds."<sup>7</sup> Merton tells us that it is in the discovery of our inmost naked self that true freedom begins. True freedom is "the freedom that cannot be guaranteed by the death of anybody else. The point where you become free not to kill, not to exploit, not to destroy, not to compete, because you are no longer afraid of death or the devil or poverty or failure."<sup>8</sup> Put differently, we are free from evil in proportion as we are free from our dependence on something outside ourselves, or some assertion of ourselves, or some visible sign of our power as a way of affirming or convincing ourselves of the value of our existence.

This is a central point, and I will spend the rest of my essay exploring it by referring to Merton's commentary on the biblical origins of the knowledge of good and evil, and to aspects of his understanding of what it means to be a person and a member of the human community.

In the archetypal Judeo-Christian story, Adam and Eve acquire knowledge of good and evil at the expense of their residence in paradise. As Merton explains it, the realms of knowledge and paradise correspond essentially to two different states of being.<sup>9</sup> The state of knowledge is characterized by a consciousness of separateness from God. In this dualistic state, there is a tendency to view good and evil in terms of the self, not God, and a corresponding tendency to exercise the will in favor of self-affirmation. Typically the self develops a dependence on things outside itself, primarily material and temporal concerns, as a source of self-affirmation. There is a seductive version of this inclination that results in spiritual pride. It is precisely when we become convinced of our own virtuousness, moral

rectitude and spiritual advancement, that is, when we are “puffed up” or full of ourselves, that we enter most into the realm of illusion, and are subject, so to speak, to the influence of the devil.

In the state of separation from God that comes with the knowledge of good and evil we are prone to construct an illusory self that seeks to affirm itself in various ways, often over and against others. We live enslaved to the power of illusion. Mistaking this false, exterior and egotistical self with the real thing, we live in our separateness with a divided heart.

In contrast, the state of paradise is a realm of innocence, purity of heart, and unity with God. Innocent, the self is free from self-deception. Pure of heart, it is emptied of the illusions of the false and separate self, and thus opened to the love of God. As Merton says: “purity of heart establishes [us] in a state of unity and emptiness in which [we are] one with God.”<sup>10</sup>

The state of paradise is thus another way of referring to our whole naked ordinary selves, the self that lives and breathes and, it should be said, dies. This ordinary self is charged with life, meaning, freedom and love. It is undivided, not fabricated, not an effort at self-assertion and self-affirmation. Merton puts it succinctly: “Paradise is simply the person, the self, but the radical self in its uninhibited freedom. The self no longer clothed with an ego.”<sup>11</sup> Paradise is the discovery of the true ground of our personality at the inmost center of our being. And there we find “a freedom beyond freedom, an identity beyond essence . . . a consciousness that transcends all division, all separation.”<sup>12</sup>

Is this paradise state attainable? Merton says that it is, since it is no more or less than who we really are, and, furthermore, that attaining it should be the goal of one’s education. But he also acknowledges that the attainment entails a considerable struggle. We must paradoxically become who we are, and that process of becoming requires some understanding of how the knowledge of good and evil can either mislead or guide us. As Merton points out,

Once we find ourselves in the state of “knowledge of good and evil” we have to accept the fact and understand our position, see it in relation to the innocence for which we were created, which we have lost and which we can regain. But in the meantime it is a question of treating knowledge and innocence as complementary realities.<sup>13</sup>

We cannot become innocent unless we are willing to confront the force of illusion in our selves, empty ourselves of it, and thus become open to the greater power of God’s love at the center of our lives.

Viewed in light of his understanding of paradise, it seems safe to conclude that, for Merton, evil derives from the freedom to be and act

untrue to ourselves.<sup>14</sup> In other words, it is the freedom to act as a partial and divided rather than a whole self, the freedom to use the knowledge of good and evil to perpetuate the state of separation from God, the freedom to weave an illusory life. The problem of evil thus becomes a problem of knowing and accepting who we are on the deepest level. This is not simply a problem for us as individuals, however; it is magnified in the collective realm of society, with potentially devastating results, as Merton points out forcefully in passages such as the following:

The contemplative way requires first of all and above all renunciation of [the] obsession with the triumph of the individual or collective will to power. . . . The aggressive and dominative view of reality places at the center the individual self with its bodily form, its feelings and emotions, its appetites and needs, its loves and hates, its actions and reactions. All these are seen as forming together a basic and indubitable reality to which everything else must be referred, so that all other things are also estimated in their individuality, their actions and reactions, and all the ways in which they impinge on the interests of the individual self. The world is then seen as a multiplicity of conflicting and limited beings, all enclosed in the prisons of their own individuality . . . all seeking to find a certain completeness by asserting themselves at the expense of others. . . . Thus there arises a spurious, inconclusive unity: the unity of the massive aggregate.<sup>15</sup>

To be a person, in contrast, is to be free from the cares of the illusory self and to relinquish what Merton calls the “futile drive for self-affirmation.”<sup>16</sup> It is knowing and acting in full affirmation of life and so in an uninhibited freedom. It should be stressed, however, that the freedom of personhood, in contrast to the illusory freedom of the separated self, is not merely an individualistic freedom. As one realizes one’s authentic identity in relation to God, there is a corresponding awakening of one’s identity in relation to others. To return to Merton’s words,

One must not forget the dimension of relatedness to others. True freedom is openness, availability, the capacity for gift. But we must also remember that the difficult dialectic of fidelity to others in fidelity to oneself requires one to break through the veils of infidelity which, as individual egoists or as a selfish community, we set up to prevent ourselves from living in the truth.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, in Merton’s Christian existential perspective, to be a person is not only to have discovered one’s own undivided, or whole, naked self, but to recognize in one’s unity with God a unity with others. As persons we come

to realize that we are “at one with everything in that *hidden ground of love* for which there can be no explanations.”<sup>18</sup> Self-discovery and other-discovery, so to speak, are intimately and mysteriously intertwined.<sup>19</sup> The separated and individual self gives way to the related and unified self, the self-serving collectivity becomes a community with space for love to emerge and guide it.

Merton states explicitly: “The grace and the mystery and the sacrament of community work when there is relatedness between one another.”<sup>20</sup> The grace that nourishes community life is tapped when we identify completely with and experience empathy for those with whom we live. As Merton explains in reference to the monastery: “You not only identify with [your fellow monk], but you are able by your identification to value him. You see him as a good in himself because he is a person.”<sup>21</sup> Identification in this sense is as much a matter of consciousness and spiritual insight as emotion, a felt intuitive awareness of the spiritual reality that we do not exist as isolated individuals. It means much more than virtue or even “the moral conscience,” much more than judgment in terms of “right” or “wrong.”<sup>22</sup> Merton elaborates: “Relatedness means this capacity to leave oneself behind . . . [to think] in terms of other . . . not ‘I’ . . . but ‘we’. [You] are no longer there as a mere individual; you are functioning as two related people.”<sup>23</sup>

For those of us whose sense of social identity is shaped by western culture, Merton’s idea of relatedness is counterintuitive. It is the spiritual counterweight to the culture of individualism and self-assertion that sets one over and against another as objects, that perpetuates an illusion of separateness. What we lose in becoming related is not ourselves in any deep sense, but the illusion of our individuality.

It is all too easy in this cultural context to mistake group identification for relatedness and true community. These are essentially power-based rather than person-oriented entities. Merton refers in this regard to Eberhard Arnold, the German Lutheran theologian who articulated the spiritual basis for community as a fellowship in the spirit in love, even as he was confronted by, and saw as equally problematic, the political alternatives of Nazism and Communism in the 1930’s.<sup>24</sup> The latter represent types of “groupthink” that Merton saw as symptomatic of the unforgiving, collective will to power that co-opts our deep need to experience relatedness. More than once, Merton cautioned against the creation of these forms of pseudo-community, whether of the monolithic variety or in the guise of activist groups which zealously set cause and ideology above people.<sup>25</sup>

To move from a state of separateness to one of relatedness, from partiality to wholeness, from individualism to personhood, and from isolation to community is a complex inner and social dynamic that depends above all on the experience of love. The monastery in which Merton lived is meant to serve that purpose. But let me conclude with some suggestions

of what this transformation, which he likens to rising from the dead, meant for Merton.

In an introduction to a Japanese edition of one of his works, Merton explains:

I must . . . not retain the semblance of a self which is an object or a "thing." I too must be no-thing. And when I am no-thing, I am in the All, and Christ lives in me. But He who lives in me is in all those around me . . . is hidden [in them]. . . . My monastery . . . is . . . a place in which I disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion.<sup>26</sup>

To the extent that we treat ourselves as an object of interest, we exist in the world of false self-reliance and self-absorption in which our whole identity rests on the need to maintain a separation from each other and from God. We cannot in this state accept our own lives, and indeed, spend our lives trying to find a way out of quiet desperation, to echo Thoreau.

The state of unity or relatedness also has its claims, however; it is not a state of quietude or passivity. To live in compassionate identification with others compels a response to their needs, and requires that we work to dispel illusion and all that devalues and disaffirms our ordinary selves and life itself. This does not mean that we set ourselves over and against others as a force of good against a force of evil; this is the world of separation and objects. The wisdom of the person is not a self-congratulatory virtuousness but a commitment to finding a true way in love for all. As Merton says:

To adopt a life that is essentially nonassertive, nonviolent, a life of humility and peace is in itself a statement of one's position. But each one in such a life can, by the personal modality of his decision, give his whole life a special orientation. It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole [of humanity] and the world. . . . I am saying NO to all the concentration camps, aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the racial injustices, the economic tyrannies, and the whole socio-economic apparatus which seems geared for nothing but global destruction in spite of all its fair words in favor of peace. I make monastic silence a protest against the lies of politicians, propagandists, and agitators. . . . The faith in which I believe is also invoked by many who believe in war, believe in racial injustices, believe in self-righteous and lying forms of tyranny. My life must, then, be a protest against these also.

If I say NO to all these secular forces, I also say YES to all that is good in the world and in [humanity]. I say YES to all that is beautiful in nature, and in order that this may be the yes of a freedom and not of subjection I must refuse to possess any thing in the world as purely my own. I say YES to all the men and women who are my brothers and sisters in the world, but for this yes to be an assent of freedom and not of subjection I must live so that no one of them may seem to belong to me and that I may not belong to any of them.<sup>27</sup>

It was from this life-affirming, unified and personalistic stance that Merton confronted the manifestations of inhumanity in the world of the 1960s, and that he forged relationships and communication across the boundaries of religion, race, nationality, place, and culture. His silence as well as his words provided ample testimony of the power of what he called the qualitative values of life—such as inner integrity, relatedness, peace, nonviolence, and compassion—to prevent us from succumbing to the lure of separateness, to help us discover our whole selves, and, once there, to ensure that we cannot be untrue to who we are.

## Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. N. Burton and P. Hart (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), p. 128.
2. Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., 1981), p. 41.
3. Merton, "The Bear" (Cassette Recording No. AA2079; Kansas City, MO: Credence Cassettes, 1967).
4. Merton, *Day of a Stranger*, p. 41.
5. Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 11.
6. Merton, *Day of a Stranger*, p. 41.
7. Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 4.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
9. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp. 116–17.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
11. Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 8.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
13. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 128.
14. Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 8.
15. Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 219.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
17. Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 8.

18. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. W. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 115.

19. Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), xv–xxi.

20. Merton, “Christian Hope and Relatedness” (Cassette Recording #243B; Louisville, KY: Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine College, 1966).

21. Ibid.

22. *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters* (New York: New Directions, 1988), p. 134.

23. Merton, “Christian Hope and Relatedness.”

24. *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, pp. 108–9.

25. See, for instance, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 294–97, and *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, p. 104. This discussion of Merton’s views on relatedness and community derives from a paper given by the author at the bi-annual conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland in April of 2002.

26. Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work*, ed. R. Daggy (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), pp. 64–65.

27. Ibid.

## EXPOSING THE DECEITFUL HEART: A MONK'S PUBLIC "INNER WORK"

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Jonathan Montaldo

If you attempt to act and do for others or for the world without deepening your own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, you will not have anything to give others. You will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of your own obsessions, your aggressivity, your ambitions, your delusions about ends and means.

—*Thomas Merton*<sup>1</sup>

According to the late Benedictine scholar Jean Leclercq, monks have always loved learning with intensities that matched their desire for God.<sup>2</sup> I would surmise that monks love learning more. Scholarship, after all, offers the satisfactions of small but significant closures of understanding, whereas desiring God is an open-ended heart project, an experience of an elusive Presence that never fully discloses itself. Since God is at core hidden and transcendent, desiring God's presence is in the same genre of never to be completed human tasks as is ridding one's experience of evil. Whoever takes up either of these projects without being grounded in humility will have begun in delusion to reach an end in dismay.

Monks love learning. Willful ignorance of the world for the Christian monk is a sin against the Holy Spirit whose activities are everywhere. Yet speculation is not the primary monastic office. The monk seeks to ground theoretical reflection in experience. Any academic enterprise, all delicious toying with ideas, must for monks be embedded in practice and experiment. Any monk who elaborates *theoria* without a personal *praxis* is suspect. An unlivd monastic theology is vain. Thus, Christian monks—ambiguously and not ideally since they are like us in all things—can provide a cautionary

footnote for anyone tempted to discuss the mystery of evil only in the abstract, at arms-length from the necessity to acknowledge the *mysterium iniquitatis* securely nested in human hearts and behaviors.<sup>3</sup>

I can speculate on the deeper meanings of Eucharist without ever giving myself the liberty to discover what could happen were I to celebrate it as my daily bread. I know the delight of reading book after book on meditation while ignoring the imperative to sit my behind down on a cushion. And, *mea maxima culpa*, I daily slide along a web of deceits about myself out of ignorance or conscious neglect of my mendacious tendency to ignore the contradictions between my private and my public behavior, between what it is I preach and what it is I do. I effortlessly confine my activities to separate compartments that do not communicate. I withhold my private self from dialogue with the sanitized self I present in everyday life. I am amazed how easily I descend from the altar of God to the gutter in the space of an afternoon, and can afterwards sit down to a quiet supper without thinking I have traveled far at all.<sup>4</sup>

I admire Thomas Merton but my reading of his text is that, no matter what those who love him or who perceive his wisdom might claim for him, he was not and never considered himself a “spiritual master.” He might certainly from the evidence of his text have been “mastered by the Spirit.” His honesty with himself and his readers in regard to his erratic struggles truly to seek God is continuously evident in his extant personal journals—now published in seven volumes—that begin in 1939, when he was living in Greenwich Village in New York City, and end two days before his death in Bangkok in 1968. Merton’s making himself ever more transparent to his readers when writing his journals, giving clear evidence that he knew himself unworthy of laurel and emulation, was, in my opinion, a conscious attempt to undermine his guru status. He compassionately sets his readers free from hero worship. He punctures any illusion, at least in his own case, that one truly leads a good spiritual life simply because one writes beautifully about the spiritual life.

In twenty-seven years of writing journals Merton bequeaths to his readers traces of his inner work. He exposes his life-long task to understand himself, to be free, to act with integrity and increase his capacity to love his neighbor. His transparency in his journals pierces the corporate veil of an institutionalized monasticism that superficially presents to the unincorporated a beautiful tableau, but whose enclosures hide the struggling humanity within that surrenders itself to the slow heart-work of fleeing evil and trying to do good one day and one night at a time.

Merton indeed had a literary gift for artful self-disclosure. He thought his best writing was a literature of “confession and witness.”<sup>5</sup> Reading over his shoulder, we have access to an essential mode of progress on the human journey toward self-transcendence to neighbor and to God: we get up and

fall down, we get up and fall down, and we struggle to get up over and over again.

Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, is a romantic document, a good read, a self-idealizing confession of a floundering young roue's having found a monastery as the perfect life raft on his youth's angry sea. A lot of people love *The Seven Storey Mountain* and recollect their reading of it with shining eyes. Among Merton's literary gifts was his ability to have his reader identify with him. His autobiography was and, being still in print since 1948, remains a life-changer. But Merton, even before the publication of his story, knew he had distorted its Hollywood-toned presentation of himself as the hero on a stairway to paradise.

Writing journals after the publication of his autobiography, Merton conscientiously refocused himself and disclosed to his journals' future readers the more visceral truths about his struggling monastic practice. Writing journals began to function as a discipline of honesty with regard to the crooked road his life had taken by his split-hearted pursuit of both monastic vows and the exigencies of a literary and public career. His journals became, as he himself characterized them, "part of a documentation that is demanded of me—still demanded, I think—by the Holy Ghost."<sup>6</sup> And what Merton documented carefully were the states of mind he could easily have hidden which, once being disclosed to journals, could and do damage his publicly professed religious life.

Merton knew he had placed himself in the occasions of sin endured by many a spiritual writer who, having publicly brought attention to themselves as spiritual seekers and having reached their goal—perhaps unconsciously—of being sought after as "sages," experience pride to be as debilitating a sin in their spiritual lives as unchecked lust. Their self-righteous criticism of others tempts them to sin against their communion with the saints. Their excessive self-concern and self-analysis becomes for them a form of unbelief in the forgiveness of sins. Ambition in "spiritual masters" poisons everything they once achieved with good will. The Chinese Taoist Chuang Tzu warned those who came to believe their own press that public good works placed them above other human beings: "Achievement is the beginning of failure. Fame is the beginning of disgrace."<sup>7</sup>

There are few journals entries that so transparently document Merton's understanding that his spiritual life and his monastic vocation were being compromised by the temptations of his literary success as that for January 19, 1961:

Someone accused me of being a "high priest" of creativity. Or at least of allowing people to regard me as one. This is perhaps true. . . . [T]he sin of *wanting to be a pontiff*, of wanting to be heard, of wanting converts, disciples. Being in a

cloister, I thought I did not want this. Of course I did and everyone knows it.

[S]t. William, says tonight's breviary, when death approached, took off his pontifical vestments (what he was doing with them on in bed I can't imagine) and by his own efforts got to the floor and died. So I am like him, in bed with a miter on. What am I going to do about it? I have got to face the fact that there is in me a desire for survival as pontiff, prophet and writer, and this has to be renounced before I can be myself at last.<sup>8</sup>

Merton was always first to admit that any treasures of spiritual insight embedded in his autobiographical writing was a harvest from poor soil. His journals expose real fissures in his character. They archive the playing out of his quintessentially human fate to stand with feet straddling a divide between who he longed to be and who he actually was. Merton's acknowledged limitations illuminate. The deep significance of Merton's confessions for our own spiritual practice might well be his self-exposed errors and failures. I take a line from theologian Karl Barth, in his *Epistle to the Romans* on the apostle Paul, to suggest an analogy for the value of Merton's autobiographical transparency for our own struggles with evil today:

A man [Barth speaks of St. Paul] may be of value to another man, not because he wishes to be important, not because he possesses some inner wealth of soul, not because of something he is, but because of what he is not. His importance may consist in his poverty, in his hopes and fears, in his waiting and hurrying, in the direction of his whole being towards what lies beyond his horizon and beyond his power. The importance of an apostle is negative rather than positive. In him a void becomes visible.<sup>9</sup>

All his false steps, his continual back sliding, his being caught in the same old compulsive thinking that Merton regularly confesses to readers of his journals, should be placed in the context of his authentic and dedicated pursuit of the evangelical monastic goal of attaining "purity of heart." Merton's personal integrity, especially in his later journals, is missionary. "I am thrown into contradiction," he wrote in his journal at his hermitage in 1966, a year that found him at fifty-one in love with a student nurse of twenty-four. "I am thrown into contradiction: to realize it is mercy, to accept it is love, to help others do the same is compassion."<sup>10</sup>

As Merton elaborates the paradox of his seeking purity of heart, while witnessing in himself the ability to evade the self-disregard necessary for its procurement, he places before the eyes of his readers their own struggle with conflicting desires that attends their own inner and public work.

By writing journals Merton discloses first for himself the deep layers of his heart's deceptions, so that he might assume and incorporate them. His practice of writing journals is thus akin to the ancient asceticism of rigorous self-disclosure practiced in the Egyptian desert by early Christian monks and reported to the West by John Cassian. Of the need for constant self-examination and self-disclosure to an elder in monastic practice, Cassian passed on this word of advice from the desert that Merton heeded well: "He who manifests his thoughts is soon healed; he who hides them makes himself sick."<sup>11</sup>

As Merton writes journals so as to incorporate his heart's dark cellar rooms, he is also inviting his readers to incorporate their own hearts' dark rooms into their own biographies. Gregory of Nazianzen in the fourth century is another source for this psychological and religious practice: "That which has not been incorporated [and accepted, and made flesh] cannot be healed."<sup>12</sup> In his journals for October 2, 1958, Merton writes resonantly with Gregory's teaching:

Finally I am coming to the conclusion that my highest ambition is to be what I already am. That I will never fulfill my obligation to surpass myself unless I first accept myself—and, if I accept myself fully in the right way, I will have already surpassed myself. For it is the unaccepted self that stands in my way—and will continue to do so as long as it is not accepted. When it has been accepted—it is the stepping stone to what is above me. Because this is the way human beings have been made by God—and original sin was the effort to surpass oneself by being "like God," i.e., unlike oneself. But our Godlikeness begins at home. We must first become like ourselves and stop living "beside ourselves."<sup>13</sup>

Professor Edward Kaplan of Brandeis University has written an article about a seminar he offered there utilizing the writings of Thomas Merton and Abraham Joshua Heschel. He entitled his article "To Keep the Pain Awake: Learning about Faith."<sup>14</sup> Among his seminar's methodologies, he presents neither himself nor the authors as magisterially having all the answers to questions to be raised in the class. He emphasizes instead the importance of the depth and quality of the questions we ask on the religious journey, questions that arise out of foundational human discontents that never allow us to settle without deep anxiety for easy, unexamined answers.

Kaplan reports that his students hate this aspect of his methodology. Like all of us, his students want answers in black and white transmitted by a professional expert, they insist the heroes and villains be clearly delineated, that the right and the wrong ways to approach religious questions be clearly exposed. But insecurity is the guardian angel at the continuing

presence of mysteries that attend our experience of being alive. These foundational mysteries, to paraphrase Gabriel Marcel, can never be reduced into solvable problems. They remain painful despite any efforts to anesthetize our seemingly primal mental wounds.

Anyone who takes up serious inner work in order to discover the truth about herself and her predicament, anyone who struggles to accept that she shares these same painful predicaments with all her neighbors, anyone who strives for a modicum of human integrity, will always find her experience as having an edge of being in exile from any supposedly settled questions (traditionally defended by corporate entities for whom settled questions preserve their own power), especially when she learns through experience that these settled questions systemically continue to reproduce evil effects.

I confess that my work in preparing for this symposium has been painful and made me discontent. I hope my anxieties are salutary and a sane response to my not finding easy explanations for the origins of evil in the face of continuing horrendous events of present human history. Perhaps one of the aims of our symposium's organizers has been fulfilled in all of us, if it has provoked us to "keep the pain awake."

Merton needs to have a last word and there would be many at hand that would convey the tone of his thinking on the persistence of evil in human experience. One of his statements, and I hope my presenting it in closing will direct you to the entire article from his book *Faith and Violence*, is his letter to a Southern Churchman in the mid-sixties that he entitled "Events and Pseudo-Events":

I have publicly stated that I would no longer comment on current events. People ask why. There are many reasons, and I might as well say at once that they are reasons which may possibly be valid for me only, not for others. In any case I did not make this decision for anyone but myself. Nor would I have made it unless I had previously made my position clear in the areas of greatest urgency—[on questions of] race and peace.

First of all, I mistrust an obsession with declarations and pronouncements. While silence can constitute guilt and complicity, once one has taken a stand he is not necessarily obliged to come out with a new answer and a new solution to insoluble problems every third day.

After all, was it not [Dietrich] Bonhoeffer himself who said it was an "Anglo-Saxon failing" to imagine that the Church was supposed to have a ready answer for every social problem?

When one has too many answers, and when one joins a chorus of others chanting the same slogans, there is, it seems

to me, a danger that one is trying to evade the loneliness of a conscience that realizes itself to be in an inescapably evil situation. We are all under judgment. None of us is free from contamination. Our choice is not that of being pure and whole at the mere cost of formulating a just and honest opinion. Mere commitment to a decent program of action does not lift the curse. Our real choice is between being like Job, who *knew* he was stricken, and Job's friends who did not know that they were stricken too . . . (So they had answers!)

If we *know* that we are all under judgment, we will cease to make the obvious wickedness of "the others" a fulcrum for our own supposed righteousness to exert itself upon the world. On the contrary, we will be willing to admit that we are "right-wised" not by condemning others according to our law or ethical ideal, but by seeing that the real sinner whom we find abominable and frightening (because he threatens our very life) still has in himself the ground for God's love . . . that ground is the sinful heart of sinful human beings just as they really are—as we really are, you, and I, and our disconcerting neighbor.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

1. John Cassian, quoted in Paul Evdokimov, *The Ages of the Spiritual Life* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Press, 1998), p. 194.

2. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1977).

3. I am using the Latin phrase to allude (perhaps too obliquely) to its use by the writer of Pope John Paul's Easter "Letter to Priests" that appeared two weeks before our symposium. The writer of the letter refers to those priests who had succumbed "even to the most grievous forms of the *mysterium iniquitatis*—the mystery of evil at work in the world." In a century that has witnessed holocausts and gulags, this reference to pedophilia as "the most grievous form" of evil invokes the depths of personal evil as opposed to the historical manifestations. My aim to present Merton as another witness to the "evil within us" hopefully becomes clearer in succeeding paragraphs. Cf. Melinda Henneberger, "Pope Says 'Shadow of Suspicion' Has Been Cast across All Priests," *The New York Times*, March 22, 2002, p. A1.

4. A friendly critic of this address wrote that he thought here I was being too hard on myself. I replied: "I am afraid I am not being as 'hard on myself' as I should be. I am rather only using a rhetorical device of self-accusation so as to have the listener identify with my critique of our common human behavior before raising her defenses. While the dilemma of being able to vacillate between the altar of God and the gutter is true of my experience, I'm not publicly grieving here only for myself. I don't consider myself more deeply caught in this awful dilemma than anybody else. And, while I indeed sin through my own fault, I don't think I suffer 'uniquely

and exquisitely' the *karma* of my sins. The evil in me, like any good, is communal and experienced with everybody else." Thus, this paragraph is not about my particular pathologies but about our shared disease.

5. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, The Merton Journals, vol. 6, ed. Christine Bochen (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), p. 371.

6. Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, The Merton Journals, vol. 3, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), p. 20.

7. Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions Press, 1965), p. 115.

8. Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, The Merton Journals, vol. 4, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), p. 87.

9. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 33–34.

10. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 355.

11. Quoted in Evdokimov, *The Ages of the Spiritual Life*, p. 194.

12. Gregory Nazianzen, quoted in Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 77 [paraphrased].

13. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, pp. 220–21.

14. Edward Kaplan, "To Keep the Pain Awake: Learning about Faith," *The NICM Journal* (National Institute for Campus Ministries) 2, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 63–73.

15. Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), pp. 145–46 and 164.

## PART IV

### PORTRAYALS OF EVIL IN ART

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# LAMENTATIONS AND LOSSES: FROM NEW YORK TO KABUL

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Daniel Berrigan, S.J.

The Timbered Choir  
 The year begins with war.  
 Our bombs fall day and night.  
 Hour after hour, by death  
 Abroad appeasing wrath,  
 Folly and greed at home.  
 Upon our giddy tower  
 We'd oversway the world.  
 Our hate comes down to kill  
 Those whom we do not see,  
 For we have given up  
 Our sight to those in power  
 And to machines, and now  
 Are blind to all the world . . .  
 —Wendell Berry, 1991

What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and  
 the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought in the  
 name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty and  
 democracy?

—Mahatma Gandhi

Lamentations: the word speaks for itself. Something terrible, something  
 literally beyond imagining, has befallen Jerusalem and its people.

“Befallen.” Exactly. The skies have fallen in. A proud clan, a proud city,  
 lies in the dust. The temple is gutted, the walls of the holy city a rubble.  
 Prophecy is stilled, at least for a time—a time that seems an eternity. The

elders and priests—those proud links of tradition and sacrifice and psalm—are vanished from the scene, driven like cattle into slavery and exile.

National identity, or more exactly, imperial identity, is shattered.

It rested on unsteady piers, as was evident after the fact. Note the fact well, the symptoms of the Fall in Jerusalem: militarism, a rigid class system of the prosperous and the deprived, worship emptied of concern for “the widow and orphan and stranger at the gate.”

And perhaps most damaging of all, a naive assumption, common among the elite, that come what may, come war and greed and cruelties against the victimized—God was “on our side.” Familiar?

The conviction was simply taken for granted—irrefragable.

And why not? The temple was a world wonder, the sacrifices spectacular in their scope and artistry, song and dance and solemn proclamation of the law. World trade flourished, coffers of palace and temple were bulging.

The sky was the limit, literally. All signs pointed to divine approval.

But wait. God had news for the empire. On the horizon, a storm was gathering; its name was Babylon.

\* \* \* \* \*

It bore a truer name, a more awful: Divine fury. Jeremiah, his voice lost on the winds, was relentless. The temple was a coven of idolaters. Let priests and people vaunt as pleased the ego, one day they would cower. The deity was outraged.

The words of the prophet served him, and the city as well, precisely nothing. The authorities cast over him the pelt of a scapegoat. He was a weaver of dire fantasies, in effect a turncoat against his own. He must be dealt with.

First he was ostracized, his writings publicly burned by the king. Then, cast in a dry well, he narrowly escaped death. Nonetheless, the truth was out. The oracles of Jerusalem were on the mark, cruelly, surgically so. Disaster swiftly descended, as Lamentations attests.

\* \* \* \* \*

Given time, the book became a liturgical text, a yearly reminder of sin, grief, chastisement and restoration.

God’s love had taken an unutterably cruel form. But that love would weather the storm. Jerusalem would rise again, the exiles would return, rebuild the temple and city walls. The faith of the remnant shone anew, chastised and purified.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Lamentations” also cast a long shadow forward in time. It became a precious *midrash* of Christian sensibility. On Good Friday each year, the service of “*Tenebrae*” resounded in churches and chapels. Lights were extinguished, as evening came on. In the sanctuary a mounted triangle held a series of beeswax candles alight, topped by a single white taper, the light of Christ.

As each verse of Lamentations was announced, the grieving resounded in the dusk. A lighted candle was snuffed. Finally, only the topmost candle remained.

Then it too was removed and hidden behind the altar, where it glowed mysteriously, as though in a closed tomb; Christ had died.

Now darkness enveloped the church and world.

But that was not the final act. In a sublime, fragile gesture of hope, the candle was brought forth and restored in place, an augury of a further, unimaginable Event. Death was denied the last word.

In silence, the worshippers departed.

The symbolism, the threnody, the stripped altar and empty tabernacle, its door swung wide as though in final desolation—these formed an immensely moving mime. Lamentation indeed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Unknown authors, singers, poets, survivors, strung together our hoop of songs. The sequence strikes one as both contrived and inspired, with the opening word of each strophe a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, from first to last.

The device lent discipline and continuity; wild grief was contained, and made bearable.

It is as though the exiles were also prisoners (which they were), chanting their grief through the bars of a cell or stockade.

Layer upon layer, contrasts and likenesses contend in the verses; despair, hope, resolve, bewilderment, anger, appeasement. The losses were unbearable—no, somehow they could be borne. Was not God still God—though God had turned about and spurned God’s own?

\* \* \* \* \*

Why, why, why this disaster?

The text poses the tormenting question, and more; it ventures an answer.

Thus: sin, our sin, has shaken the pillars of empire. What has befallen, we have brought upon ourselves. The moral universe stands vindicated. This is the word that comes through the text, clogged with grief and loss. Despite all, a word of truth. And the bare bones of hope as well.

Why, why the awful events that befell the United States in autumn of 2001?

For this cause. An awesome “yang” has followed on a repeated, unrepented “yin.” What has befallen us at the Twin Towers and the Pentagon—repeatedly and in more grievous measure, we have inflicted on others.

Daring to ask “why.” Daring an answer, wounding as it may be to pride and ethos and national myths. Letting a harsh, wounding truth strike home.

Thus the saving themes of Lamentations: remorse, repentance, hope of reconciling. Anger as well, against a God who has turned on God’s own.

Shall the like become possible to ourselves, a people reeling and wounded?

\* \* \* \* \*

C. 1, vv. 1 ff. At the start of Lamentations we are plunged into a scene of woe. The “bride of God” is widowed. Grief sits on every face, life is stricken to heart. No more pretense, no vaunting or show of power; days of wine and rose are vanished on the winds of war.

Drink the bitter cup to its lees.

\* \* \* \* \*

The American vintage of wrath was grown, harvested and mixed—elsewhere, by other hands. From the opening verse, more than the autumn disaster in New York and Washington is at stake.

Our sin is that of the Jerusalem of Jeremiah: idolatry. The World Trade Center (the name implies the sin) together with the Pentagon, are quite literally places of worship. There, world domination, monetary and military, is cozened, calculated, paid tribute. Such worship has exacted a horrendous price, for generations. And always (until a day now seared in memory), the price was paid by others than ourselves.

Thus the lamentation, rightly taken, falls from the stricken lips of the victimized, the invaded and sanctioned and bombed peoples who fall (too bad for them!) afoul of the American hegemony.

Only tardily, only a comparatively few Americans claim the threnody, take it to heart and lips. From those at the highest level of authority, from media and military, another mood and word, another spasm—a clamorous outcry for vengeance and retaliation.

Confession of sin, questioning of our behavior, submitting to chastisement—these are emotions foreign to the national soul, a lost language of Ur.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the lament, undoubtedly we read of less than admirable reaction, of malice, and the seeking of vengeance. But this is a background clamor. The major theme is other: lingering grief, confession of sin, purpose of amendment.

It is the word of God, instructive, meant for our own lips, our chastening and healing.

The opening symbols are of prebirth and post partum, both:

C. 1, v. 1  
How lonely she is now,  
the once crowded city!  
Widowed is she,  
who was mistress over nations;  
The princes among the provinces  
have been made toiling slaves.

In magical New York, the cynosure of the eyes of the nation, the self proclaimed "capital of the world." Mighty towers were toppled.

Let it be confessed, the first, indispensable, humiliating admission. The ruin we have wantonly sown abroad, has turned about and struck home.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How lonely . . ." We Americans are more and more isolated on the world scene. The Bush administration has rejected the Kyoto agreement on global warming, rejected an agreement to regulate the trade of small arms, distanced itself from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the Biological Weapons Convention.

Yet more of this isolating pride. The U.S. has refused to ratify the proposed International Criminal Court of Justice. To nullify the effort, the U.S. proposes something to be known as "The American Service Members Protection Act." This will authorize military force to free any American soldier taken into International Criminal Court custody. "Touch us not!" is the message.

\* \* \* \* \*

After bombing eighteen countries in the last decades, after incursions and manipulations and lethal sanctions and the seizure of world markets and the reduction of multitudes to economic enslavement—after all this, the Towers were struck, ejecting their human cargo like rubbish. And the Pentagon was breached.

To such horrendous effect, was there no cause attached? The question is out of order: "For us or against us."

Enormous sums were spent to insure “national security,” to punish enemies—and what an illusion! How vulnerable are the mighty, we the “mistress over nations.”

\* \* \* \* \*

V. 2

Bitterly she weeps at night,  
tears upon her cheeks,  
With not one to console her  
of all her dear ones;  
Her friends have all betrayed her  
and become her enemies.

The scene is of utter desolation, a dark night of the spirit. The reigning images of an omnipotent warrior god have dissolved, fled the soul, the temple, the grandiose cityscape.

Likewise overthrown is a pier of identity jealously set in place, guarded and exploited through the ages; we, “the chosen.”

Brutally, against all tradition and expectation, the tribe is—unchosen.

Worse. In a crushing irony, as Isaiah testifies, Babylon the merciless claims the divine favor snatched from Jerusalem.

\* \* \* \* \*

Friends become enemies; those once trustworthy and near turn traitors. Whatever the reference, the grief lies deeper than grief; sanity and good sense are crushed out of recognition.

What sorer loss, than that of trust between friends?

We humans flourish through trust and friendship—or we die for lack of these. The web of life is woven close; survival demands fidelity to the design, hands and eyes carefully, skillfully weaving and repairing.

\* \* \* \* \*

V. 3

Judah has fled into exile  
from oppression and cruel slavery;  
Yet where she lives among the nations,  
she finds no place to rest.  
All her persecutors come upon her  
where she is narrowly confined.

Despite the rather clumsy translation, “exile” is clearly one with “oppression and cruel slavery.” We are mourning in exile, a historical reality and a

spiritual as well, an ancient uprooting and “non-belonging”; and a modern too—or a post-modern, which comes to much the same.

\* \* \* \* \*

This is the sensibility Paul actually commends to the believing community. “Be not conformed to this world,” he warns.

The warning has never been more exactly to the point, bespeaking the vocation of Christians in America.

“Con-formity” with this world implies several metaphors: a kind of grafting on to worldly ethos, a non-argument with its ideologies and appetites, a falling in step with its projects.

Or a disappearing into its vortex. Drowning there, suffocating.

\* \* \* \* \*

As in the spring of 2002, Bush’s war proceeds apace against the all but decimated, impoverished people of Afghanistan.

An immediate “statement” was issued by the Catholic bishops. The stipulations of the “just war theory” once more were hauled out, fiction and fact. Mr. President, in effect, full speed ahead!

\* \* \* \* \*

And I thought, in a mood veering between dejection and recognition: *deja vu*—with a difference.

Vietnam had endured fifteen years of American napalm and bombs. A number of us spoke up, wrote, marched, destroyed draft files and went to prison. And the bishops were mum as a midnight graveyard.

In an ironic way, their silence was fitting. Quite literally, they had nothing to offer.

Year 2001, yet another war. And the bishops, not to be caught napping, issue “a statement.”

They have nothing to offer—and they lack the grace to keep silent. They offer—nothing.

An old lesson, and a new. The bishops are, willy-nilly, fulfilling the metaphors suggested by Paul. They are grafted on to the world, that “tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” and its ambiguous fruits. They have no argument with the ethos of mass killing. They fall in step with a vile project, enlisting themselves (and us?) “for the duration.”

And what of an echo of the gospel teaching: “Love your enemies”?

Astonishing, and weirdly instructive: the bishops’ statement made no reference, even in passing, to the teaching and example of Christ.

\* \* \* \* \*

## V. 4

The roads to Zion mourn,  
 for lack of pilgrims going to her feasts;  
 All her gateways are deserted,  
 her priests groan,  
 Her virgins sigh,  
 she is in bitter grief.

Ecology takes up the plaint. The rhythms of worship, the great days that awakened remembrance, rejoicing, confidence in the saving acts of God, interventions of renewal and healing and return—no more of those.

The stones of the road find voice: “no more, no more. . . .”

Could it be imagined that catastrophes of war, bombings, massed forces moving against the innocent, misery and displacement and death—that these leave our worship untouched?

Or that—a worse case by far—if the priests react to the moral disaster with silence or a “statement” of approval—shall that worship speak for the God of peace, for Jesus, capitally condemned by the empire?

Another task is called for. Let priests who are faithful to the Gospel speak up, let them resist the infamy of state and church marching to a war drum. Let them “groan.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## V. 7

Jerusalem is mindful of the days  
 of her wretched homelessness,  
 When her people fell into enemy hands,  
 and she had no one to help her,  
 When her foes gloated over her,  
 laughed at her ruin.

Memories do not rebuild walls, nor restore a people destroyed. Generations passed, the exile went on, brutish, unending.

In the present, in the eyes of the conquerors, this is a “former” nation, Zion, its memories fictive and fading.

Of what point this dwelling on the past? It is lost, done with. To those born in Babylon, as to those born in the wilderness after Egypt, memories count for less and less. They are old wives’ tales, a fog dispersed by every sunrise.

\* \* \* \* \*

Still, a contrary current gains voice in the verses. It can never be entirely stifled. Let us not allow the memories to die; memories of the great ancestors,

their teaching and worship, the year's rhythms, kosher discipline, daily prayer. Even in despair, turn toward Jerusalem!

Memory is a bitter herb: "foes . . . gloating . . . homelessness . . . ruin." Sharp on the tongue, in the mind, memory heals, it confers the will to endure.

\* \* \* \* \*

Arrogant, indifferent, contemptuous of international law, both dismissive and manipulative of the United Nations—this (the U.S.) is now the most dangerous power the world has ever known—the authentic "rogue state"—but a rogue state of colossal military and economic might.

And Europe, especially the United Kingdom, is both compliant and complicit; or as Cassius in *Julius Caesar* put it, we "peep about to find ourselves dishonorable graves."

—Harold Pinter; address at the  
University of Florence, presented on September 10, 2001

\* \* \* \* \*

In Lamentations, the later default Christians also stand revealed. American religion, in face of the American empire, provokes no quarrel, no questioning. Instead of uttering a prophetic outcry, the leaders fall in line. By compliant silence and complicit word, the church shows herself a reliable collaborator: the god is on our side.

\* \* \* \* \*

No mere description of the impasse will do. Instead, a daring, lyric leap; judgment is reversed. God must be summoned *vis-à-vis*:

Look O God and see,  
how worthless I have become!

Exactly: worthless, the price tag tied to the flesh of the living. Multitudes, in the estimate of Mars, are better dead; and soon will be dead. Without worth in any case, living or dead.

It is wartime. Humans are expendable. So is the human itself, a sense of one's own humanity, of the foe's.

Human life: cheap, if not worthless.

\* \* \* \* \*

V. 12

Come, all you who pass by the way,  
look and see  
Whether there is any suffering  
like my suffering,  
Which was dealt me  
when God afflicted me  
on the day of blazing wrath.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the first few days after the destruction of the World Trade Center, as we strive to understand, as we continue to work, search for hope and pray, we also ask again and again for forgiveness. Please forgive us, as our civilizations continue to unfold their long histories of violence.

Forgive us our anger, hate and drive for retribution. Forgive us our confusion and failure. We pray for the grace to maintain our faith and live out our pacifist convictions. We ask forgiveness for our sins.

—Catholic Worker, October, 2001

\* \* \* \* \*

There are those who suffer greatly: exiles, refugees, slaves, bare survivors. They are given voice here, the voiceless, the wretched of the earth.

Thus the Bible, its God, its prophets and witnesses speak for those pushed to the verge of the world, those who live and die anonymous, unsung, statistics in the ledgers of the Olympians. Thus the ironbound decree.

But God is not mocked, the God of “widows and orphans and strangers at the gate.”

V. 17

Zion stretched out her hands,  
But there was no one to console her.  
God gave orders against Jacob  
for his neighbors to be his foes;  
Jerusalem has become in their midst  
a thing unclean.

The scene: a woman's hands are extended. She is a suppliant in a male world. The world is hardly to be thought her world, practiced in tenderness, responding to her need and that of her children. Nothing of this. Too bad for her—she must make do or not, in a world of warriors.

For centuries during the era of the kings, feminine images were rare indeed. Only now and again, through the prophets, is a woman heard from, or her God.

Now, in defeat she “stretches out her hands.” In the days of glory, hands had other uses. They were invariably male, they brandished a sword.

Males seldom yielded before the supplications of women.

Now, “she” must endure a like heartlessness; no mercy. It is as though her cry served only to aggravate blood lust. The response is lethal, heartless.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) wrote that “the fundamentalist terrorists (the Taliban) would devour their creators.”

“Let Americans be warned,” wrote the women.

Their prediction was appallingly verified in the autumn of 2001.

After the tragedy, the Afghan women sent another message of condolence; its words were remarkable, one thinks, for psychological acuity:

We send words of deep sorrow and solidarity with the American people. We believe, however, that attacking Afghanistan and killing its most ruined and destitute people will not in any way decrease the grief of the American people.

Previously, RAWA had written:

The most treacherous, most criminal, most anti-democracy and anti-women fundamentalists . . . the Taliban, have committed every possible heinous crime against our people. They would feel no shame in committing such crimes against the American people . . . in order to gain and maintain their power.

\* \* \* \* \*

The mourner trapped in a dilemma, of two minds. Whence came the catastrophe? Is it of God, is it of the Assyrians?

V. 21

Give heed to my groaning;  
there is no one to console me.  
All my enemies rejoice at my misfortune;  
it is You who has wrought it.  
Bring on the day you have proclaimed,  
that they may be even as I.

It is of both God and the Assyrians. But faith forbids that she call God to accounts.

The same faith, it seems, hardly forbids the summoning of vengeance. Quite the contrary. Intensely the theme continues:

V. 22

Let all their evil come before You;  
deal with them  
as You have dealt with me  
for all my sins;  
My groans are many  
and I am sick at heart.

We have an equation strongly presumed. God, she confesses, is just.

May that justice vindicate itself; *quid pro quo*, equal treatment under law. This: "An eye for an eye."

But a question intervenes like a halting hand raised. Will destruction of enemies—in the name of God's justice—will this mitigate our own sufferings? Or is there another way than vengeance, a better?

On this serious subject, Christians have a *midrash* of note. It takes the form of a strong charge:

My command to you is:  
love your enemies,  
pray  
for your persecutors.  
Thus  
you will show yourselves  
sons and daughters  
of  
your  
heavenly  
Father . . .

—Mt., C. 5, vv. 44, 45

\* \* \* \* \*

From a letter to *The Chicago Tribune*, September 25, 2001:

My husband, Craig Amundson of the US army, lost his life at the Pentagon on September 11. . . .

Losing my 28 year-old husband and father of our two young children is a terrible and painful experience. . . .

I have heard angry rhetoric by some Americans, including many of our nation's leaders, who advise a heavy dose of revenge and punishment.

To those leaders, I would like to make clear that my family and I take no comfort in your words of rage. . . . Your words and immanent acts of revenge only amplify our family's suffering, deny us the dignity of remembering our loved one in a way that would have made him proud, and mock his vision of America as a peacemaker in the world community. . . .

Craig would not have wanted a violent response to avenge his death. And I cannot see how good can come of it. Mohandas Gandhi said: "An eye for an eye only makes the whole world blind."

I call on our national leaders to find the courage to respond to this incomprehensible tragedy by breaking the cycle of violence.

—Amber Amundson

\* \* \* \* \*

C. 2, v. 1  
God in wrath  
has detested daughter Zion,  
has cast down from heaven to earth  
the glory of Israel,  
Unmindful of God's footstool  
on the day of wrath.

What a strange faith! Do we conclude that a totally unknown terrain, little light is shed?

The faithful one wavers uneasily between the agents of her downfall. Whom to blame, whom indict? This one, no; that one . . .

For now, in this mood, let it be said as clearly as word and trope can convey: God has wrought this horror.

But no. It was formerly and just as strongly stated—our sins have brought this horror:

God has punished her  
for her many sins.  
(C. 1, v. 5)

And again:

Through the sins of which she is guilty,  
Jerusalem is defiled.  
(V. 8)

Yet again:

God has kept watch  
over my sins.  
(V. 14)

\* \* \* \* \*

“God . . . has detested daughter Zion.” “A detested daughter”—could a perversion more offensive to nature be imagined?

To the father, a daughter is the very apple of his eye, a pride and joy. Even in a culture of male bonding, the affection (not, to be sure, the primogeniture and portion) abides strongly. But here?

The hardening of heart, the casting out, is awful, unbearable. It cannot be squared with logic, cannot be undone by summoning affectionate memories. It stands there, a text turned icy, a testimony; rejection, the beloved put to the door.

Summon a trope then; one that bespeaks a heart mortally wounded. Daughter, and detested. Mourn and mourn.

\* \* \* \* \*

Another image in this pharmacology of tears: “Cast down from heaven to earth . . .”

How more strongly, poignantly—more wrongly stated! Wrongly? A suggestion: an authorial implication whispers in the text, the trope.

The image drives on, inexorable, insatiable:

C. 2, v. 2  
God has consumed without pity  
all the dwellings of Jacob;  
Has torn down in anger  
the fortresses of daughter Judah.  
Has brought to ground in dishonor  
her kings and her princes.

Is God, after all, to be held to accounts? Does the verse refer to grief or judgment, or something of both? “Without pity . . . in anger. . . .” The emotions are like hands tightening about a throat. They choke off reason.

The losses are cumulative, from rubble to human bones: “dwellings . . . fortresses . . . kings and princes. . . .” One cannot but note: the poet is charged with the fury he seeks to locate in God.

\* \* \* \* \*

V. 3. Fire again, a leading image of total destruction.

And a God who goes counter. No longer standing with God's own; implacably against.

What then of the refrain of Genesis—"And God saw that it was good"—repeated like a song of sweetness and love, in the days of creation?

Six times repeated, in favor of light (C. 1, v. 4), of earth and seas (v. 10), of vegetation (v. 12), again of light (v. 18), of living creatures twice (vv. 21, 25).

And culminating in the human, with a superlative approval upon all:

And God  
saw everything  
God had made,  
and behold,  
it was  
very good.  
(V. 31)

Now apparently, roles are reversed. The Friend of creation and covenant, the Spouse of the Song of Songs, is become—"the Enemy." The steadfast Lover, Protector, Provider of manna and water in the wilderness, the Shekinah of the wandering years, is now—"the Foe."

Daring, risky faith! Thus does this unaccountable God appear to the defeated exiles.

\* \* \* \* \*

God, Friend or Foe? A modern poet has notably recorded the like, thorny question:

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend  
With thee; but, sir, what I plead is just . . .  
Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,  
How could thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost  
Defeat, thwart me?

—G. M. Hopkins

\* \* \* \* \*

V. 5. The woman victim is lost, bereft, shocked. Shall she absorb the catastrophe, and go on? Easier said than done!

She has known much of enmities—how else could that "glory" have arisen, except through wars and a prevailing most costly?

Still, amid chaos and carnage, the heavens stood firm. God was with her.  
Or so it was said, and affirmed by priests. So too, the grand liturgies of  
the sanctuary assured.

Now all, all is changed. The heavens have fallen. God has declared war  
against the once “chosen.”

And the threnody of loss and alienation continues, obsessively.

\* \* \* \* \*

V. 5

God has become an enemy,  
has consumed Israel;  
Consumed her castles,  
destroyed her fortresses;  
For daughter Judah  
has multiplied  
moaning and groaning.

\* \* \* \* \*

Memory scalds. Can the defeated so much as dream of recovering former  
glories, will they see once again the beloved horizons of home?

More tormenting by far: will their God ever again be known as—  
Friend, Brother, Lover, Spouse? Can the exiles again befriend their God, and  
stand, confident, befriended?

\* \* \* \* \*

The questions need not hang on the air like a sword suspended.

For Christians, at a stroke someone has answered: “Yes. Stand confi-  
dent, befriended.” Someone has healed and reconciled and died, that the  
Yes! may live on:

As the Father  
has loved Me,  
so  
I have loved  
you.  
Live on  
in My love . . .  
This  
is My commandment;  
love one another  
as I

have loved you.  
There is  
no greater love  
than this;  
to lay down  
one's life  
for one's friends . . .

I  
call you  
friends,  
since I  
made known  
to you  
all  
I heard  
from  
My  
Father . . .

—John, C. 15, vv. 9, 12, 13, 15



## EVIL AS MYSTERY: PRIMAL SPEECH AND CONTEMPORARY POETRY

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Michael True

But keep your eyes below us, for coming near  
Is the river of blood—in which boils everyone  
Whose violence hurts others.

—Dante, *The Inferno*<sup>1</sup>

As someone with little experience writing systematically about the problem of evil, I find Gabriel Marcel's distinction between "the problem" and "the mystery" of evil very helpful.<sup>2</sup> Although the phrase *mysterium iniquitatis* has gotten a rather bad press recently, speaking of evil as mystery provides more direct access to charting an anatomy of evil, it seems to me, than speaking of it as "a problem."

The phrase "the problem of evil" distances me from the concept, framing the discussion as a kind of academic game far removed from my daily life. The phrase "the mystery of evil," by contrast, speaks directly to "the actual business of living," as John Hick says,<sup>3</sup> that is, to the immediate and absorbing task of trying to live a moral or spiritual life in times like the present, so replete with depression and despair. Focusing on "the mystery" should not exclude "the problem"; it merely seems more pertinent in a nuclear age, particularly during wartime, particularly for anyone who regards nonviolent social change as essential to the world's survival.

Depression and even despair are understandable and rational responses to the present state of affairs, not only since September 11, but since the nuclear weapons impinged on our daily lives. The fact that the full implications of this condition tend to be ignored much of the time by institutions and intellectuals responsible for our education only deepens the spiritual malaise.

As in much of the modern era, our moral compass spins randomly in a time of rapid scientific and technological change, as ethicists and others responsible for moral leadership lose their way. American theologians and clergy, trooping to the colors as cluster bombs, daisy cutters, and other weapons of massive destruction fall on innocents in Afghanistan, is only the most recent evidence of moral confusion and cop-out. Having long chosen “the lesser evil,” as Hannah Arendt said on one occasion, they—and we—forget much of the time that we are still choosing or at least tolerating evil.

In contrast, contemporary artists, particularly poets, have been somewhat more precise in naming our dilemma and suggesting the shape and structure of evil in our time. As early as 1955, for example, William Carlos Williams, a major Modernist poet, and Allen Ginsberg, author of “Howl,” perhaps the most important poem of the Post-Modernist period, described the effects of nuclear weapons. According to Williams, in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,”

The mere picture  
of the exploding bomb  
fascinates us  
so that we cannot wait  
to prostrate ourselves  
before it. . . .  
The bomb speaks.  
All suppressions,  
from the witchcraft trials at Salem  
to the latest  
book burnings are confessions  
that the bomb  
has entered our lives  
to destroy us.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, in “Howl,” Ginsberg describes the effects of it on “the best minds” of his generation. He names the evil god, Moloch, that “sphinx of cement and aluminum /that/ bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination.”<sup>5</sup>

In these and other writings, poets have not failed us, in doing what art does best, naming what was previously simply a feeling toward a private agony or social calamity. As with writers at the time of the First World War, Wilfred Owen, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, they dramatize and particularize the philosophical and theological implications of “the same war,” as Denise Levertov called it in one of her poems. She is not talking about the “war” between good and evil but about the one on the Western Front that gradually encompassed the world, the environment and ourselves, and threatens, if the Bush administration has its way, outer space.

"We have breathed the grits of it in, all our lives," Levertov wrote in the late 1960s, "our lungs are packed with it, the mucous membrane of our dreams/ coated with it, the imagination/ filmed over with the gray filth of it."

Yes, this is the knowledge that jostles for space  
in our bodies along with all we  
go on knowing of joy, of love:  
our nerve filaments twitch with its presence  
day and night,  
nothing we say has not the husky phlegm of it in the saying,  
nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness,  
the deep intelligence living at peace would have.<sup>6</sup>

In a later poem, "Desolate Light," Levertov describes how that condition weighs on this generation, so that people seldom regard the future optimistically, as they did in earlier centuries, when it was still possible to arrive at "certainties through which/ voices edged into song":

engorged fringes of anemone swaying  
dreamily through deluge,  
gray Lazarus gearing  
the exquisite itch and ache of blood returning.  
Reason has brought us  
more dread than ignorance did.  
Into the open  
well of centuries  
we gaze and see gleaming,  
deep in the black broth at the bottom,  
chains of hope by which our forbearers  
hoisted themselves  
hand over hand toward light.  
But we  
stand at the edge looking back in and knowing  
too much to reasonably hope. Their desired light  
burns us.  
O dread,  
drought that dries  
the ground of joy till it cracks and  
caves in.  
O dread,  
wind that sweeps up the offal of lies,  
sweep my knowledge, too, into oblivion  
drop me back in the well.<sup>7</sup>

Acknowledging this circumstance, especially for artists equally attuned to the awe and wonder of the universe, takes courage; conveying it artfully, even

gracefully, extends the boundaries of lyric poetry, a task that poets in various languages—Czeslaw Milosz in Polish, Pablo Neruda in Spanish, as well as Levertov in English—set for themselves and accomplished. Trying to speak to our condition in a fully human language, in a culture more than half in love with death requires the patience and spiritual strength associated with saints. And few writers are up to it. More often than not, literary critics, as with the rest of us, resort to strategies of pain avoidance, in an attempt to ignore or to camouflage the evil surrounding us. This isn't surprising, since structural violence, as Johann Galtung calls it, seems more horrible than anything traditionally designated or imagined as "evil" in the past.

We all have our favorite "distractions"—the boob tube, conspicuous consumption, and other means of "psychic numbing," as Robert Jay Lifton called it some years ago. Academics are fond of burrowing into underground spaces, linguistic and intellectual distractions, as the bombs fall. Among the more obvious constructs of this kind are those characterized by the discourse of theologians, including the pretense that since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, "a just war," by traditional standards, is likely or possible.

The problem of evil is not, then, how it impinges on our belief or disbelief in God so much as how it impinges on our ability to name and to confront what is before our very eyes. In this regard, one may feel that much of Western philosophical and religious thought stands in our way. Doesn't the word "evil," in English, connote something "out there," rather than "in here"? Am I wrong in suggesting that religious traditions such as Hinduism, Vedanta, Buddhism, in regarding "evil" as being rooted in human greed, hatred, and ignorance—as well as betrayal, perhaps the root of evil of our time—are wiser than Christianity?

"The problem of evil" can be regarded, then, as a linguistic problem, a problem of naming. What was once perhaps an accurate word to describe a wicked deed resulting in harm or suffering has been outdistanced or outmaneuvered or domesticated by humanity's capacity for destruction and injury. Reading Dante, one may be reminded of the limited capacity of people for evil in an earlier time. Even people in the lowest rung of hell seem almost amateurish compared to people responsible for unspeakable crimes in recent history.

If one regards willful murder as "evil," for example, what word conveys the horror of Auschwitz or, worse, Dresden, Hiroshima, or the Christmas 1972 bombing of Vietnam? Or moving closer to the present, how does one "name" the violations of international law represented by the recent destruction of Baghdad's infrastructure, the carpet bombing of Afghanistan, the deaths of an estimated 500 children a month as a result of the UN sanctions against Iraq? The fact that these war crimes are tolerated by so-called civilized people gives a whole new connotation to Hannah Arendt's prescient phrase, "the banality of evil."

So in the face of this “un-named” behavior, we tolerate circumstances that undermine language and thus our capacity to speak truth about what human beings are capable of and what we are doing. Meanwhile, all that goes into making weapons of massive destruction absorb the talents, money, and skills that might feed 24,000 people who die each day of starvation.

People have long killed one another out of jealousy or anger or revenge. But there are those, some responsible for the deaths of thousands, even millions, who seem to feel nothing at all. That appears to be the case with those involved in the making and deployment of weapons of mass destruction. And how does one “measure” the extent of the evil that they (and we, by tolerating it) cause: destruction, psychological and physical wounds, deprivation, waste, environmental damage, “death, death, death, and death”?

Although nothing in Dante’s *Inferno* or Milton’s *Hell* approaches the horror of what we have experienced over the past century or may yet experience, clergy and ethicists and theologians continue to speak as if Augustine’s conditions for evaluating just and unjust wars still apply. Worse, they bless the weapons of mass destruction used repeatedly against innocent civilians. What words adequately convey the deterioration of moral judgment of such failures and deceit?

This lapse of judgment would not be so shocking had modern poets not found language to convey the full implications of modern warfare. The crisis of language was dramatized as early as 1922, when Eliot resorted to a Sanskrit word, “*shanti*,” in *The Waste Land*, to convey the concept of “peace,” as if the English word had died on the Western Front eight years earlier. Ginsberg’s “Howl,” similarly, conveys the spiritual, moral, and psychological consequences, as “the same war” continues, our consciences seared and parts of our brain cut away.

The issues associated with this state of our souls are not easily addressed, I realize. And the fact that “our barbarous tongue”—as the poet William Meredith says—offers only the word “nonviolence,” to contrast the word “violence,” we have trouble imagining alternatives to the *status quo*, as a way of being in the world.<sup>8</sup> Our dilemma has been complicated, as suggested earlier, by recent literary scholarship and criticism. In an effort to evade the full implications of recent poetry, some influential and, even brilliant, critics resort increasingly to abstract theories about literature, as if the full implications of reality, as reflected in contemporary literature, are beyond them.

Living so long with modern warfare has in some ways domesticated it. We plan not only around it, but for it; weapons of mass destruction feed our economy, as arms manufactures remind us. The air strikes in Afghanistan, according to a co-manager of the \$700 million Armada Large

Cap Value Fund, were “what we have been waiting for.” A money-manager at Brandywine Asset Management Co, with shares in General Dynamics and Northrop, was similarly “enthusiastic”: “the events of September 11 really steered the American public to higher defense spending.” The headline for the article quoting these men read, “Protracted fighting would benefit Raytheon and other firms,” with shares climbing from 25 to 46 percent.<sup>9</sup>

How do we awaken from this deep sleep, or more accurately from this drugged state accompanying the on-going escalation of wanton destruction? How does one make visible, as Levertov says in another poem, “not only sapphire continents, swirling oceans,” of our planet, views from outer space, but also “wars—like bonfires, wildfires, forest conflagrations. . . . It should be visible that this bluegreen globe,” the poem concludes, “suffers a canker which is devouring it.”<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Wendell Berry’s poem, “The Morning’s News,” describes the effect of accounts of war’s horror in the popular press. It ends with a suggestion of “what must be done,” according to the speaker in the poem. Meditating on a picture of deliberate murder of one man by another, representing the state, the speaker concludes with a mournful reflection on “what must be done”:

I am sickened by complicity in my race.  
 To kill in hot savagery like a beast  
 Is understandable. If is forgivable and curable.  
 But to kill by design, deliberately, without wrath,  
 that is the sullen labor that perfects Hell.  
 The serpent is gentle, compared to man.  
 It is man, the inventor of cold violence,  
 death as waste, who has made himself lonely  
 among the creatures, set himself aside,  
 so that he cannot work in the sun with hope,  
 or sit at peace in the shade of any tree.  
 The morning’s news drives sleep out of the head  
 at night. Uselessness and horror hold the eyes  
 open to the dark. Weary, we lie awake  
 in the agony of the old giving birth to the new  
 without assurance that the new will be better.  
 I look at my son, whose eyes are like a young god’s,  
 that are so open to the world.  
 I look at my sloping fields now turning  
 green with the young grass of April. What must I do  
 to go free? I think I must put on  
 a deathlier knowledge, and prepare to die  
 rather than enter into the design of man’s hate.  
 I will purge my mind of the airy claims  
 of church and state. I will serve the earth  
 and not pretend my life could better serve.<sup>11</sup>

"Conscientious Objector," a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay written after World War I, expressed something of the same sentiment, with the speaker saying: "I shall die, but that is all I shall do for Death; I am not on his payroll." In our time, when every family automatically pays \$2500 a year to "Death," that is, the manufacture and deployment of nuclear weapons, Americans can no longer make such a claim. The burden of recent poetry has been to explore that unpleasant truth and to chart the anatomy of evil in our time.

If conscience is, as Terrence Des Pres wrote, "the collective effort to come to terms with evil, to distill a moral knowledge equal to the problems at hand,"<sup>12</sup> one could argue that we have failed to hear what those most attentive to the connotations and denotations of language have been telling us. And although it is difficult, as William Carlos Williams said, "to get the news from poems," his conclusion seems accurate enough, that "men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there."<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

1. *The Inferno of Dante*, trans. Robert Pinsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), p. 65. Virgil is observing the second ring of the seventh circle of hell.
2. Cited and commented on in John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), pp. 9ff.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
4. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. 2, 1939–1962, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1988), pp. 321–24.
5. Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959), p. 21.
6. Denise Levertov, *Poems 1960–1967* (New York: New Directions, 1967), pp. 229–30.
7. Denise Levertov, *Candles in Babylon* (New York: New Directions, 1982), p. 77.
8. William Meredith, "The Jain Hospital in Delhi," in *Partial Accounts: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), pp. 174–75.
9. Lawrence (Mass.), *Eagle Tribune*, October 9, 2001, pp. 4–5.
10. Denise Levertov, *Sands in the Well* (New York: New Directions, 1996), p. 56.
11. Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems, 1957–1982* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), p. 109.
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# THE TRIAL OF MAN AND THE TRIAL OF GOD: JOB AND DOSTOEVSKY'S GRAND INQUISITOR

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## 1

All great books are books of unlearning. Regardless of what they may teach us, no matter what novelty they bring, these works invariably lead us away from our well-trodden paths and thus expose our cherished illusions. All great books take away our crutches and force us to walk on our own two feet.

The ancient Book of Job and Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* are two such books. Although composed in different eons, they stand beside each other like two complementary reflections of the same reality. Both epics center on what Sophocles called the most mysterious of all questions: What is man?, and both Dostoevsky and the mysterious writer of the Book of Job approach this wonder through man's affiliation with God. While the biblical tale indicates that the answer to this riddle is in the hands of God, Dostoevsky's modern drama turns the story around by suggesting that the enigma of God can be resolved only through solving the riddle of man. In the Book of Job man is put on trial and God is to be his judge; in *The Brothers Karamazov* God is the accused and man presides over his trial. Paradoxically, however, these trials teach us more about these alleged

judges and prosecutors than about the accused, and in both cases many of our misconceptions about those enforcing justice are dispelled. What are, then, those misconceptions and how can we liberate ourselves from them?

## 2

The Book of Job is about a trial of man. Job's integrity, indeed, every man's integrity is tested in the most challenging way: Does he respect God for the right reason? Is he pious and obedient only because of his self-interest and pride; or is there something else that can motivate man's inner convictions and external behavior? Unlike his friends, Job gets a passing mark from his judge, God. He emerges from his trial as if reborn, spiritually stronger and wiser.

That life itself is a trial is an idea as old as the human race. We find its countless illustrations and endless variations in mythology, religion, art, and everyday experience. "The hero with a thousand faces" receives a call and, if he is courageous enough to answer it, he is initiated onto the road of a challenging and dangerous trial. The hero descends into an underworld and, if he survives the adventure, returns to share his otherwise unsharable experience with his community.

In many ancient tales a life of trial and truth is a life of suffering and torture, and the Book of Job is not an exception. Where the narrative of Job stands out is in its highlighting of the two issues that touch on the very core of human existence: the meaning of suffering and the nature of justice. Job and his friends are not aware of the holy bet made in heaven, when the Accuser seduces God into allowing him to test the true integrity and the depth of faith of God's most fearful and devoted servant. In the "Prologue in Heaven," human suffering is understood as a way of testing man's righteousness, an experiment to determine the kind of stuff man is made of.

The faithful servant Job, the one who conscientiously feared God and avoided evil, is stripped of his elevated social status and his enormous riches; more tragically, his ten children all die. The highest man is brought lower than a person might believe possible; an uncrowned ruler is turned into a scarecrow, ugly and distorted almost beyond recognition. This is where the second act of the drama takes place, when his friends come to console the wounded man. Seven days and seven nights they mourn in silence; then the fireworks of words turns the stillness of shared pain into an explosion of accusation. Although highly emotionally charged, the friends do not lose their rational composure and present a perfectly valid argument to Job:

All suffering comes from God. You, Job, are suffering. God is just. Therefore, you, Job, are guilty.<sup>1</sup>

In the face of this impeccable reasoning, Job must have recognized not only the “wisdom” of his culture, tradition, and religion, but also his own former view. For could we doubt that he himself did not believe that all suffering was a result of sin? Have we not been told that Job was afraid that his own children may have unknowingly sinned against God? The God of retribution must have been Job’s God as well, and yet Job cannot accept the conclusion of his friends’ reasoning. But if he is innocent, what went wrong with the syllogism? The first premise is acceptable: All suffering comes from God. The second premise must be: I, Job, am innocent. Therefore . . . Therefore what? Therefore, God is unjust. Therefore God is unjust because he allows the wicked to live unpunished and crushes into dust some of those who are innocent.

If the demolition of his family and the sores that covered his entire body did not cause Job’s cup to overflow, this realization certainly did. From this point on, he could no longer say: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken; may the name of the Lord be blessed.” His friends pushed Job against the wall of what is acceptable and believable, and the wall crumbled. Job had good reasons to embrace the heretical conclusion; his own fate may have been his best evidence. And yet something in him refused to find solace in accusing God for his misery and perhaps the misery of the whole world. It is as if in Job’s heart and mind God himself splintered into two: one unjust deity, who appears indifferent to how suffering and sin are interrelated, and one just god, his expected “witness in heaven,” who does care about his creatures and lives up to the human conception of justice.<sup>2</sup>

The friends are tireless in repeating their well-rehearsed lessons, but Job addresses his troubled mind and his questioning words more and more toward the two-headed deity. The friends act as an extended hand of the unsympathetic and suspicious Accuser, but Job demands to hear not so much the charge but the verdict from the ultimate judge. The relatively gentle shower of “friendly persuasion” gives way to the highest discharge of thunder, and we find ourselves at the culminating act of the drama.

What the voice from the whirlwind tells Job is difficult enough to repeat; it is an even bigger problem to discern the message of those perplexing words. The voice addresses Job from the heavenly heights and paints before him a majestic tapestry of creation. But the voice displays more than mere grandeur, connectedness and wholeness of an endless chain of being; the powerful voice of the unnamable is clearly offended by Job’s questions:

Who is this whose ignorant words  
Smear my design with darkness? (38:2–3)

It seems that all of the previous trials of Job will be nothing in comparison with what follows, for the voice keeps charging:

Where you there when I planned the earth,  
Tell me, if you are so wise. (38:4-5)

A breathtaking battery of “Were you there when . . .?” questions is more than sufficient to silence Job and make him aware of his ignorance and insignificance. He realizes that he has to put his hand to his mouth and speak no more; he concedes that he will be quiet, comforted that he is dust.

Did not Job, then, fail the trial? Is he not going to be further punished for his lack of faith? Surprisingly, Job is rewarded. Not only is he rewarded by a rare (for a human being all too rare) opportunity to hear the voice of the unnamable, but his previous status, riches, and family are restored and multiplied. It is his friends who are reproached; it is they who fail the trial.

Reading the Epilogue almost inevitably brings the question: Why exactly was Job rewarded? Was it because he was unjustly tried and punished in the first place? Or perhaps because of his refusal to succumb under the pressure of his friends and admit his unknown sin? Or was it because during the bitter exchange with the friends Job was already becoming aware of the inadequate conception of God that the friends so unquestionably defended? Or was it perhaps because Job, despite all the terrible trials, never lost his faith in his incomprehensible God? Or was Job rewarded because he was able to learn the lesson that the voice of the unnamable intended to teach him?

The only clue that we find in the Epilogue is the twice-repeated claim that Job spoke the truth about God and his friends did not. But what exactly did Job say about God that was true? And what was the falsehood that the friends uttered? If anything, it seems that the friends defended God by claiming that he is just. Job, by contrast, presented a taunting possibility that God is not just, or that there is an aspect of God that is not just. Is this where Job spoke the truth and the friends did not?

Subtle is the Lord, not only in his speech from the whirlwind, but in the Epilogue as well. Subtle is the Lord, and his words may have been directed not toward the letter but toward the spirit of Job’s disagreement with his friends. It is hardly possible to overlook the fact that the majestic voice from the whirlwind does not address at all the question of God’s justice and injustice over which Job and his friends so bitterly contested. Instead of speaking in plain, human language, the voice expresses itself in puzzles:

Does the rain have a father?  
Who has begotten the dew?

Out of whose belly is the ice born?  
Whose womb labors with the sleet? (38:28–31)<sup>3</sup>

Does the rain have a father? How is Job to resolve this *koan*, if both the positive and the negative answers are meaningless? Does the rain have a father? What does that have to do with the question of whether or not God is just? What does it have to do with Job speaking truly about God?

Perhaps the Lord of the Epilogue should have said that Job spoke more truly than his friends, or that Job thought more profoundly about God than his friends. Even better, the difference is that Job truly thought about God and pondered what his real nature might be, while the friends did not think at all. All they did was endlessly repeat a few accepted clichés, and accuse Job of daring to look behind the wall of dogmatized faith. If, as the author of the Book of Job seems to insist, God is truly unnamable, God is then unknown and incomprehensible. God is unknown and incomprehensible from the point of view of our human worries and concerns. God's true nature may then be a real *koan* we human beings should try to solve.

If God's nature (and not the question of whether the rain has a father) is man's real puzzle, Job has certainly advanced further toward resolving this puzzle than his friends. For he tried not just a worn-out answer but its negation: perhaps God is not just, after all. This does not mean that the human understanding of justice is the way of comprehending the nature of God, just as the human understanding of parentage is not the way of comprehending the nature of rain. What Job may have realized while listening to the exalted voice is just how inappropriate the human terms "justice" and "injustice" are in trying to grasp the ways of God. It may be that he realized that those concepts are the crutches that were taken away from him, and that even before he tried to walk again, he needed to bow deep in front of the awesome and overpowering voice from the whirlwind. Overwhelmed and mystified, Job swallowed his pride, surrendered in front of the unnamable, and was redeemed.

### 3

There are many puzzling questions left unanswered in the Book of Job. One of them deals with the bet in heaven: Why would God allow Satan to test Job?<sup>4</sup> Does not God already know the ultimate result of the test? If he does, whom is he trying to reassure of Job's true faith? Himself? Or the Accuser? Or he is trying to teach man a lesson and thereby allow him to grow further?

Another important puzzle concerns the disappearance of Satan after the Prologue. What happens to the Accuser? Is he expelled from heaven

and punished to wander forever around the earth? Or, if the Accuser is neither fully expelled nor destroyed, has he perhaps become integrated with another being? Could it be that Satan is somehow integrated into human beings and the human psyche? Or is he perhaps integrated by God and within God? Or both human beings and God?

The most pressing question of all may be the one dealing with Job's acceptance of the voice from the whirlwind as if it provided a satisfactory answer to his questions. Why did Job not pursue his questions when he finally got the opportunity to do so? Was he really satisfied with, or perhaps even enlightened by, what the voice told him, or was he simply overwhelmed by the awesome presence of the Lord?<sup>5</sup>

We will never have definitive answers to these questions, but we know that after Job, the triangular relationship between God, Satan and man could never be the same. The voice from the whirlwind satisfied Job's heart and mind, but did not silence those who came after him. Although Job bowed himself to the ground, many of his successors were not willing to follow his example. Job was the first to assert the right of man against God the Creator: he demanded to know, to hear an explanation for his unbearable and unjust suffering. He demanded a common measure between God and man, the same yardstick to be used for man's actions and God's actions. When his friends told him to confess his sins and pray for grace, Job refused to bow and asked for justice. Then, and in the eons to come, man continued to ask for justice: one justice and justice for all.

At the end, Job put his hand over his mouth, but his new sons and daughters (and their sons and daughters) did not. And ever since, they have kept asking forbidden questions and challenging God. If Job may be an archetypal model to some of us, he did not look that way to his new children. Not Job but Prometheus became their model; not Job but Prometheus became the idol of modern man.

If Job is a symbol of faith, Prometheus is a symbol of action. If Job has a clear and deeply rooted awareness of the drawbacks and limitations of human knowledge, those boundaries are blurred for Prometheus. He does not look backwards, toward the past and tradition, but forwards, toward the future progress of mankind. If Job is overpowered by nature, if for him wild beasts and uninhibited wilderness are as much a care to his God as man and his dwellings, the fire of Prometheus leads modern man to believe that he can tame nature and force it to serve his interest. While Job regards Behemoth and Leviathan as untamable by man, Prometheus wants to expel and eliminate these beasts from his reality.

Job is God's servant. He is a servant who, in the highest moment of his admiration for his Lord, surrenders to the beatific vision of reality blue-printed by the voice from the whirlwind. Prometheus is not God's servant.

At most, he is a son, a rebellious youth dissatisfied with himself, his father, and the rest of the creation. If Job dares ask God for an explanation of why the world is created the way it is, the modern Promethean man goes much further. He wants to modify, even recreate the creation, and wonders whether an improved creation can surpass its original creator. Modern man refuses to accept creation as it is and wonders whether the creature can reject the creator. With Prometheus, it is not man but God who is on trial. And this is where Dostoevsky's novel becomes relevant for our story.

#### 4

*The Brothers Karamazov* is about a trial of God. It is a tale of four sons' lost faith in their father, the murder of the father, and the subsequent struggle of the sons to find meaningful orientation in a harsh and confusing world. The old Fyodor Karamazov is an indifferent and unconcerned father; worse yet, he is selfish, lustful and despicable. If the father Karamazov in any way symbolizes the father in heaven, that God has been seduced by Satan and is united with him. If Fyodor Karamazov symbolizes a deity, it is a fallen one.

Dostoevsky's novel approach is not in this treatment of the father; for centuries before, this father has lost his credibility and claim to respect in the eyes of his children. For centuries since, he is perceived as an abusive stepfather of his children, rather than their true guardian. He failed his trial miserably.

Dostoevsky is more interested in how the children plot to get rid of their father and how the orphans react to a new reality without a supreme authority. Put differently, Dostoevsky is deeply concerned with the consequences of man putting god on trial and deifying himself. One of the culminating and most brilliant peaks of this generally brilliant novel is reached in the chapter on "The Grand Inquisitor." This is a tale invented by one of the brothers, Ivan. Ivan is a rebellious, progressive and "disillusioned" youth, gifted by a powerful reason and crippled by his inability to love and feel any genuine feeling for his family members or his fellow human beings. Ivan symbolizes a modern cosmopolitan man; he is a man of science and progressive socialist vision. And he is a man opposed to the irrational bounds of religion and tradition. Ivan presents the story of the Grand Inquisitor to his younger brother, Alyosha, a simple lad, traditional, compassionate and deeply religious. Alyosha is no intellectual match for Ivan, but he has a good heart and a genuine desire to understand and befriend his alienated older brother.

Ivan opens their conversation by showing off his superior knowledge. He speaks of Voltaire's mocking idea that, if God did not exist, it would be necessary for man to invent him. Moreover, like Feuerbach, Ivan really

believes that man has invented God, but directs his battery of complaints not so much against God as against his creation. In the chapter that very much resembles the Book of Job, Ivan speaks of human suffering. This time the emphasis is not on the suffering of one individual but on the suffering of collective humanity. To make his case strong, Ivan speaks of the suffering of children, those who could not possibly be responsible for their terrible fates. Against God and his flawed creation, Ivan demands justice. If this justice is to be directed against the creator, so be it. If this justice demands that the creator be separated and forever detached from his creation so that man can correct his injustices, so be it. *Fiat iustitia, ruat caelum.*

Ivan's rebellion already oversteps anything that Job was willing to do, but Ivan takes that rebellion a step further when Alyosha counters Ivan's demand for unconditional justice by reminding his brother of love and forgiveness, of the legacy of Jesus. Perhaps Yahweh, the old fearful and powerful deity of the Old Testament, failed his trial, but what about God's loving and forgiving son? This is where Ivan brings in his story, which is a masterfully composed tale about the Second Coming of Jesus and the resistance he encounters. The resistance comes from the Grand Inquisitor, a powerful old cardinal living in seventeenth-century Spain. In the tightly structured world of the middle ages, the world with regular spectacles of heretics burning *ad maiorem gloriam Dei*, Jesus reappears and continues to miraculously heal the sick and poor. The Grand Inquisitor has him arrested, and visits the prisoner that night in his cell. Far more sophisticated than Pontius Pilate or Job's learned friends, the cardinal accuses Jesus of disturbing the well-oiled social order and demands that he depart from this world, fenced by the high walls of the institutionalized religion, once and forever. In this contemptuous trial of Jesus, the proud cardinal presents a logically convincing case against his prisoner. The freedom that Jesus preached overestimates man's capacities and is too much of a burden for him; it neglects man's need for earthly bread and security, and encourages man to strive toward an ideal that is too high and unattainable. The church, the only true helper of the weak and desperate masses, has built its protective walls and within the confines of those walls has secured the only realistically possible justice, freedom, and happiness for an ordinary man. The Grand Inquisitor and those like him who sacrifice themselves in order to protect humanity are of course aware of the difference between the true Jesus and their projection of him. But their noble goal has to be carried out by all possible means, even if they include illusions and lies, the converting sword and the burning fires of inquisition. The Grand Inquisitor's ultimate verdict is clear, harsh, and irrevocable: this is the world of man and for man, and Jesus has no business here and should forever depart from it. The speechless Jesus departs by kissing the Grand Inquisitor "on his bloodless, aged lips."

## 5

The legend of the Grand Inquisitor leaves as many questions unanswered as the Book of Job. The most obvious ones deal with the conclusion of the story. Why does Jesus not say anything to the wicked old man? Why, unlike Job, does he not protest and defend his innocence? What is the meaning of the kiss? Is the kiss some mystifying symbol that expresses a faith in the ultimate victory of good over evil or an ultimate victory of truth and love over deception and power?<sup>6</sup> Or is it rather recognition of a lost war—an admission that the whole of mankind is already delivered to Satan?

The second group of questions deals with the division of humanity into two camps: the strong and ruling minority and the weak and obedient majority. If man rejects the relationship of master and servant with respect to god, why introduce this relationship among human beings? What does this relationship mean if not that some men now, after rejecting god, deify themselves? Is not the deification of man the true motive lying behind the trial of god?<sup>7</sup>

Finally, how brave are those brave inquisitors and Ivans? Those bravest of the brave, those deified individuals, are they god-like or devilish?<sup>8</sup> Into what brave new world are they leading humanity? While in the Book of Job Satan's restrained attempt to ruin one man seems defeated, is not this prince of darkness the one who has the last laugh on the entire world?

If Dostoevsky feared anything, it was the deification of man. If there is anything to unlearn in *The Brothers Karamazov*, it is how much the self-glorification of man should be avoided and resisted. While Ivan is significantly better off than his brothers at the beginning of the novel, at its end his life is in ruins. He is caught in a maze, a confusing triangle of his own shattered self, the devil that visits him more and more frequently, and his idiotic semi-brother Smerdyakov who first commits a parricide and later a suicide. Ivan's superiority turns into a madness of the sick intellect, the insanity of an intellect uprooted from the rest of his being and external reality. It is hardly possible to doubt that Dostoevsky believed that such self-deification would bring disaster to those narcissistically self-absorbed, those around them, and perhaps even to the world as a whole. Radical pride begets radical evil.<sup>9</sup>

The conclusion of the novel, as well as Dostoevsky's correspondence, indicate that his hopes for the rehabilitation of man and the world were placed in Alyosha. That is to say, they are on the side of the true Orthodox Christian faith. If God is dead, or if God is dismissed from this world, there arises a terrible problem of authority. Without God, everything is permissible, as Raskolnikov already realized and as Ivan tries to convince Alyosha. This is Dostoevsky's worst nightmare, and trusting in Alyosha entails trying to restore faith in God's authority: Perhaps, like Job's friends, we have

misunderstood and misrepresented God. Perhaps we have imposed our misconception of justice, human justice, on God, and he failed the trial because of the failed standard by which we measured his creation.<sup>10</sup> The true Christian God is not the God of justice but the God of grace and mercy.

Alyosha carries this message of a merciful God throughout the novel. But he is only a young man innocent of the ways of the world, and yet to mature fully. He is an angel-like figure, and, like every angel, the content of messages he carries around depends on others. Alyosha has, indeed, a venerable teacher, the Elder Zosima, who is a saintly figure and a true advocate of love and forgiveness. There are, nevertheless, puzzling things about the revered teacher. He repeatedly tells Alyosha to leave the monastery; his path should not be that of a monk. Furthermore, Zosima dies soon after Ivan presents the story of the Grand Inquisitor, virtually in the middle of the novel. And when he dies, his corpse has an unbearable smell, as if to turn everyone away not only from his dead body but from his faith as well.

It is hard to avoid the impression that, while one part of Dostoevsky intended Alyosha as our model and the return of a humble and faithful man back to the protection of the merciful and loving God as his solution to the human problem, there was another part of him that hesitated and had doubts.<sup>11</sup> There were good reasons for Dostoevsky to have these doubts and, we, too, should be equally puzzled. Given the unprecedentedly tragic dimension of historical events of the last century, God's bet with Satan from the Book of Job may look like a childish play. While in the biblical tale one man is victimized, *The Brothers Karamazov* is a book about victimized humanity. And, as we know, after Dostoevsky wrote this novel, things did not get any better. In a world shattered by two world wars, Holocaust and the atomic bomb, totalitarianism and terrorism, a belief in a merciful and loving God just as the belief in a wise and omnipotent God ruling history for the good of his creation seems to have no defensible basis.

## 6

If we can trust neither God nor man playing God, what options are left to us? Has Satan managed to estrange God and man after all?

Although the Book of Job and *The Brothers Karamazov* are books of unlearning, it is noteworthy and remarkable that the authors of both books conclude their works on a positive note. God praises Job for his truthfulness and his good fortunes are restored and multiplied. Alyosha reassures his young followers that, together with their recently deceased friend Ilysha, they will all rise from the dead, come back to life, and all meet again. Could we not only unlearn many of our misconceptions about God

and man from these books, but also share their optimistic conclusions? That depends on whether these conclusions have any solid foundation in reality, or whether they are only desperate attempts to restore a vanquished hope.

If Job were to live in our time, his cross would be far heavier to carry. Not only does contemporary man have neither the patience nor the faith of Job, but he would have to bear the burden of all the poor in the world. Not only the third world, but the first world, too, is creating with agonizing speed those who do not have their daily bread and nightly shelter. Would even God be able to feed and protect billions of his abandoned children?

And would God be able to return from the dead all of the countless and nameless victims of the madness of wars, of epidemics of poverty and disease, of racial and religious hatred, of over-flooding floods and never-ending draughts? And how about us who are living more dead than alive? Could God give us the sight to see the blindness of our illusions, and awaken us from the banality of our everyday evil?

In the Book of Job, God is held responsible for human suffering. *The Brothers Karamazov* points the finger in the direction of man. Who, then, is to blame for this valley of tears? And who can open our eyes to the peaks above those valleys? In their provocative and uncompromising accounts of the divine and the human, these books may or may not provide true answers to these difficult questions. They disagree about them and do not provide a unified answer to Sophocles' wonder of all wonders. Yet they certainly and unequivocally agree about something else: It is terribly difficult to be a human being.

## Notes

1. Throughout his book *Job and Death No Dominion* (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2000), Daniel Berrigan emphasizes how logical the friends are.

2. How many conceptions of God are there in the Book of Job? In his book *Job: The Victim of His People*, trans. Y. Freccero (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), René Girard insists on two: a God of persecutors (executioners) and a God of victims. I tend to side with Martin Buber, who distinguishes four conceptions: God of the Prologue (cruel but living and in contact with his creation), God of the friends (a reasonable and rational God removed from his creation), Job's God in the dialogue with his friends (a paradoxical, confusing God who contradicts his revelation by hiding his face), and the God from the whirlwind (a living God who allows things to become themselves). See Buber's article "A God Who Hides His Face," reprinted in *The Dimensions of Job: A Study and Selected Readings*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 56–65.

3. Here I follow Stephen Mitchell's beautiful translation. For his insightful comments of this passage and the entire speech from the whirlwind, see his Introduction, *The Book of Job* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), esp. xviii–xxviii. For

a critical reading of the last part of the book, see Girard, *Job: The Victim of His People*. On Girard's view, the central and by far the most original part of the story of Job is the dialogue with the friends. It is here that Girard finds support for his understanding of the scapegoat mechanism and mimetic desire.

4. Berrigan calls it God's "first mistake"; see *Job and Death No Dominion*, pp. 10ff.

5. Elie Wiesel argues that "Job's resignation . . . was an insult to man. He should not have given in so easily. He should have continued to protest, to refuse the handouts." See his *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 234.

6. Nicholas Berdyaev and René Girard defend such a reading of Dostoevsky's novel. See Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, trans. D. Attwater (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1965), esp. chapter 8, pp. 188–212, and Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Fyodor Dostoevsky*, trans. J. G. Williams (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), esp. chap. 4, pp. 106–42.

7. This is how Berdyaev interprets Dostoevsky; *Dostoevsky*, p. 104.

8. On this point, see Lev Shestov, *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche*, trans. S. Roberts (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969), pp. 217–19.

9. What clearly disturbed Dostoevsky was the possibility of "criminals without crime." Characters such as Ivan Karamazov are not so much evil (in direct or obvious sense of that word) as they are sick. Their sickness is that of a "superior" mind, of the mind highly developed and proud, of the mind obsessed with its own ideals and projections, which after a while cannot discern the boundary between its ideals and reality. Dostoevsky was justifiably afraid that such people would create more wickedness and incomprehensible evil than those who consciously follow their openly wicked intentions.

10. As Horace Meyer Kallen argued, "The most potent, the most subtle and the most pervasive form of the psychologist's fallacy is that which describes the unseen universe as congruous with our own will, as sharing its nature and contributing to its propensity and its final happiness. We persist in this, with a sort of dumb, blind faith, even in the face of the ultimate horrors that man may undergo." Despite the voice from the whirlwind, "on the whole Jewish thought stayed with the more comfortable conception of the prologue-epilogue, of Eliphaz and his comrades, of Elihu. These still prevail, the world over"; *The Book of Job as a Greek Tragedy* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1918), pp. 44–45.

11. Unlike other critics of Dostoevsky, Berdyaev does not admit the existence of this doubt. He even proposes the following radical line of reasoning which, I suspect, is really Berdyaev's rather than Dostoevsky's: "The existence of evil is a proof of the existence of God. If the world consisted wholly and uniquely of goodness and righteousness there would be no need for God, for the world itself would be god. God is, because evil is. And that means that God is because freedom is"; *Dostoevsky*, p. 87.

## THE RESURRECTION OF HELL

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Leo Tolstoy

When Jesus was on earth, his teachings were so clear and easy to follow it seemed that the coming of the Kingdom of God was imminent. Beelzebub, the father and king of all devils, was terrified. He realized that unless Jesus repudiated his teaching, evil's power over man would be forever broken. Yet Beelzebub did not despair. He incited the Scribes and Pharisees, his obedient servants, to revile and torment Jesus as much as possible. He also used his powers to make Christ's disciples lose faith in their master. He hoped that humiliation, abandonment by all his followers, and a terrible execution, would make Christ renounce his teaching in such a way that would destroy all his power.

It was settled at Christ's crucifixion. As Jesus cried out: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Beelzebub rejoiced. He took the chains prepared for Jesus and tried them out on his own limbs so they couldn't be removed from his enemy. But then immortal words were heard: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Now Beelzebub saw that he was totally defeated. He tried to remove his legs from the bonds prepared for Christ but, to his terror, could not move. The very chains were now welded to his limbs. Neither could he move his wings.

So Beelzebub watched in agony as Christ appeared at the gates of Hell, and freed all sinners, from Adam to Judas. He watched as all the devils

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Tolstoy's story was first translated by Aylmer Maude as "The Restoration of Hell"; this translation, quite different, was done by Nalin Ranasinghe and published in *Diotima: A Philosophical Review* 2, no. 1 (2001): 27–36. Used by permission.

scattered, and the walls and foundation of Hell silently collapsed. Beelzebub could not stand to watch this spectacle any longer. Screaming horribly, he plunged into the gaping abyss that had opened up beneath him.

Slowly hundreds of years passed, although Beelzebub could not count the time. He was surrounded by complete darkness and silence. He couldn't help but think hateful thoughts about his victorious enemy. Then suddenly, he heard weeping, groans, and the gnashing of teeth. He raised his head and began to listen intently. That Hell could still be in business was more than he could believe. Yet the sounds grew clearer every minute.

Beelzebub raised himself up and found to his surprise that the chains fell of his limbs. Freely extending his wings he gave the signal by which he had, in better times, called his minions to do his bidding. Instantly, a throng of devils dropped through the opening above, from whence red flames blazed as of old. They assembled around him, like scavengers around a fresh kill. There were devils of all shapes and sizes. A sleek black devil, wearing a cape, with a clean-shaven round face and a huge sagging belly, sat before Beelzebub and smiled as he waved his long slender tail from side to side.

"What's going on there?" demanded Beelzebub, pointing upwards.

"Just what was and is now and always will be," replied the caped demon.

"Are there still sinners?"

"More than ever before."

"But what of the teachings of him whose name I bear not speak?"

Stifled laughter was heard as Beelzebub's caped interlocutor grinned broadly, baring his fangs. "That doesn't hinder us at all. Men just don't believe in it."

"But it clearly saved man from sin, and his death confirmed his victory!"

"All that has been changed," replied the caped demon, rapping on the floor with his tail for emphasis. "It's been arranged so men don't live by his teachings but by mine, although they still use his name as they do my bidding!"

"How did you do this?"

"I only helped a bit. It mostly happened naturally."

"Tell me how!" demanded Beelzebub.

"When Hell was overthrown and you left us, I saw that those who followed his teachings were happy and quite beyond our reach. They did not grow hate, or lust after each other. They didn't own property but held all in common; they turned the other cheek and returned good for evil. They were so kind that other people were increasingly drawn to their way of living. It seemed that all was lost.

"But then something happened. Though insignificant, it caused me to remain hopeful that we might still prevail. Some of his followers demanded that all be circumcised and that none should eat food that the old covenant

had deemed unclean. Others refused to be circumcised and wouldn't accept the old dietary restrictions. I decided to suggest to both sides that this point of principle was of the utmost importance and that God would be angered if they gave in to the other side. They gladly accepted my suggestions and their disputes soon became fierce and quite unchristian.

"I then suggested to both sides that miracles would prove the truth of their beliefs. Even though miracles obviously can do no such thing, they were so anxious to defeat their opponents that they believed the miracles that I arranged for them. This was very easy. They were pathetically willing to believe anything which suggested that they alone were in the right.

"Some claimed that tongues of flame had entered their souls while others claimed to have been consecrated by the risen body of their master and lord. They kept inventing incredible stories to prove their rightness and using the name of the very person who exposed our lies, matched and surpassed us, lie for lie. While they exposed the falsity of their rivals' miracles, they refused to admit that their own miracles had been woven of the same fabric of lies.

"Although things were going very well, I was afraid that they might eventually see through my flimsy deceptions, so I invented 'the Church.' Once they swallowed, this, the greatest of all my deceptions, I rested. I saw that this was very good indeed. We had snatched victory from the very jaws of defeat, and all the legions of heaven had lost."

"What is 'the Church'?" asked Beelzebub sternly, secretly elated but still unwilling to admit that this fat scoundrel was so much more successful than he.

"When these hypocrites utter untruths and suspect that they will not be believed, they always call upon God to be their witness. This, in essence, is 'the Church', but I built in another wrinkle. Those who call themselves 'the Church' convince themselves that they cannot go wrong, so they convince themselves that they cannot and must not repudiate their lies. This greatest of lies is what they call 'infallibility'. I taught these pathetic men that God, to ensure that he should not be misunderstood, gave power to certain men, and to those to whom they chose to transfer this power, that they alone could infallibly interpret his teachings. So these men, who collectively call themselves 'the Church' regard themselves as possessing the truth, not because what they have passed on is good or reasonable, but simply because they see themselves as the only true heirs of the disciples, their hated master, and finally of God himself.

"While even a fool could see that so many conflicting authorities cannot all be right, this state of affairs only brings more 'infallible' factions into existence. As soon as men have declared that they are 'The Church', and have staked their entire credibility on that claim, they can't repudiate their words, however absurd, no matter what others say."

“But why did the Church misinterpret his teachings in our favor?”

“Once they established themselves as the only interpreters of God’s law. And having convinced others of this, they obtained the highest power. And having gained that power they naturally became proud and wicked, and so they earned the hatred and enmity of others. In the inevitable strife that followed, having no means but violence at their disposal—since their doctrines were so irrational—they persecuted, tortured and burned all who rejected their infallible authority. Even when they knew they were wrong, they were forced to misinterpret the true teachings of the savior to justify their sinful ways and the horrendous cruelties that were used against their rivals and enemies.”

“But his teaching was so simple and clear,” marveled Beelzebub, still unwilling to grant that his mastery of the ways of evil had been so surpassed by this fat toad, “that it was impossible to misinterpret. ‘Do unto others as you would that they should do to you!’ how can that be misinterpreted?”

“Well, I used various techniques,” replied the devil in the cape. “There is a story about a good magician who to save a man from an evil enchanter turned him into a grain of wheat; the enchanter, turned himself into a cock to eat the grain, but the good magician emptied a whole sack of grain over it. The enchanter could not eat up all the grain, and so could not eat the grain he wanted. That’s just what they did with the teaching that the law consists in doing unto others what we wish them to do to us. They accepted sixty-six disparate writings as God’s sacred word, and declared that every word was written by the Holy Ghost. Over the simple and clear truth was poured so much chaff that it was impossible to either accept all or identify the one truth necessary for man.

“This was the first method. The second, which was used successfully for over a millennium, consisted in burning and killing anyone who wished to reveal the truth. Nowadays, though they do not torture or burn, they slander and so ruin the lives of the lovers of truth that few have the courage to oppose them publicly. The third method is that, by asserting themselves as the infallible Church, they teach what suits them even when it flatly contradicts the original teachings. This so demoralizes those who try to reconcile the original teachings with those of ‘the Church’ that after a while they resign themselves to passive acceptance of whatever the powers that be dictate.

“For instance, it is said: ‘Call no man your father on earth, only your Father in heaven. Neither should you have earthly masters, for your only master is Christ’. But they set themselves up as the holy fathers and masters of mankind. Or again, it is said: ‘When you pray do so secretly, and God will hear you’, but they force men to pray collectively in churches, with singing and music. Also, their master told them not to swear or use God’s name in

vain, but they demand that men should make oaths of obedience to the authorities. God also said, 'You shall not kill', but their laws teach that men should and must kill all who oppose their authority or corrupt laws. Or again they teach that if bits of bread are dipped in wine and certain words are uttered over them these scraps of bread becomes the flesh of their master, and the wine turns into his blood, they say that eating this bread and drinking this wine is very profitable for the soul's afterlife. Men believe this drivel and diligently eat these scraps. Later, when through their very gullibility they fall into our hands they are amazed that these scraps have not helped them." The fat devil rolled his eyes and grinned broadly. At this, all the devils broke out into loud laughter.

"Excellent," exclaimed Beelzebub, no longer able to withhold his approval.

"Can it be possible that things are just as they were before his victory? Are there still fornicators, robbers, and murderers?" asked Beelzebub, now quite cheerful.

The devils now all spoke at once, trying to show off to him.

"Not just as they were before, but even better!"

"We can't find enough room for all of the adulterers into their circle in hell."

"The robbers have grown even more desperate."

"Our only difficulty is in finding enough wood to burn the murderers!"

"Don't all speak together," said Beelzebub, "but answer my questions in turn. Who promotes adultery? Please tell me how you now deal with the teachings that forbid divorce and held that a man should not look at a woman lustfully."

"Me, Sir!" replied an effeminate brown devil, with a fat oily face and a drooling mouth, and he crawled up. He crept up and told of his deeds in a sing-song voice: "We use both the traditional method employed by you in Eden, which delivered humanity into our power, and also a new, ecclesiastical way. In the ecclesiastical way we persuade people that real marriage is not what it really is—the spiritual union of man and woman—but in buying very expensive clothes, going into a building extravagantly decked up for the occasion, and performing a stupid ritual. We arrange matters so people look forward to the ceremony more than to the sacred spiritual union itself. And believing this, they conclude that every copulation apart from these conditions is merely a bodily gratification without any strings attached, or a mere hygienic necessity."

The effeminate devil continued with his report: "In this way, while not neglecting the classic tactics used in Eden, of curiosity and forbidden fruit, we obtain optimal results. Imagining that they can have an honest Church marriage even after sleeping with (and ruining) many women, men take many mistresses and become so habituated in adultery that they continue in this

way even after their Church marriage. And if for any reason their marriage still seems irksome, they pay a small fee and arrange for another petty ritual to be performed and the first ceremony is rendered null and void.”

“Simple and elegant,” said Beelzebub. “Now, who is the patron of the robbers?”

“I am,” replied a big devil with large crooked horns, pointed moustaches, and great misshapen paws. Having crawled to the front like the previous one, this devil twirled his moustaches in military fashion and stood at attention as he waited to be questioned.

“My once victorious enemy,” said Beelzebub, “taught men to live like the birds of heaven, and saying that for salvation, men should own no possessions, urged men to give charity to all who sought it, giving away their coat to one who would steal his cloak. How do you encourage men who have heard these words to go on robbing?”

“I do it,” said the moustached demon, tossing back his head majestically, “just as you, our father and ruler, did when Saul was king of Israel. Then as now, we promote the idea that instead of robbing one another, it is more convenient to allow one to rob them all by letting him rule over them. My only innovation consists in setting up a new ritual to confirm this special privilege to rob and pillage all. We lead him into a specially big and expensive church, put a heavy metal cap on his head, seat him in a high and uncomfortable chair, put a stick and a ball in his hand, smear him all over with rancid vegetable oil, and in the name of God and his son, proclaim the person of this oil-smeared mortal to be sacred. It follows that the plundering carried on by this person can in no way be restricted. So these sacred crooks and their helpers, and the assistants of their helpers, all rob and pillage the common people unceasingly, calmly, and safely. Simultaneously, laws and decrees are enacted to permit an idle few to legally rob and plunder the working masses with impunity. Indeed, in some lands now the plundering goes on without any sacred anointed arch-robber personage at all. As you see, our method is practically the old one. We have merely made it more general, secret, widespread and more stable.

“We have made the method more general in this way: formerly people submitted freely to whoever they elected, now they must submit not to someone they have chosen, but to anyone who turns up and claims to have the authority of the anointed one. Our method is also more secret: now those who are robbed do not see those who rob them. The method is more widespread because not content with robbing their own so-called Christian nations using very strange excuses, and especially on the pretext of spreading Christianity, they also rob all other nations who have anything worth stealing by proclaiming religious wars in the name of the Prince of Peace. This new method is more extended over time than the old one thanks to

public and State loans. They now rob not only the present generation but mortgage future ones as well.

"This method has been made more stable by making the persons of the chief plunderers sacred, so people are afraid to oppose them. Once the chief plunderer is smeared with oil, he may quietly go on plundering as much as he likes from whomever he wishes. Once, in Russia, I anointed one after another two very wicked women, stupid, illiterate, and dissolute, who even by these stupid laws, had no claim to be anointed. The last of these was a criminal who murdered both her husband and her legal heir. Just because she had been smeared with oil, people did not deal with her as they would treat other wantons who killed their husbands, instead they slavishly submitted to her for thirty years, letting her and her numerous lovers plunder their goods and deprive them of liberty. Today, simple open robberies—slitting a purse, or stealing goods or cattle—are hardly a one-millionth part of all the legal robberies which are continually being performed by the anointed ones and their minions. Today, unmasked robberies, and general dishonesty are so profitable that the chief purpose of life for all is plunder. The only restraint is placed by mutual strife between the various thieves."

"Well done," declared Beelzebub. "But what of the murderers? Who looks after their interests?"

"I do," said a blood-red devil, stepping forward. He had sharp horns, fangs sticking from his mouth, and a thick tail that stood proudly to attention.

"How do you get men to murder when they follow one who said: 'Do not give evil for evil, but love your enemies?'"

"In the good old way," replied the red devil in a very loud voice, "through greed, discord, spite, vengeance, and pride. In the good old way we convince the teachers to teach men not to murder by publicly and cruelly murdering those who have committed murder. This method actually prepares a whole new crop of murderers in the spectators of these gruesome executions. An even greater number of murderers continue to be spawned by three hypocritical doctrines: infallibility, marriage and equality.

"The doctrine of infallibility yielded the best crop of murderers. Violent men who identified themselves as pillars of the infallible Church believed that they placed their souls in jeopardy by allowing false interpreters of God's teaching to lead men astray. Concluding that these actions would be pleasing to God, they killed whole populations, executed and burned hundreds of thousands of people. Ironically, those who understood the true teachings of God—our most dangerous enemies—were seen as our servants, that is, servants of the devils; while those who executed and burned them at the stake, and who were actually our obedient servants, saw themselves as saints fulfilling the will of God.

"Today, also, many murderers are given us by the teaching of Church concerning marriage and equality. The institution of marriage leads spouses to kill each other and their children. Husbands and wives kill each other when the law of ecclesiastical marriage restricts their freedom to enjoy lascivious pleasure: but mothers often kill their children chiefly when offspring are born outside the legal definition of wedlock.

"Although murders caused by the teaching of equality do not occur often, when they do, they happen in vast numbers. People are taught that all are equal before the law. However, the victims of injustice and plunders discover how untrue this is. They discover that the law only permits the robber to plunder with impunity while they are restrained from retaliation or emulation. When they retaliate against these robbers, ten of thousands of murders are committed."

"What about war? How do you make the followers of he who told men that they should love their enemies since they all were sons of one father, go to war?"

The red devil smirked, spat out a cloud of fire and brimstone and triumphantly slapped himself on the back with his thick tail. "Easy, each nation is persuaded by us that it is the very best in the world and loved especially by God: *Deutschland über alles*, France, England, Russia all '*über alles*,' and that this nation (its name is legion) has a manifest destiny to dominate all the others. Since we instill the same idea in all nations, they (always feeling paranoid) ceaselessly prepare to defend themselves, and find endless reasons to mistrust one another. But the more one side prepares for defense and builds antagonism towards its neighbor, the more its neighbors hate one another. Thus, today, the followers of he who called us murderers are obsessed with preparations for murder and actual mass-scale acts of murder."

"Very clever indeed," said Beelzebub after a long pause. "But how is it that wise scholars, free from the deception of ecclesiastical dogma, have not exposed these perversions and restored the true teachings?"

"Impossible," said a black devil with a flat receding forehead, protruding ears, and scrawny limbs, speaking in a pompous voice as, wrapped in a colorful mantle, he emerged out of the throng.

"And why not?" asked Beelzebub sternly, irked by this devilish self-assurance.

Quite unabashed, this devil leisurely sat down, not squatting but crossing his weak legs and addressed his master in a confident measured voice. "I continually distract their attention from what it is possible and necessary for them to know, and direct it towards what is unnecessary and inherently unknowable."

"How?"

"I do it in different ways, in accordance with the intellectual fashions and vanities of the time. In the past, I suggested that it was most important

that men should know the mysteries of the Trinity, the origin and nature of Jesus, the divine attributes, and so on. They discussed and argued so much over these matters that they grew angry. They were so preoccupied with these arcane matters that they quite forgot to consider how to live. Thus, they had no desire to know what the divine teacher had said about life. Later, when they grew so confused that they themselves had no idea what they were talking of, I convinced some of them that the wisest man who ever lived was Aristotle, an insufferable pedant who had lived over a thousand years ago in Greece. His authority impeded the path of true learning for many hundreds of years. Others were persuaded that the most important thing of all was to find a stone that could make gold. A third set of men became obsessed with an elixir that would make men immortal. So the cleverest and most learned of men directed their minds to these totally illusory matters.

"I persuaded others that it is most important to know whether it is the earth that moves round the sun or the sun round the earth. When it was discovered that the earth revolves and not the sun, and others ascertained how many million miles the sun was from the earth, they were very glad, now they investigate the distances between the stars still more ardently, even though they know full well that there is an infinite number of stars and that all of these matters are quite irrelevant to human virtue or happiness.

"Others were convinced by me that it was of the utmost importance that they should find out how all the animals came into existence. Though this knowledge was also unnecessary, and evidently impossible—seeing that the number of creatures is almost as great as that of the stars—they still direct all their mental powers to these and similar phenomena. These men are amazed to discover that the more they find out concerning unnecessary things the more these irrelevant questions multiply. As the domain of what remains unknown becomes wider and wider and the subjects of investigation become more and more complex and the knowledge they acquire becomes less and less applicable to life, this does not at all perplex them. Convinced of the supreme importance of their solipsistic pursuits, they continue to investigate, to preach, write, print, and translate accounts of their investigations.

"To perpetually hinder these men from ever again seeing that the establishment of the law of life given in the teaching of Jesus was the only thing necessary, I then convinced them that all ethical systems were relative. They duly concluded that all religious teaching, including the revelations of Jesus, was erroneous and false. Now they try to determine how to live from a science called sociology which studies how badly and unhappily the worst people of the past lived. Thus they attempt to reconstruct the lives of former people on this basis, and deduce general laws of life therefrom, instead of following the teachings of Jesus.

"Then, to compound their errors, I taught them to compete with religious superstition by postulating that science and scientific knowledge is as infallible as the Church. As soon as these scientists were persuaded of their infallibility, they trumpeted around as clear and certain truth matters that were often both necessary and absurd. Yet, having proclaimed these matters as infallibly true, the prestige of science in its rivalry with religion prevents them from exposing what they know full well to be false.

"I'm convinced that as long as these pseudo-intellectuals continue to venerate science, they will never apprehend the spiritual teachings that could so easily destroy us."

"Well done, you good and faithful servant," said Beelzebub, and his face shone like the Morning Star. "You deserve a rich reward."

"But you have forgotten us!" cried the remaining devils.

"What is it that you all do?" asked Beelzebub.

"I am the devil of technology."

"I divide labor."

"I cause perpetual movement."

"I'm the printer's devil."

"I inspire modern art."

"I practice false medicine."

"I cultivate false culture."

"I corrupt educators."

"I teach the art of reforming others."

"I intoxicate."

"I inspire false philanthropy."

"I preach socialism."

"I teach hatred to women," they shrieked in unison, crowding up to Beelzebub.

"Speak one at a time and briefly!" commanded Beelzebub. He turned to the devil of technology: "What do you do?"

"I persuade people that the more they produce and the faster they do so, the better it will be. So, destroying their lives to produce things, men make more and more useless things, while becoming alienated from what is truly necessary to them."

"Splendid! What about you?" asked Beelzebub of the divider of labor.

"I persuade men that since things can be produced quicker by machines than men, men must become machine-like, and the men who are turned into machines hate those who have done this to them."

"Excellent! And you?" said Beelzebub addressing the devil of perpetual movement. "I persuade men that they ought to move from place to place as fast as possible. Thus instead of each improving the place where he is, men spend much of their time moving from place to place."

Beelzebub praised him too.

The printer's devil then stepped forward. He disseminated to as many people as possible all the evil that is done in the world.

The devil of modern art explained that, under the pretext of pleasing men and arousing elevated feelings in them, he fostered their vices.

The devil of false medicine explained that he persuaded men that taking care of their body was the highest value. Since physical anxiety about the body has no end, men not only forget about others but also neglect their spiritual life.

The devil of culture taught people that, to make use of the things created by the devils of technology, division of labor, perpetual motion, printing, art, and medicine, is a virtuous lifestyle, and that a man learned in these artificialities need not try to improve.

The devil of education explained that he persuaded men that while living badly and not even knowing what virtue was, they could teach the right way of living.

His brother, the devil of reforming explained that he taught lazy people that they could best improve themselves by reforming other bad people.

The devil of intoxication taught men that instead of trying to live better, it is better to forget themselves under the influence of wine, opium, tobacco, or morphine.

The devil of philanthropy made rich men with ill-gotten gains even more evil by persuading them that by giving paltry contributions to charity they became saintly and had no need of improvement.

The devil of socialism excited class hatred. The devil of feminine hatred boasted that besides class enmity he aroused enmity between the sexes.

"I am comfort!" "I am fashion!" cried out yet other devils, crawling up.

"I am not so old and stupid as not to understand that once the teaching of life itself is contaminated, everything that might be harmful to us becomes profitable," rejoiced Beelzebub with a loud peal of laughter. "Thank you all!" He sprang to his feet.

The other devils encircled Beelzebub. At one end was the devil in the cape (the inventor of the Church); at the other was the devil in the mantle (who invented science). They clutched each other's paws and the ring was complete. Then, fiendishly laughing, shrieking, and waving their tails, the devils danced round Beelzebub. He danced in the middle, spreading and flapping his wings and throwing his legs up as his shackles mysteriously flew up, beyond hell and beyond the earth itself.

From far above could be heard cries and groans, and weeping and gnashing of teeth.



## THE GULAG ARCHIPELAGO (A FRAGMENT)

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Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn

The day after my arrest my march of penance began: the most recent “catch” was always sent from the army counterintelligence center to the counterintelligence headquarters of the front. They herded us on foot from Osterode to Brodnica.

When they led me out of the punishment cell, there were already seven prisoners there in three and a half pairs standing with their backs to me. Six of them had on well-worn Russian Army overcoats which had been around for a long time, and on their backs had been painted, in indelible white paint, “SU,” meaning “Soviet Union.” I already knew that mark, having seen it more than once on the backs of our Russian POW’s as they wandered sadly and guiltily toward the army that was approaching to *free* them. They had been freed, but there was no shared happiness in that liberation. Their compatriots glowered at them even more grimly than at the Germans. And as soon as they crossed the front lines, they were arrested and imprisoned.

The seventh prisoner was a German civilian in a black three-piece suit, a black overcoat, and black hat. He was over fifty, tall, well groomed, and his white face had been nurtured on gentleman’s food.

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I completed the fourth pair, and the Tatar sergeant, chief of the convoy, gestured to me to pick up my sealed suitcase, which stood off to one side. It contained my officer's equipment as well as all the papers which had been seized as evidence when I was arrested.

What did he mean, carry my suitcase? He, a sergeant, wanted me, an officer, to pick up my suitcase and carry it? A large, heavy object? Despite the new regulations? While beside me six men *from the ranks* would be marching empty-handed? And one representative of a conquered nation?

I did not express this whole complex set of ideas to the sergeant. I merely said: "I am an officer. Let the German carry it."

None of the prisoners turned around at my words: turning around was forbidden. Only my mate in the fourth pair, also an "SU," looked at me in astonishment. (When he had been captured, our army wasn't yet like that.)

But the sergeant from counterintelligence was not surprised. Even though I was not, of course, an officer in his eyes, still his indoctrination and mine coincided. He summoned the innocent German and ordered him to carry the suitcase. It was just as well the latter had not understood our conversation.

The rest of us put our hands behind our backs. The former POW's did not have even one bag among them. They had left the Motherland with empty hands and that is exactly how they returned to her. So our column marched off, four pairs in file. We did not converse with our convoy. And it was absolutely forbidden to talk among ourselves whether on the march, during a halt, or at overnight stops. As accused prisoners we were required to move as though separated by invisible partitions, as though suffocated, each in his own solitary-confinement cell.

The early spring weather was changeable. At times a thin mist hung in the air, and even on the firm highway the liquid mud squelched dismally beneath our boots. At times the heavens cleared and the soft yellow sun, still uncertain of its talent, warmed the already thawing hillocks and showed us with perfect clarity the world we were about to leave. At times a hostile squall flew to the attack and tore from the black clouds a snow that was not really even white, which beat icily on faces and backs and feet, soaking through our overcoats and our footcloths.

Six backs ahead of me, six constant backs. There was more than enough time to examine and re-examine the crooked, hideous brands "SU" and the shiny black cloth on the German's back. There was more than enough time to reconsider my former life and to comprehend my present one. But I couldn't. I had been smashed on the head with an oak club—but I still didn't comprehend.

Six backs! There was neither approval nor condemnation in their swing.

The German soon tired. He shifted the suitcase from hand to hand, grabbed at his heart, made signs to the convoy that he couldn't carry it any

further. At that point his neighbor in the pair, a POW who only a little while before had experienced God knows what in German captivity (but, perhaps, mercy too), took the suitcase of his own free will and carried it.

After that the other POW's carried it in turn, also without being ordered to; and then the German again.

All but me.

And no one said a word to me.

At one point we met a long string of empty carts. The drivers studied us with interest, and some of them jumped up to full height on top of the carts and stared. I understood very quickly that their stares and their malice were directed toward me. I was very sharply set off from the others: my coat was new, long, and cut to fit my figure snugly. My tabs had not yet been torn off, and in the filtered sunlight my buttons, also not cut off, burned with the glitter of cheap gold. It was easy to see I was an officer, with a look of newness, too, and newly taken into custody. Perhaps this very fall from the heights stimulated them and gave them pleasure, suggesting some gleam of justice, but more likely they could not get it into their heads, stuffed with political indoctrination, that one of their own company commanders could be arrested in this way, and they all decided unanimously I had come from the *other* side.

"Aha, the Vlasov bastard got caught, did he! Shoot the rat!"

They were vehement in their rear-line wrath (the most intense patriotism always flourishes in the rear), and they added a good deal more in mother oaths.

They regarded me as some kind of international operator who had, nonetheless, been caught—and as a result the advance at the front would move along faster and the war would come to an end sooner.

How was I to answer them? I was forbidden to utter a single word, and I would have had to explain my entire life to each and every one of them. What could I do to make them understand that I was not a spy, a saboteur? That I was their friend? That it was because of them that I was here? I smiled. Looking up at them, I smiled at them from a column of prisoners under escort! But my bared teeth seemed to them the worst kind of mockery, and they shook their fists and bellowed insults at me even more violently than before.

I smiled in pride that I had been arrested not for stealing, nor treason, nor desertion, but because I had discovered through my power of reasoning the evil secrets of Stalin. I smiled at the thought that I wanted, and might still be able, to effect some small remedies and changes in our Russian way of life.

But all that time my suitcase was being carried by others.

And I didn't even feel remorseful about it! And if my neighbor, whose sunken cheeks were already covered with soft two-week growth of beard

and whose eyes were filled to overflowing with suffering and knowledge, had then and there reproached me in the clearest of clear Russian words for having disgraced the honor of a prisoner by appealing to the convoy for help and had accused me of haughtiness, of setting myself above the rest of them, I would not *have understood him!* I simply would not have understood *what he was talking about*. I was an officer!

And if seven of us had to die on the way, and the eighth could have been saved by the convoy, what was to keep me from crying out: "Sergeant! Save me. I am an officer!"

And that's what an officer is even when his shoulder boards aren't blue!

And if they are blue? If he has been indoctrinated to believe that even among other officers he is the salt of the earth? And that he knows more than others and is entrusted with more responsibility than others and that, consequently, it is his duty to force a prisoner's head between his legs, and then to shove him like that into a pipe . . .

Why shouldn't he?

I credited myself with unselfish dedication. But meanwhile I had been thoroughly prepared to be an executioner. And if I had gotten into an NKVD school under Yezhov, maybe I would have matured just in time for Beria.

So let the reader who expects this book to be a political exposé slam its covers shut right now.

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood. But his name doesn't change, and to that name we ascribe the whole lot, good and evil.

Socrates taught us: *Know thyself!*

Confronted by the pit into which we are about to toss those who have done us harm, we halt, stricken dumb: it is after all only because of the way things worked out that they were the executioners and we weren't.

If Malyuta Skuratov had summoned *us*, we, too, probably would have done our work well!

From good to evil is one quaver, says the proverb.

And correspondingly, from evil to good.

## HELEN'S EXILE

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Albert Camus

The Mediterranean sun has something tragic about it, quite different from the tragedy of fogs. Certain evenings at the base of the seaside mountains, night falls over the flawless curve of a little bay, and there rises from the silent waters a sense of anguished fulfillment. In such spots one can understand that if the Greeks knew despair, they always did so through beauty and its stifling quality. In that gilded calamity, tragedy reaches its highest point. Our time, on the other hand, has fed its despair on ugliness and convulsions. This is why Europe would be vile, if suffering could ever be so.

We have exiled beauty; the Greeks took up arms for her. First difference, but one that has a history. Greek thought always took refuge behind the conception of limits. It never carried anything to extremes, neither the sacred nor reason, because it negated nothing, neither the sacred nor reason. It took everything into consideration, balancing shadow with light. Our Europe, on the other hand, off in the pursuit of totality, is the child of disproportion. She negates beauty, as she negates whatever she does not glorify. And, through all her diverse ways, she glorifies but one thing, which is the future rule of reason. In her madness she extends the eternal limits, and at that moment dark Erinyes fall upon her and tear her to pieces. Nemesis, the goddess of measure and not of revenge, keeps watch. All those who overstep the limit are pitilessly punished by her.

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The Greeks, who for centuries questioned themselves as to what is just, could understand nothing of our idea of justice. For them equity implied a limit, whereas our whole continent is convulsed in its search for a justice that must be total. At the dawn of Greek thought Heraclitus was already imagining that justice sets limits for the physical universe itself: "The sun will not overstep his measures; if he does, the Erinyes, the handmaids of justice, will find him out." We who have cast the universe and spirit out of our sphere laugh at that threat. In a drunken sky we light up the suns we want. But nonetheless the boundaries exist, and we know it. In our wildest aberrations we dream of an equilibrium we have left behind, which we naively expect to find at the end of our errors. Childish presumption which justified the fact that child-nations, inheriting our follies, are now directing our history.

A fragment attributed to the same Heraclitus simply states: "Presumption, regression of progress." And, many centuries after the man of Ephesus, Socrates, facing the threat of being condemned to death, acknowledged only this one superiority in himself: what he did not know he did not claim to know. The most exemplary life and thought of those centuries close on a proud confession of ignorance. Forgetting that, we have forgotten our virility. We have preferred the power that apes greatness, first Alexander and then the Roman conquerors who the authors of our schoolbooks, through some incomparable vulgarity, teach us to admire. We, too, have conquered, moved boundaries, mastered heaven and earth. Our reason has driven all away. Alone at last, we end up by ruling over a desert. What imagination could we have left for that higher equilibrium in which nature balanced history, beauty, virtue, and which applied the music of numbers even to blood-tragedy? We turn our backs on nature; we are ashamed of beauty. Our wretched tragedies have a smell of the office clinging to them, and the blood that trickles from them is the color of printer's ink.

This is why it is improper to proclaim today that we are the sons of Greece. Or else we are the renegade sons. Placing history on the throne of God, we are progressing toward theocracy like those whom the Greeks called Barbarians and whom they fought to death in the waters of Salamis. In order to realize how we differ, one must turn to him among our philosophers who is the true rival of Plato. "Only the modern city," Hegel dares write, "offers the mind a field in which it can become aware of itself." We are thus living in the period of big cities. Deliberately, the world has been amputated of all that constitutes its permanence: nature, the sea, hilltops, evening meditation. Consciousness is to be found only in the streets, because history is to be found only in the streets—this is the edict. And consequently our most significant works show the same bias. Landscapes are not to be found in great European literature since Dostoevsky. History explains neither the natural universe that existed before it nor the beauty

that exists above it. Hence it chose to be ignorant of them. Whereas Plato contained everything—nonsense, reason, and myth—our philosophers contain nothing but nonsense or reason because they have closed their eyes to the rest. The mole is meditating.

It is Christianity that began substituting the tragedy of the soul for contemplation of the world. But, at least, Christianity referred to a spiritual nature and thereby preserved a certain fixity. With God dead, there remains only history and power. For some time the entire effort of our philosophers has aimed solely at replacing the notion of human nature with that of situation, and replacing ancient harmony with the disorderly advance of chance or reason's pitiless progress. Whereas the Greeks gave to will the boundaries of reason, we have come to put the will's impulse in the very center of reason, which has, as a result, become deadly. For the Greeks, values pre-existed all action, of which they definitely set the limits. Modern philosophy traces its values at the end of action. They *are* not but *are becoming*, and we shall know them fully only at the completion of history. With values, all limit disappears, and since conceptions differ as to what they will be, since all struggles, without the brake of those same values, spread indefinitely, today's Messianisms confront one another and their clamors mingle in the clash of empires. Disproportion is a conflagration, according to Heraclitus. The conflagration is spreading; Nietzsche is outdistanced. Europe no longer philosophizes by striking a hammer, but by shooting a cannon.

Nature is still there, however. She contrasts her calm skies and her reasons with the madness of man. Until the atom too catches fire and history ends in the triumph of reason and the agony of the species. But the Greeks never said that the limit could not be overstepped. They said it existed and that whoever dared to exceed it was mercilessly struck down. Nothing in present history can contradict them.

The historical spirit and the artist both want to remake the world. But the artist, through an obligation of his nature, knows his limits, which the historical spirit fails to recognize. This is why the latter's aim is tyranny whereas the former's passion is freedom. All those who are struggling for freedom today are ultimately fighting for beauty. Of course, it is not a question of defending beauty for herself. Beauty cannot do without man, and we shall not give our era its nobility and serenity unless we follow it in its misfortune. Never again shall we be hermits. But it is no less true that man cannot do without beauty, and this is what our era pretends to want to disregard. It steels itself to attain the absolute and authority; it wants to transfigure the world before having exhausted it, to set it to rights before having understood it. Whatever it may say, our era is deserting this world. Ulysses can choose at Calypso's bidding between immortality and the land of his fathers. He chooses the land, and death with it. Such simple nobility is

foreign to us today. Others will say that we lack humility; but, all things considered, this word is ambiguous. Like Dostoevsky's fools who boast of everything, soar to heaven, and end up flaunting their shame in any public place, we merely lack man's pride, which is fidelity to his limits, lucid love of his conditions.

"I hate my time," Saint-Exupéry wrote shortly before his death, for reasons not far removed from those I have spoken of. But, however upsetting that exclamation, coming from him who loved men for their admirable qualities, we shall not accept responsibility for it. Yet what a temptation, at certain moments, to turn one's back on this bleak, fleshless world! But this time is ours, and we cannot live hating ourselves. It has fallen so low only through the excess of its virtues as well as through the extent of its vices. We shall fight for the virtue that has a history. What virtue? The horses of Patroclus weep for their master killed in battle. All is lost. But Achilles resumes the fight, and victory is the outcome, because friendship has just been assassinated: friendship is a virtue.

Admission of ignorance, rejection of fanaticism, the limits of the world and of man, the beloved face, and finally beauty—this is where we shall be on the side of the Greeks. In a certain sense, the direction history will take is not the one we think. It lies in the struggle between creation and inquisition. Despite the price which artists will pay for their empty hands, we may hope for their victory. Once more the philosophy of darkness will break and fade away over the dazzling sea. O midday thought, the Trojan war is being fought far from the battlefields! Once more the dreadful walls of the modern city will fall to deliver up—"soul serene as the ocean's calm"—the beauty of Helen.

# INDEX

---

- Abel, 30; and Cain, 9–10, 13, 130  
action, 13, 68–69, 141, 208, 254, 279;  
    evil, 71, 88–89, 105; free, 8, 86;  
    morality of, 61  
Adam and Eve, 10, 103, 206  
Adorno, Theodor, 185, 188  
Afghanistan, 242; attack on, 229, 233,  
    244  
aggressiveness, 141–42. *See also*  
    destruction; violence  
al-Qaida, 107  
altruism, 13; and selfishness, 8, 130  
America, terrorist attack on. *See*  
    Pentagon; September 11; terrorism;  
    World Trade Center  
Améry, Jean, 92, 126  
anatomy, of evil, 2–3, 7, 9–10, 45, 241  
angel, 171, 176  
Angelou, Maya, 178, 181  
apocalypse, auto-, 146–53. *See also*  
    destruction; omnicide  
Aquinas, Thomas, 202n9  
Arendt, Hannah, 6, 93; on evil, 14n12,  
    75, 104–5, 107, 113–14, 117, 122,  
    129, 242, 244; on thinking, 113–17  
Augustine, 46, 49, 54–58, 96–97, 100,  
    245; on evil, 14n12, 75, 104–5, 107,  
    113–14, 117, 122, 129, 242, 244  
Auschwitz, 2, 91, 92–93, 100–102,  
    103–5, 120, 122, 130, 244. *See also*  
    camps; Holocaust; Jews  
authority, 5, 37  
  
Barth, Karl, 216  
Bayle, Pierre, 94–95, 96  
beauty, 184, 211, 277–80; and order, 95  
Berdyaev, Nicholas, 11, 260n11  
Berlin, Isaiah, 2–3  
Berry, Wendel, 223, 246  
Bettelheim, Bruno, 120, 126, 128, 130  
  
Bible, 183. *See also* Gospel; New  
    Testament; Old Testament  
bin-Laden, Osama, 85, 89  
body, and soul, 198–99  
Boehme, Jacob, 174  
bomb, atom, 152, 258. *See also* weapons  
bombing, 227, 229, 230, 244  
Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, 218  
Book of Job, 249–51, 253, 256, 257,  
    258–59. *See also* Job  
Boyle, Nicholas, 36, 38, 39, 40  
brainwashing, 162, 163  
Buber, Martin, 259n2  
  
Cain and Abel, 9–10, 13, 130  
camps, concentration, 2, 3, 101, 103,  
    105–6, 119–22, 124, 128, 178–79, 210.  
    *See also* Auschwitz; Holocaust; Jews  
Camus, Albert, 13, 180  
caring, 10, 13, 55  
Cassian, John, 217  
Christ, Jesus, 23, 24, 32, 38, 56, 80, 166,  
    175, 225, 229, 256–57, 261, 264, 269.  
    *See also* God  
Christianity, 23, 25, 31–34, 37–38, 42,  
    46, 59, 102, 152, 171–72, 175–76,  
    185, 257, 279. *See also* faith; religion  
civilization, 53, 133, 144–45, 147; evils  
    of, 65, 98  
Communism, 87, 121, 124, 140, 141,  
    209  
community, 134, 137–40, 141–44, 153,  
    209; ethical form of, 76, 78–79  
compassion, 8, 13, 55, 129, 211.  
    *See also* pity  
conditioning, to kill, 156–57, 159,  
    161–64; operant, 158, 160  
confession, of sin, 254  
conscience, 106, 114, 125–26, 172, 209,  
    246; origin of, 142

- consciousness, 81, 84, 172, 174, 190, 278. *See also* unconsciousness
- consumerism, 84, 87, 99
- creation, 100, 103, 202, 251, 256, 258
- crime, 87, 94, 103–4, 105, 113, 121–23, 128, 173, 233; totalitarian, 127; war, 101, 210, 244
- criminal, 5–6, 113, 114
- crucifixion, 22, 261
- cruelty, 3, 65, 100, 102, 141, 177–80, 264
- culture, 211; and scapegoating, 21–22, 24
- Dalai Lama, 81
- Dante, Alighieri, 7, 241, 245
- death, 46, 108, 125, 126, 142, 194, 195, 206, 230, 245, 247, 262; of God, 11, 32–33, 35, 115, 279; and life, 9, 47, 51, 53, 57, 142, 199
- de Lubac, Henri, 31, 32
- democracy, 130, 150, 223
- desire, 7, 52, 56, 62, 98, 190; mimetic, 26–27
- destruction, 140, 144, 177, 180, 195, 223, 244, 246; global, 2, 201; instinct for, 140–42; self-, 147–49, 152; weapons of mass, 84–85, 102, 245. *See also* aggressiveness; apocalypse; bombing; omnicide; violence
- devil, 12, 107, 175–76, 200–201, 207, 261–71, 276. *See also* Satan
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor Michailovich, 12, 96, 166, 249, 255, 257–58, 260n9, 278, 280
- Douglass, Frederick, 177–78, 179, 180
- duties, 25, 61–62, 67, 70, 77–78, 113, 153; conflict of, 173
- Dyer, Gwynne, 157, 158
- earthquake, in Lisbon, 7, 91–93, 99–101, 102, 106–7
- Eckhart, Meister, 174
- Eichmann, Adolf, 6, 9, 10, 11, 75, 104–6, 107, 113–14, 122, 129
- Eicke, Theodor, 124
- enemy, 124–25, 126, 166, 188; dehumanization of, 160–61, 164; love of, 8, 229, 267
- Enlightenment, 12, 20, 41, 94
- Eros, 141, 142, 149
- ethics, 100, 173–74, 180–81, 205, 269; consequentialist, 153; Kantian, 76, 102. *See also* Kant; law; morality
- Eve, and Adam, 10, 103, 206
- evil, 1–13, 14n10, 21–22, 31, 45–48, 54, 59–60, 68–69, 81, 100, 101–4, 107–9, 119–21, 125, 127, 129–30, 139, 174–75, 179, 181, 184–89, 194, 195, 213, 218, 244, 245, 247, 250, 260n11, 261, 264; absolute, 89, 93, 149, 153; action, 71, 88–89, 105; anatomy of, 2–3, 7, 9–10, 45, 241; Arendt on, 14n12, 75, 104–5, 107, 113–14, 117, 122, 129, 242, 244; Augustine on, 14n12, 75, 104–5, 107, 113–14, 117, 122, 129, 242, 244; banality of, 75, 99, 105, 113–14, 122, 129, 244, 259; of civilization, 65, 98; criterion of, 86; as our destiny, 7, 10, 13; doctrinal, 4; and freedom, 76; and good, 4, 8, 31, 33, 47, 52–53, 56–57, 60–61, 63–71, 76–77, 82, 83, 85, 86, 88–90, 94, 102, 119, 126, 128, 130, 141, 171, 172–73, 174, 206–7, 210, 229, 257, 262, 276; identification of, 5, 46; as impairment, 48–46, 53; instrumental, 4; intentional, 4, 9, 76, 83, 104–6; Kant on, 59–71, 75–78; and killing, 122; knowledge of good and, 171, 206–7, 229; and malice, 9, 104; Merton on, 197–202, 205–8, 214, 216; metaphysical, 7, 93, 102, 103; moral, 6, 7, 48–49, 64, 66, 68, 77–79, 85, 93–94, 95, 96–97, 102, 107; mystery of, 10, 214, 241; natural, 7, 47–48, 85, 93–94, 95, 96–97, 102, 103, 107; ontological explanation of, 188; problem of, 2, 11, 12, 78–79, 91, 94, 96, 100, 102, 186, 208, 241, 244; propensity to, 76–78; radical, 4, 60–61, 67, 68, 69–71, 76–77, 79, 82, 85–86, 89, 122, 257; reality of, 8, 84, 97, 103, 173; and religion, 2, 12, 20, 42, 59–60; roots of, 197; Rousseau on, 96–97; sources of, 4–5, 9, 66, 75–76, 149, 188; Stoics on, 49–50, 52–56; unintentional, 4–5; and violence, 13, 20
- existence. *See* life
- extermination, 121, 144; of Jews, 122, 184–85

- faith, 42, 94, 166, 183–84, 201, 210,  
 224, 235, 252, 253, 257, 259, 261.  
*See also* Christianity; religion  
 Fall, 7, 9, 97, 176, 199  
 fanaticism, 121  
 fear, 108  
 Feuerbach, Ludwig, 255  
 forgiveness, 28; and love, 25, 256  
 freedom, 8, 49, 55, 68–69, 83, 98, 148,  
 206, 207, 211, 256, 279; and evil, 76;  
 moral, 59–63, 65, 76, 78  
 Freud, Sigmund, 6, 83, 103  
  
 Galtung, Johann, 244  
 Gandhi, Mahatma, 223, 235  
 genocide, 77. *See also* Holocaust  
 Ginsberg, Allen, 242  
 Girard, René, 20–21, 22, 23, 31, 32, 33,  
 37, 38, 40, 259n2  
 Gnostics, 175  
 God, 3, 13, 14n10, 29–30, 52, 54–55,  
 58, 59, 60, 85, 92, 94, 95–96, 100,  
 152, 153–54, 171, 175–76, 184, 195,  
 198–99, 200–201, 206–8, 213, 214,  
 217, 224, 255, 263–64, 267; death of,  
 11, 32–33, 35, 115, 279; love of,  
 9–10, 54–56, 88, 199, 201, 207; and  
 man, 7, 31, 38, 64, 66, 69–70, 208,  
 210, 225–26, 230, 231–38, 249–59;  
 trial of, 255–59. *See also* Christ  
 Goebbels, Josef, 120  
 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 60, 92,  
 166  
 Golgotha, 23, 24, 30, 41  
 good, 9, 60–61, 67, 87, 88, 102, 130, 153,  
 183–84, 195, 211; and evil, 4, 8, 31,  
 33, 47, 52–53, 56–57, 60–61, 63–71,  
 76–77, 82, 83, 85, 86, 88–90, 94, 102,  
 119, 126, 128, 130, 141, 171, 172–73,  
 174, 206–7, 210, 229, 257, 262, 276;  
 highest, 4, 11, 194; will, 64, 68, 102  
 goodness, 52, 183  
 Gospel, 22, 23, 28–29, 30–32, 37, 40,  
 41–42  
 grace, 69, 209, 254, 258  
 greed, 4, 7, 244  
 Gregory of Nazianzen, 217  
 Grossman, Vasily, 121, 126, 130  
 guilt, 33, 104–6, 200; and innocence,  
 129; of killing, 164; and sin, 251  
 Gulag, 2, 120, 121  
  
 Hallie, Philip, 129  
 Hamlet. *See* Shakespeare  
 happiness, 48–49, 53, 55, 88, 90, 256  
 hatred, 4, 7–8, 89, 141, 179, 198,  
 199–200, 201, 208, 244, 280; instinct  
 for, 140. *See also* Eros; love  
 Hegel, Georg Friedrich, 148, 278  
 Heidegger, Martin, 36–37  
 Hell, 12, 105, 200, 261, 262  
 Heraclitus, 278, 279  
 hero, 6, 214, 250  
 heroism, 9, 144  
 Heschel, Abraham Joshua, 189, 217  
 Hick, John, 241  
 Hillesum, Etty, 128, 130  
 Himmler, Heinrich, 120–21, 180, 181  
 Hiroshima, 101, 152, 176, 244  
 history, 22, 24, 94, 139, 140, 149, 278–80;  
 meaning of, 58, 148; of philosophy,  
 91, 100; Rousseau on, 96–99  
 Hitler, Adolf, 10, 11, 120–21, 125, 179  
 Hobbes, Thomas, 130, 150  
 Holocaust, 6, 48, 53, 83, 92, 180,  
 184–85. *See also* Auschwitz; camp  
 Horkheimer, Max, 185, 188  
 humanity, 6, 11, 66, 76–78, 101,  
 127–28, 157, 165–66, 174, 244, 257;  
 moral improvement of, 12; self-  
 destruction of, 148–52; survival of,  
 148–51, 153. *See also* man; nature  
 Hume, David, 89, 94, 95–96  
  
 Ignatieff, Michael, 40–41  
 imperative, 61–62, 165–67; categorical,  
 153, 172  
 impulse, destructive, 6  
 inclination, 142; Kant on, 61–62, 63,  
 64–65, 67, 77  
 injustice, 5, 12, 172, 210  
 innocence, 23–24, 29, 32; and guilt,  
 129. *See also* victim  
 instinct, 40, 121, 134, 135, 174;  
 aggressive, 141; death-, 142;  
 destructive, 140–42; of love, 141,  
 142  
 intention, 3–4, 51–52; and evil, 4, 9, 76,  
 83, 104–6  
 interest: conflict of, 139; self-, 103,  
 190–93, 250. *See also* selfishness  
 International Criminal Court of Justice,  
 227

- Jesus. *See* Christ
- Jews, extermination of, 122, 184–85;  
murder of, 101. *See also* Auschwitz;  
camps; Holocaust
- Job, 3, 4, 91, 175, 219, 250–56. *See also*  
Book of Job
- Jonas, Hans, 153
- joy, 49, 55, 202; of life, 181
- justice, 79, 83, 91, 99, 129, 134, 137–38,  
200, 234, 250, 251–54, 278;  
International Criminal Court of, 227
- Kafka, Franz, 6
- Kant, Immanuel, 12, 92, 96, 102, 108,  
115–16, 153; on evil, 59–71, 75–78;  
on imperatives, 153; on inclinations,  
61–62, 63, 64–65, 67, 77; on moral  
law, 61–64, 65, 66–69, 71, 76–78, 102
- killing, 13, 39, 137, 152, 155, 159–69,  
162, 166, 167, 179, 180, 185, 233,  
246, 268; mass, 2, 229; resistance to,  
156–57, 158, 161; in Vietnam, 155,  
157, 158, 161–64, 188; in war,  
124–25. *See also* murder
- King, Rodney, 19
- knowledge, 114, 115–16, 208, 254; of  
good and evil, 171, 206–7, 229; self-,  
173–74
- Lao-tzu, 165, 166
- law, 129, 138–39, 166, 264, 268; and  
might, 134, 137–38; moral, 61–64, 65,  
66–69, 71, 76–78, 83, 102. *See also*  
ethics; morality
- League of Nations, 136, 139
- Le Chambon, 179–80
- Lenin, Vladimir Illich, 124
- Levertov, Denise, 242–43, 244, 246
- Levi, Primo, 121, 123, 127, 128, 129
- life, 8, 47–51, 52, 134, 135, 143, 175,  
177, 189, 198, 207, 208, 250;  
communal, 79; and death, 9, 47, 51,  
53, 57, 142, 199; joy of, 181;  
meaning of, 84; spiritual, 205, 214; as  
a task, 9; value of, 87, 211, 231
- Lifton, Robert Jay, 244
- Lisbon, earthquake in, 7, 91–93,  
99–101, 102, 106–7
- love, 6, 9–10, 54–58, 89–90, 181,  
183–84, 195, 198, 209, 210, 255; and  
forgiveness, 25, 256; of God, 9–10,  
54–56, 88, 199, 201, 207; God's, 219,  
224; power of, 179–81; self-, 76–78.  
*See also* Eros; hatred
- Luke, 23–24, 29–30, 41
- lynching, 24
- malice, 9, 104
- man, 7, 65, 67–68, 115, 133–34, 157,  
165, 166–67, 174, 175, 192, 216, 261;  
deification of, 257; dignity of, 60–61;  
and God, 7, 31, 38, 64, 66, 69–70,  
208, 210, 225–26, 230, 231–38,  
249–59; trial of, 249–50. *See also*  
humanity; nature
- Manicheism, 94–95, 96, 129
- Marcel, Gabriel, 218
- Marshall, S. L. A., 156–57, 161, 162
- Marx, Karl, 83
- mechanism, defense, 160, 164;  
scapegoating, 11, 30, 39
- Mengele, Josef, 121
- Merton, Thomas, 209–11, 213–18; on  
evil, 197–202, 205–8, 214, 216
- metaphysics, 62, 66, 115, 117; end of,  
114
- Milosz, Czesław, 224
- Milton, John, 7, 245
- monster, 6, 121
- morality, 13, 108, 153; of action, 61;  
and nature, 103; and religion, 70. *See*  
*also* ethics; law; Kant
- Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, 166
- murder, 9–10, 13, 25, 29, 65, 144, 180,  
255, 267; of Jews, 101; judicial, 210;  
mass, 101, 104, 109, 186–87. *See also*  
killing
- Nagasaki, 152, 244
- nature, human, 7–8, 55–56, 66–67, 68,  
71, 75, 89, 97, 123, 130, 149, 173–74,  
279. *See also* humanity; man
- Nazis, 85, 88, 101, 104, 106, 121, 122,  
123
- Nazism, 209
- need, 189–94, 208, 256; ethical, 189;  
false, 7, 99; material, 189, 194; of  
reason, 115–16; spiritual, 189,  
191–93
- Neruda, Pablo, 244
- New Testament, 24, 28, 32–33, 38, 166.  
*See also* Bible; Gospels

- Nietzsche, Friedrich, 11–12, 25–26, 29, 30–31, 32–35, 36, 82, 115, 279
- nihilism, 34, 86, 115
- nonviolence, 211, 241, 245
- Old Testament, 166, 171, 176, 256. *See also* Bible
- omnicide, 2, 5, 7. *See also* apocalypse; destruction
- optimism, 92
- pacifism, 38, 144–45
- Paul, 81, 175, 216, 229
- peace, 200, 210, 211; and war, 139, 245
- Pentagon, 226, 227, 234. *See also* September 11; terrorism
- person, 47–48, 51–52, 208–9
- pessimism, 33
- philosophy, 13, 89, 92, 96, 114, 116–17, 151–52, 173, 200, 279, 280; end of, 115; history of, 91, 100
- pity, 25, 31, 97. *See also* compassion
- Plato, 81, 96, 141, 278, 279
- Platonists, 55, 56
- pollution, 6
- positivism, 114–16
- Pound, Ezra, 242
- power, 121, 125–26, 134, 138, 139, 151, 178, 195, 233, 257, 278, 279; of love, 179–81; and wealth, 189; will-to-, 25–26, 39, 82, 208
- privatio boni*, 172. *See also* Augustine; evil
- progress, 40, 78–79, 148, 166–67, 254, 278; moral, 1–2, 75
- Prometheus, 149, 254–55
- psychoanalysis, 140, 143
- psychology, 100, 157, 174
- reality, of evil, 8, 84, 97, 103, 173
- reason, 62, 94–96, 98, 115–16, 166, 255, 277; boundaries of, 279
- redemption, 70
- regime, 123; totalitarian, 105, 125–27. *See also* totalitarianism
- religion, 89, 96, 152, 211, 231, 255; and evil, 2, 12, 20, 42, 59–60; and morality, 70; and science, 23, 83, 270. *See also* Christianity; faith
- resistance, Jewish, 126–27; to killing, 156–57, 158, 161
- responsibility, 85, 88, 94, 105, 127; for evil, 7, 104
- revenge, 234
- right, 4, 153; human, 40–41, 78–79; and might, 136–38
- Robespierre, Maximilien, 35–36
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 7, 92, 99–100, 102–3, 108, 130; on evil, 96–97; on history, 96–99
- sacred, 21, 192, 277; duty, 28
- Sade, Marquis de, 85–86, 106, 107
- Santayana, George, 180
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, 12, 82
- Satan, 14n10, 176, 253, 254. *See also* devil
- scapegoating, 22, 23–24, 200, 224; and culture, 21–22, 241; as mechanism, 11, 30, 39
- Schiller, Friedrich, 60
- science, 23, 82–84, 89, 133–34, 142, 174, 175, 176; and reductivism, 82–83, 84, 86, 87; and religion, 23, 83, 270
- self, 206–11; false, 198–200; illusory, 207; image of, 206; inner, 199, 201; -interest, 103, 190–93, 250; -knowledge, 173–74; -love, 76–78
- selfishness, 200; and altruism, 8, 130. *See also* interest
- Sells, Michael, 19–20, 42
- September 11, 92, 106–8, 234, 241, 246. *See also* Pentagon; terrorism; World Trade Center
- Shakespeare, William, 25–29, 34
- sin, 21–22, 31, 114, 200, 219, 226–27, 232, 252, 262; confession of, 254; original, 59–60, 69, 102, 152, 217; and suffering, 94, 99, 251
- Skinner, B. F., 87, 158, 160
- slavery, 103, 172, 177–78
- society, 124–25
- Socrates, 276, 278
- solidarity, 20, 151, 190, 193, 194
- soul, 49, 56–57, 58, 175, 177, 200, 216, 279; and body, 198–99; of man, 101
- sources, of evil, 4–5, 9, 66, 75–76, 149, 188
- Speer, Albert, 121
- Stalin, Josif Visarionovich, 124, 125
- Staub, Ervin, 77

- Stoics, 9–10, 41, 46, 50–52, 58, 66; on evil, 49–50, 52–56; on tranquility, 49–52, 56
- suffering, 85, 102, 108, 187, 200, 277; meaning of, 58, 100, 250; and sin, 94, 99, 251; unjust, 251, 254, 256, 259
- summum bonum*. *See* good
- superman, 11, 12, 26, 29, 31, 33
- survival, 241; of humanity, 148–52; individual, 199
- survivors, 114; of concentration camps, 120
- terror, 35
- terrorism, 39, 84, 88, 107, 108–9, 147, 233, 258. *See also* Pentagon; September 11; World Trade Center
- Thanatos, 149. *See also* instinct
- theology, 200–201
- thinking, 109, 113–17; absence of, 6, 114, 253; instrumental, 108, 126
- Tillion, Germaine, 120, 123, 127
- Tolstoy, Lev, 12
- torture, 121, 166, 250, 264
- totalitarianism, 122–27, 130, 223, 258
- trial, 113–14, 122; of God, 255–59; of Job, 250; of man, 249–50
- tranquility, Stoics on, 49–52, 56
- tyranny, 172
- unconsciousness, 173–74. *See also* consciousness
- United Nations, 79, 231
- value, 13, 86, 148, 279; of life, 87, 211, 231
- vengeance, 28, 29
- veterans, Vietnam, 155, 164
- Vietnam, killing in, 155, 157, 158, 161–64, 188; veterans of, 155, 164; war in, 155, 159, 186–87, 229, 244
- vice, 66, 77, 280
- Vico, Giambattista, 31
- victim, 3, 9, 11, 20, 28–29, 38, 42, 53, 126, 127, 130, 161, 237, 258, 259; empathy for, 24, 31, 34, 38; innocence of, 23–24, 29, 32; and victimizer, 6, 129, 178–79
- victimizer, 30; and victim, 6, 129, 178–79
- violence, 7, 12, 13, 19, 21, 27, 30, 32–33, 34–39, 125, 126, 136–40, 187, 232, 245; collective, 20–21; and evil, 13, 20; mob, 19, 20–21, 36; sacred, 21, 25, 28, 29–30, 32, 36, 40. *See also* aggressiveness; destruction
- virtue, 48, 51, 54, 166, 278, 280
- Voltaire, François, 92, 96, 98, 99, 255
- war, 6, 12, 13, 124–25, 133, 135–36, 137–38, 139–40, 141, 142–45, 166, 167, 200, 230, 231, 242, 246, 259, 268; civil, 135, 138, 140; crimes, 101, 210, 244; criminal, 113; holy, 37; just, 229, 245; nuclear, 147; and peace, 139, 245; in Vietnam, 155, 159, 186–87, 229, 244. *See also* Afghanistan; Vietnam; World War I; World War II
- warfare, 135, 157, 245; atomic, 101
- weapons, 12, 89, 137, 147, 156–57, 160, 200; biological, 107, 147, 154; of mass destruction, 84–85, 102, 245; nuclear, 241, 247. *See also* bomb
- Wells, H. G., 35
- wholeness, 172, 173, 175, 209
- wickedness, 114
- Wiesel, Elie, 3, 40, 260n5
- Williams, William Carlos, 242, 247
- will, 26–27, 51, 62–63, 66, 67–69, 76, 102–3, 198; free, 63–65, 83, 85, 87–88, 100; good, 64, 68, 102; -to-power, 25–26, 39, 82, 208
- Wilson, E. O., 82, 83
- World Trade Center, 84, 89, 226, 232. *See also* September 11; terrorism
- World War I, 101, 136
- World War II, 6, 41, 101, 126, 155, 156–57, 158, 162
- worship, 226, 230

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