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### Boundaries: The Primal Force and Human Face of Evil

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LAWRENCE KIMMEL

## **BOUNDARIES: THE PRIMAL FORCE AND HUMAN FACE OF EVIL**

And one morning while in the woods I stumbled suddenly upon the thing,  
Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly oaks and elms.  
And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves between the world and me. . . .  
There was a design of white bones slumbering forgotten upon a cushion of ashes.  
There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt finger accusingly at the sky.  
There were torn limbs, tiny veins of burnt leaves, and a scorched coil of greasy hemp;  
A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat, and a pair of trousers stiff with black blood.  
And upon the trampled grass were buttons, dead matches, butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells, a  
drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick;  
Scattered traces of tar, restless arrays of feathers, and the lingering smell of gasoline.  
And through the morning air the sun poured yellow surprise into the eye sockets of a stony skull ...

—Richard Wright

### PREFATORY REMARK

Philosophy can be, rarely perhaps, a call to a sane place, a resolve to take time to consider the Other, to understand and overcome the space between. In quite ordinary and extraordinary ways, this begins over again the elemental process of healing, of becoming whole. This is not the only or even the primary task of philosophy; but in a secular age, one in which everything is negotiable and most things for sale, the convergence of the philosophical and poetic is a still point of access to such elemental passions of the soul.

Evil is a primal word, a sound that was in the dawn of consciousness. We wonder about this sometimes. Can it be understood at all? Is evil, in this absolute sense, not beyond the frame of understanding? At least, of common understanding?

We know, as decent people, that there is an imperative which guides civility—to somehow develop the capacity to see the evil in ourselves, as well as the good in others. But why is this such a terribly hard thing to do? Why is it we accomplish this so rarely, and for such brief moments in our individual and collective lives?

Many answers have been and are still given: we are too angry, or too impatient, too frustrated, too greedy, or too unhappy—or simply sometimes the world is too much with us and so we are too busy, preoccupied, or indifferent to see the good in others or the evil in ourselves. But in the cruelty of the wanton act, the natural pain of life takes on inhuman palor and becomes, somehow, unnatural, perverse, terrifying, and grips our lives from inside.

The moral point is on the surface of it: we must each learn to recognize in ourselves, the other, and in the person of the other, ourselves—both evil and good. But there is something else, something deeper we recognize, sometimes with the shock of the intimate and familiar. It is only then that the word is primal: Evil—inside us is the alien, the wholly Other. Understanding here is without precedent. We must somehow come to terms with the paradox of Man, acknowledge that at the core of his being is something other, something inhuman. It is this that most frightens us; it is the most basic obstacle to understanding evil, and of doing something with this understanding. To reach this point something more is required, something deeper, elemental, something primal.

Paradoxically, human beings cannot be cured of the inhuman: the Other is at the beginning, the dark out of which comes light; a deadwinter universe from which energy emerges in the sound of spring. At this absolute reach, if anything is possible it is not curing but healing, a making whole of person and community, a realization of kinship and kindness toward all things we are and are not. Nothing less will meet the face within the force of the evil within.

This may seem an impossible task left to language and understanding, even to the broad ranges of thought represented in the languages of poetry and politics, law and science, literature, history, and theology. What more is possible? For each it may be different—the resonance of music, the movement of dance, the revelation of seasons. It is in celebration of wholeness, however it is done, that reconciliation is finally effected—the elemental healing of mind and body and spirit. Without such integration, no heroically wrought product of language or intellect can unburden the spirit of fear or loosen the residuals of memory, of guilt and shame.

Nietzsche recalled, in the archaic language of Greek myth and drama the creative power in the tragic celebration of life and death, before Aristotle refined tragic drama into a therapeutic exercise of public katharsis. Realizing this original possibility in literature and philosophy, we become less dangerous to each other and to ourselves. There is evil—it is not alien to me. It may be creative or destructive; I may make use of it or fall victim to it; it has positive as well as negative character. In the narrow margin of what can be investigated in the brief space of a paper, the point is this: what understanding may lack in explanation, can be made whole in celebration. What cannot be said may still be shown. This is the genius of art: to see in so many ways, from so many vantage points—a seeing which is also affirmation.

## I

The meaning of evil requires not definition, but description. The literary imagination is never so intimate, never so with us as when it expresses the primal force and fact of evil. We are never so vulnerable as human beings as when we feel the raw expression of evil, the primal resonance of soul, and complicity of spirit with the act. At such moments the wholly Other, the alien, the inhuman comes to presence in us.

Goethe memorably recorded his experience that no one can be a poet or speak the whole truth until he fully realizes that there is nothing human—no evil—of which he is not capable. In the same vein, Nietzsche argues that evil is at the heart and life of language and literature. Primitive and formative, it is the Other; it is untruth—the shadow cast by a living soul. Evil is the focused energy at the point of risk, rejecting what we have in favor of ... we know not what. Conceived in terms of poetic imagination, evil is the place we are not, and part of its energy is the craving to be what and where we are not. This admits the paradoxical, that evil is not always bad, though likely it is always destructive. To create is also to destroy, which places evil, however tenuously, in the constitution of the good, the germ of evil at each new beginning.

In its creative and destructive sense, evil is possibility—what is not, but wills to be. For the Greeks, the poet, calling on the muse, falls into the time of the God, invites madness. This is the evil Plato feared—the irrational, the uncertain, what cannot be predicted, what cannot be controlled. He was right, of course. But Plato's impulse and censorial response to this danger in

*The Republic*<sup>1</sup> is another no less fundamental source of evil: the institution of Reason, the dominion of Rule, carrying with it the total hegeromic(???) authoritarian suppression of whatever is not rational order.

We have learned through science, history, and literature that the irrational desire and will can be suppressed or repressed only at great cost, and in the end usuriously claims its pound of flesh. Even so, the temptation outside of art is, understandably, to suppress evil, deny it, rationalize it, project it, sublimate it. Christian religious scripture is clearer on this, however; the famous prayer asks only what is possible for the God, ... and deliver us from evil . . .”. Deliver us, for there is no destroying it. This counsels the disciples, less they misunderstand the point of the absolute in spirit: “the poor you will have always with you”, therefore, leave the dead to bury the dead, and follow me. There is no end to suffering or the evil that attends the hands and days of man, so rejoice, celebrate life, and leave sufficient unto the day the evil therein.

Evil cannot be cured, cannot be legislated out of existence—not by law, by politics, by economics, by theology, by psychotherapy, or by social reform. The advantage of the poet is that he has no need either to explain or eliminate evil. He may express it in a thousand ways, in celebration or lament, but he must in some fatal moment of turning, accept it. Examples abound in the literature of every culture and genre, from Genesis to Genet, from Job to Jesus, from Sophocles to Shakespeare, Milton to Arthur Miller, Beowulf to Baudelaire.

Evil as we wish to understand it here, is not comparative: it is different not in degree, but in kind, a limiting condition analogous to “infinite” or “perfect”. Is there common agreement even in what questions are appropriate to ask, toward understanding evil? What is it? Does it have any meaning? Can it be explained? Why can it not be destroyed, cured, eliminated? What would fill its place? Consider analogously, death and evil: what would it mean to destroy death? The point is, it fits with other interlocking phenomena: Where no one dies, the pain goes on, and on, and on. . . .

Consider the following historical and conceptual paradigms of comparative evil:

slavery/as an institution  
genocide/as political policy  
torture/as a practice or action.

It is in the light of such examples that evil finds variable definition:

Evil is: the absence of hope  
the absence of love (decency ...)  
the presence of pain  
willful harm  
institutional (or personal) failure to treat human beings as kindred (as not human beings).

From such comparative expressions, Kant developed an absolute ethics in the categorical imperative. To avoid the evil of exception, human beings must treat one another as ends, not merely means, which condemns both the motive of cruelty and universal utility of slavery “in

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<sup>1</sup> I here refer to the Plato of *The Republic*, and not *The Symposium*. His legacy to philosophy and western culture, for better or worse, is created in the former, not the latter.

principle”. This is perhaps the most effective attempt in analytic philosophy to eliminate contingencies and incorporate limits, but it, too, rests finally on judgment, not fact.

The grammar of evil as a primal phenomenon, coincides with the fundamental category of “human”, but only in an absolute, “spiritual” sense. Evil is an act against God (not merely others, or society) where God means *what is absolute*, wholly good. Thus it is a violation not of expectation or prescription, not of laws or mores—but a violation of what is essential, \_\_\_\_\_, sacred.

The sense of absolute evil is, in common understanding, an offense singular in kind. It is an offense not merely against the state, against others or the social order, indeed not even, I think, a “crime against humanity”. Its offense is against what is sacred, what is without price, the violation or sacrifice of which divests us of what it is we are and must be—the positive meaning of our very souls. In short, it is, simply, what *cannot* be justified; what no one has a fight to excuse, perhaps not even to forgive. In Ivan Karamazov’s description of evil in the “Pro & Contra” section of the *The Brother’s Karamazov*, he says of the mother of a child who has been mutilated for the sport of it by Cossacks, “She has no right to forgive them”.

Raul Hilberg, Holocaust historian, in reply to a plea for a statute of moral limitations remarked “No, I do not forgive, I will not forgive, we have no right to forgive!” His option instead goes something like this: One can only bear witness to evil, remember it, and resolve, through that remembrance, that it will not occur again, never in such ways again. This is, I believe, the first of two stages of “deliverence from evil”, the negative stage: the imperative of remembrance. The second stage requires a different kind of courage closer to the innocence of the child or the sensibility of the poet: to celebrate life, even and especially in the face of evil.

That evil cannot be justified or excused, perhaps not forgiven makes the philosophical question no easier: But can evil be *understood*? I rather believe it cannot be *explained*, and if that is what philosophy must do, it will fail. Perhaps, however, we have made a start toward understanding, in the absence either of definition or hypothesis—by clarifying the meaning of evil as it is used in quite ordinary and traditional discourse, and in literature.

An analogy may help here. It is a common experience that we understand (say) “mind” even though we may have no definition in hand, no explanation to give. “I can tell that she has a very good mind; much better than his”. So too, I can make up my mind, and know when I have done so; change my mind and then regret doing so. We can do all this and still we cannot say *what the mind is*. In the sense of the absolute limit of philosophical conception, it is not clear that anyone could do so or even needs to do so.

Closer to our problem, however, is the analogue with what are sometimes called “limiting concepts”. Most familiar among these are of the sort “infinite”, “perfect”, and, perhaps those like “God” and “eternity”. What is meant is that we possess no further concept under which to order these. Anselm speaks of God, e.g., as that, “than which nothing greater can be conceived” God encompasses the totality of Being; and now one cannot ask (the meaning is such) “And what encompasses God?”

Aristotle’s “unmoved mover” is yet another example—if God moves all things (through attraction—through “love” or the imperfection of things—or through generating need in what is attracted) then what moves God? — Nothing; the God is perfect, is a limit beyond which is ... ? We *cannot* ask “What was before fire?” “What is outside space?” The questions are nonsense. Again in mathematics, if the concept of “infinite” bounds all numbers, one cannot ask, on pain of nonsense (the meaning is such), “And how many is infinity plus one?” The mind has limits, as

language has limits, and we are, here, up against those limits. Such concepts are absolute; they express a sense of the Absolute.

Evil is such a concept. Evil is that than which nothing worse can be conceived? No—at least this isn't quite right. Consider the case in which someone whips an adult male slave who has challenged authority in the field. Now, in a second case, imagine a child tortured to death for sport. Both offend in an absolute way, but we might accept slavery as a kind of institutional evil less malevolent than sportive torture. Or we might not. The point is this: even of absolute *judgment*, there may still be a difference in magnitude such that if one had to choose, “the lesser evil is . . .” But if it is genuinely evil, then it is absolute, in the sense that it transcends the boundaries of —? Now what are we to say here? We are held to the terms of our own analysis: we are up against the boundaries of sense.

## II

Understanding evil is thus an enormous project, if it is an intelligible one. How many forms of evil are there? As many as there have been human beings perhaps, nor limited by invention or situation. As the concept is commonly understood, there are two basic notions: the idea of relative evil, what we have called “trivial” . related to concept not effect, and the idea of absolute evil, what we have approached as a “limiting concept”. There are both positive and negative attributes and expressions of evil. Our interest here is only in the absolute sense and understanding of evil; focusing on the negative concept; the positive and creative will be left aside here.

No one would question evil as an elemental concept and experience, but in what sense is it a passion of the soul? It may be a constituting structure of the world, but of soul as well? An elemental passion is that which moves the whole self. We may think of evil as that which is suffered—as one kind of passion, as in the St. Matthew passion, the passion of Christ. We may, on the other hand, consider evil as an elemental passion, as an activity of soul—Aristotle calls happiness, e.g., a characteristic activity defining the human. To treat the complexity of the concept of evil, one must respect the extent of its domain—in world, in self, in others.

There is a special kind of philosophical problem in understanding evil, for it presents the most fundamental of experiences, expresses the most elemental of value concepts. The concept of original sin, e.g., and of the devil, are intended to account for evil, recognizing, importantly, that there is no “doing away” with it, only combating it. Similarly, later accounts of evil, say Marxist critiques of capitalist exploitation, or the Freudian therapeutic intervention to provide temporary reprieve from the inevitable disease of civilized life, are attempts to give explanations which, along with the fact that they are finally not satisfying, leave the residual issue and problem of evil untouched. Wittgenstein remarked in the *Tractatus* that the ancient account of the world had one advantage over the modern account in that it acknowledged a terminus. The modern account regards everything as explained or at least explainable.

Our lack of concern for the relative or “trivial” notion of evil in this paper is not intended to dismiss it; it is only that there are many available and sufficient comparative expressions, including the conjugations of “bad/worse/worst”. Our concern then is with the primal notion which civilization has sustained from earliest times, and which cycles again and again into cultural consciousness even as the different accounts of it wither away. There may indeed be evil in the political oppression of a given regime, or in the malevolence of an individual act. People do bad and worse things which are sometimes characterized as “evil” nor do I wish to contest

this, only qualify it. But if the experience is adequately covered by ready concepts such as “gratuitously callous”, or “personally vindictive”, I want to put these cases of “evil” aside, or at least bracket them. What we require for a clear case of the Absolute, is not a case of judgment or interpretation, but of description: “*This* is evil, it comes of itself, it is, somehow, beyond the control of person or group attracted or moved by it”. It is, simply, how the world is, or rather how *we* are in the world—evil is a cornerstone in the foundation of the human world.

But just as we do not *invent* the law of non-contradiction but we *come to it* (or come up against it), so it is with evil of the sort which is limiting or absolute: It is there, it is real, we cannot be rid of it—the real stain beneath the metaphoric blood on the hands of Lady Macbeth. I do not mean that one cannot or should not try to oppose it or those in its possession or service—although that may be a resolution and action outside the boundaries of philosophy.

Perhaps the definitive case is where one has become blind to evil in oneself, and so becomes the very agent of that which in another, one would be quick to oppose. An analogous situation to this case is Dostoevsky’s analysis of freedom in “The Grand Inquisitor”, the point of which is that freedom is most completely lost not when it is forcibly taken from a people, but when it is given away in the form of unwanted or burdensome responsibility by the people. Ironically, people are most often provoked into freedom only on occasion that another intends conquest. The lesson in this is that the most insidious and pervasive threat to the dignity, identity, and existence of a person or a people is not from without, but from within. The greatest destruction results not from being overwhelmed by others, but through being undermined by the other in oneself.

The evil of the Grand Inquisitor lies not in the torturous force and fire of the *auto da fe*, but in the willing seduction of the spirit of the audience, who are grateful for his strength, his care, his sacrifice in their name. In the character and commitment of the Grand Inquisitor can be seen an instance of the good converting to its opposite. Believing man to be weak, needing guidance and protection, the caring priest, the vicar of the crucified Christ, becomes the antichrist: to save man, man must be destroyed, his freedom abandoned, his spirit crushed. One may see the same point in Kierkegaard’s “Diary of the Seducer” in *Either/Or*. The tempter is not after her body, but her soul, her spirit, the affirmation of her belief in him. She must assent, give over of herself. This is his victory, the rest is bookkeeping detail. The dominion of evil is finally found not in force or possession, but in complicity of spirit fundamental to human life.

The philosophical focus is simply to wonder at the presence of this elemental fact and force and its point must be first to understand not to judge. The primitive as well as continuing religious notion of evil is that man does not create it, nor does it come into the world through will or acts of man; but, rather, *we fall into it*. The old testament conception, in existential terms, is not properly “The Fall”, but the *Falling*: there is, for Man, no end to this, generation after generation. There is no “landing”, no picking oneself up after hitting bottom: the falling is, in this sense &’absolute”, and at the same time dynamic.

Evil, as an absolute, is a presence which is also a limit. But it is a limit in the sense of the limit of a cell—it gives way under pressure. Or consider the analogy with the limit of a visual field, or the limits of thought and language: it is not fixed; however it is absolute.

Camus, in *La Peste* characterizes what we might call the pervasiveness of evil, an anonymous evil that emerges, for no good reason, in its own season and without intent, out of the sewers of the city. The spectre rises of itself and holds sway, establishes dominion, and just as inexplicably vanishes—not defeated, only withdrawn into the bowels of the earth, to sleep as it were, until its next appearance. This is Camus’ testament to the Nazi Holocaust: one cannot adequately explain

this, it is . . . evil. It is ... not over. A parallel image of Armageddon suggests itself in Yeats' line " . . . And what rough beast its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?"

Can we even form a conception of absolute evil in a secular age? Do we not require an experience of the sacred in order to understand its violation as evil? There must be a transgression of definitive limits—of decency, civility, humanity, rationality toward the realization of an absolute. The Greeks, too, had a moveable, malleable, concept of the absolute, recording the primal as void, chaos, nothingness. We are in literature still close to both the Hellenic and Hebraic sense of evil.

What, if anything, is a modern *image* of evil? Likely, its characteristics will be distributive, dispersed among relative phenomena. We no longer think in terms of the "devil", or of any incarnate object of evil. The modern conception is closer to Camus' which is what makes his novel *La Peste* so compelling as a morality play. Here evil is a condition, a presence, over which finally, we have no control—no amount of reason, or good intent will prevent it. The theme of the plague is common and instructive. Evil exists in the form of a resistant destructive virus—e.g., AIDS at present—which of itself has no character, it simply is. Nuclear contamination and pollution is another example: the air looks healthy, but ... evil lurks within. Cancer is also a contemporary fit: the apparently healthy body, it is suddenly discovered, for no apparent reason is wracked with disease. It is a similar sense which Hannah Arendt tried to express in the subtitle for her book on Eichman, ". . . The Banality of Evil". In her view, bureaucratic mindlessness generates an insidious form of contemporary evil.

There are two traditional images of destructive force: to be overwhelmed; to be undermined. Evil perhaps finds expression within both paradigms, but in our time, except for the nuclear holocaust—which is, simply, not imaginable—it more often takes the form of decay from within: the image of the worm in the heart of the apple. The germ, carried harmless for years begins to grow to dominion and claims the whole.

### III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The concept of absolute limit, finally, is the shifting boundary of sense not truth, which can be probed though not circumscribed. There is no encompassing concept within which evil is clarified once and for all. It remains, in spiritual terms, anchored in the mystical, the unknowable. In terms of literature, if we can express the sense of our experience of the Absolute, then we may come to terms with it; that is, understand ourselves in relation to ourselves through it. To understand, in this sense, is not knowledge—we can explain nothing now, as before. It is rather something more, in that we can now make sense of and integrate what before was alien, the Other.

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