CHAPTER ONE

A PRELIMINARY MEDITATION ON OEDIPUS AND ADAM

Evil terrorizes, but not all that terrorizes is evil. We may be terrorized by illness, but we do not describe it as evil. Evil characterizes an actor, a group, or a regime; it is not simply a bad or frightful experience. Without a perception of agency, there can be terror but not evil. When the collapse of the sun replaced the Last Judgment in our imaginations, cosmology replaced eschatology. Imagining the end of the universe, we lose our moral bearings. We may feel terror, but there is no one to blame—whether ourselves or others—and so there is no demand that we do anything. With that, a subject of intense moral significance was replaced by one of scientific interest.

Evil is connected to death but not just as an expression of the scale of injury. The morally bad actor does not become evil when he moves from maiming to killing. Moreover, whatever the connection of evil and death not all that is evil arises out of a literal killing. Conversely, not every killing—not even large-scale death—has its origin in evil. Both the Final Solution and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration embody administrative rationality, but even if both envision large-scale death, only one is evil. A world without evil would be one in which we would still have to worry about bad actors, just as we would still have to worry about accidents. While all that is evil may be unjust and harmful, not every injustice and harm is evil.

Part of the problem of evil lies in its attraction. We see something of ourselves in evil; we are not always repulsed by what we see. We imagine ourselves as both terrorized and terrorizing. To grasp this double character of evil, we need to understand the nature of sin and not just bad events, of which unjust human action might be one source. After the Fall, the evil Adam confronts is not a threat from
outside himself but one that arises from within. Evil, I argue, is not sin but a response to the condition of sin in which man finds himself. Stripped of the language of myth, we can say that evil is a response to the self-consciousness of death. The account of original sin is an effort to make comprehensible the terror in the face of our universal fate. Evil arises when and where man finds his own finitude an intolerable burden. Enlightenment promised to relieve man of the burdens of the sacred and the polluted, by putting reason in the place of faith. But enlightenment had no answer to the crisis of consciousness that arises with the awareness of death. Accordingly, enlightenment left open the space for evil but left us without the conceptual tools to understand the character of evil.

The terror of death is linked to the terrorizing of evil. Joseph Conrad vividly portrays this link in The Heart of Darkness. The protagonist, Kurtz simultaneously perceives the terror of existence—“the horror”—and expresses evil in his own life. Terror arises from an experience of powerlessness. The inevitability of death does not merely represent man’s powerlessness; it is, rather, the very substance of that powerlessness. A world characterized by death—and Kurtz lives in a world surfeit with death—is one in which we all are susceptible to the perception of horror. Kurtz’s evil is an assertion of power in the face of this horror. Formally, he occupies the ambiguous moral position of colonial commerce, which had the double mission of advancing one civilization and destroying another. Kurtz, however, turns on the intended beneficiaries—the natives—of this cultural gift. He becomes a kind of god to them because he has power—indeed, the power over life itself. He is, we might say, demonic.

Kurtz has become ineffective—powerless—from the perspective of his Western employers, but he is an image of power to those he lives among. Evil is at home in this simultaneous experience of powerlessness—the horror—and of power—the terrorizing. Because power and powerlessness can coexist in the same person, one can be evil and yet see oneself as a victim. Suffering from the terror of powerlessness, the subject asserts a power to master death.

Just here the inquiry into evil is as much metaphysical as it is psychological. We are asking how a finite being overcomes the experience of his or her own finitude. This question points to the intimate connec-
tion between love and evil: Kurtz is simultaneously an object of love and an expression of evil. The juxtaposition of love and evil was at the center of Freud’s later work, in which he saw eros and thanatos as equiprimordial forces shaping the individual and civilization. 1 It is hard not to see this antinomy when one looks at the dual, Western inheritance of “carnage and culture.” 2 Yet love and evil are not simply forces set in opposition to each other. Rather, they express ways of understanding the self in the world, ways that have an intimate and complex relationship to each other.

Already the story of Cain and Abel, the children of Adam and Eve, presents an image of this relationship. The children go before God once they have mastered the culture of the earth in agriculture and husbandry—the labor to which Adam’s sin condemned all his descend­ants. Abel finds favor with God; Cain does not. We are not told what God’s acceptance means, but there is a suggestion that Abel is recovering some of what his parents lost, whereas Cain remains condemned to a life of labor and death. When God rejects Cain’s offering but takes Abel’s, He says to Cain, “If you do well, will you not be accepted?” Cain, however, turns on Abel. He could have embraced Abel’s good fortune in an expression of fraternal love; instead, he kills Abel. Cain’s power to kill is matched with God’s power to pro­tect. Thus, after killing Abel and suffering exposure of his crime, Cain cries to God, “Whoever finds me will slay me.” But God marks Cain “lest any who came upon him should kill him.” Although the text turns quickly to a generational account, marking births and deaths, there is no mention of Cain’s death. This is not to suggest that the evil do not die. We know that Cain dies, but his death is pushed off into an indefinite future that remains out of sight. This is an apt character­ization of the power of evil over death: a pushing off, a delay of recog­nition, a flight.

The biblical story goes further. Cain does not exactly wander the earth. Instead, he founds a city, Enoch. The biblical narrative turns from Cain’s generational and political accomplishments to the geneal-

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2 The expression comes from V. Hanson, Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power (2001).
ogy of Seth, the child Adam and Eve had in place of Abel. But in a
textual confusion, the genealogy of Seth merges with that of Cain,
leading to Enoch and finally to Noah. This confused history suggests
a deeper point. Love and evil are not just equiprimordial, and they
are not just in opposition. They are equally productive in the same
dimension of human activity. The men of Noah’s time are all judged
by God to be evil—they are the descendants of Cain. But they are also
the descendants of Seth, so there is among them love as well—Noah
and his family. To eliminate evil requires a second, divine intervention:
the flood. Neither love nor evil can do away with the other.

Here, then, in archetypal form, is an account of evil. Cain experi-
ences again the terror of Adam’s condemnation. Without God’s accep-
tance, Cain remains destined to a life of labor and then death. He is
condemned to this life for no apparent reason: like his brother, he,
too, made an offering, but it was not accepted. Every person’s death
appears undeserved and irrational in just this way. Failing to receive
divine acceptance, Cain asserts his own power over life and death: he
kills his brother. The power of evil, moreover, is genuine: he does avoid
his own death at the hands of others. Death is put off. But the power
of evil is never separate from the experience of terror. His punishment
is worse than the one for Adam’s sin: “When you till the ground, it
shall no longer yield to you its strength.” Cain declares, “My punish-
ment is greater than I can bear.” But bear it he does, for man’s capacity
for suffering is virtually endless. His suffering is matched by his power
over other men: he builds a city and founds a line. Men would kill
him if they could, just as they would kill countless, later rulers. They
do not, and we cannot help but suspect that it is not the mark, but
love, that saves him. For founders are loved even as they are feared.3

Together Cain and Abel tell us that we cannot identify evil with
man’s fallen state, not if we want the concept to do any work for us.
After the Fall, all have the potential for evil; there is nothing special
about Cain. It could have been Abel who killed Cain. Evil is not the
condition in which we find ourselves but a form of response to that

3 For a recent reflection on this double quality—hated and loved—of the founder, see I.
(May 12, 2005).
condition. For that reason, evil is deeply intertwined with that which is creative or constructive in our nature. Satan is often represented as possessing knowledge and culture.\textsuperscript{4} Again, consider Kurtz, the agent of European civilization. Seeking to overcome death, we are never far from evil even as we build those deathless products of human creativity: culture, polity, family. Evil is disturbingly close to love.

Evil seems to threaten from without—to terrorize—but to come from within. Focusing on either the inward or the outward aspect alone misses the phenomenon. Viewed from the outside, evil becomes just another source of terror, that is, a part of the horror of it all. Among the horrors of the world are evil men: Abel is killed by his brother. Viewed from the inside, evil becomes just another form of psychological pathology. Evil is to be explained by jealousy, ambition, or rage: Cain is jealous of Abel. Both these accounts appeal to the logic of causal representation. Evil is categorized alongside other phenomena, whether internal or external. Implicit in these accounts is the assumption that we can master evil once we understand it, which means to assign it a cause. Either we can avoid it through oppression and containment—the outside perspective—or we can treat it—the inside perspective. Avoidance and treatment characterize our attitudes toward disease. Not surprisingly, some theories of evil speak of it quite openly as a kind of disease.\textsuperscript{5}

But evil is not a disease; it is not even analogous to a disease. Every effort to treat evil as if it were a disease fails, because it is not possible to identify the cause or set of causes that leads to evil. Where and when evil will appear is always unpredictable. There is no constellation of factors, whether psychological or sociological, from which we can confidently predict the appearance of evil. We cannot say that the well-off are less likely to be evil than the poor or that culture and education protect us against evil. There is an implicit acknowledgment of this when people warn, “If the Holocaust could happen in Germany, the center of European culture, then it could happen anywhere.” We see the phenomenon of Cain and Abel repeated endlessly within families:

\textsuperscript{4} For example, Goethe’s \textit{Faust} or Stephen Benét’s \textit{The Devil and Daniel Webster}.

children raised by the same parents turn out to have completely different moral characters. Again the analogy to love is exact: we cannot identify the conditions in which individuals will realize a love of others, whether individuals or communities. This is not to say that we cannot offer an explanation, point to patterns of causation in particular individuals or groups. But we cannot generalize from any such narrative of an individual or a community. Christianity, with its faith in love, arose within conditions of misery and destitution. That hardly means that we should pursue suffering to find love, although certainly some Christians have done just that.

THE TERROR OF OEDIPUS

We can get a better sense of evil by looking first in a direction from which evil does not appear. The Greeks had myths of terror and powerlessness. They, too, thought about the possibility that man’s labor could fail, that it could produce the opposite of its intended aim. Nevertheless, theirs were not myths of evil. Oedipus’s experience terrifies; he, too, can speak of the horror. Even blind and old, he terrorizes others. He is polluted, but he is not evil. He only becomes evil on a modern rereading. To make him evil, we have to replace the Greek idea of pollution with a Judeo-Christian idea of sin. We have to assign Oedipus an agency that he lacks in Sophocles’ account. Indeed, the very point of Sophocles’ play is to say that Oedipus is incapable of such agency. To make Oedipus evil, we first have to kill the Olympian gods and then invest Oedipus with a subconscious.

What terrorized the Greeks was the world, not the inner life. When the Greeks thought about the terror of human existence, they produced tragedy. Tragedy gives the audience just what subjects lack in their ordinary lives: knowledge of the reality that is creating the appearance on the stage. The audience sees what the actor cannot see. Seeing both the actor and the context, the audience understands the drama to represent a gap in knowledge. The play’s action is the overcoming of that gap—a direction and goal that the audience perceives as necessary from the moment the play begins. In this sense, the audi-

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4 See Aristotle, Poetics 1449b(24–28) (I. Bywater, trans.) in Basic Works of Aristotle (R. McKeon, ed. 1941) (referring to tragedy as an “imitation of an action that is . . . complete in itself,” but also “with incidents arousing fear and pity”).
ence knows the whole from the beginning, and experiences a reduction in tension as the perceptions of actor and audience converge at the end. To the extent that the audience identifies with Oedipus onstage, it shares in his experience of terror. But to the extent that the spectator reminds himself that he is not onstage, that he has a comprehensive view of both the stage appearance and its cause, he has some control over that terror. Oedipus may blind himself, but the audience is never blind. The audience can thereby experience a kind of catharsis that is not available to the actor, whether on the stage or in real life. Greek tragedy reveals the terror of life itself—a terror rooted in what we cannot know—but does so in a context within which it is cabined, allowing some temporary relief from the horror of it all.

To see the causes of appearances—to see what men literally cannot see—is to be beyond terror. For this reason, there is nothing of terror in Greek philosophy, which strives to penetrate appearances and to see the real. Plato’s cave—the most famous metaphor in all classical philosophy—is all about shifting positions such that one sees fully the context within which the human drama is set. Still today, this is the ambition of reason. If reason can grasp the real, it can provide a firm ground for practical action, whether of social construction or individual therapy. The philosopher turned therapist takes up the position of the classical playwright who brings together, if only temporarily, appearance and reality at the play’s conclusion. Psychoanalysis is the construction of just such a drama in which the patient becomes the audience to his own performance. Plato, who would banish the poets from his ideal city, is only the first of a long line of philosophers, psychoanalysts, economists, and others who would drive illusion from the society: they rally to the cry, “To the facts themselves.”

Plato’s Republic, for example, is a profound psychological work, but the psychological problems with which it deals are political problems with political solutions: how to educate a military class, how to produce leaders who will not abuse public power for private ends,

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7 If we compare Oedipus to Lear, we see that Shakespeare inverts the position of audience and actor. Lear’s madness creates an access to truth not available to the audience. Lear knows more than the audience because he can see beyond the mere appearances to which the audience is bound. See P. Kahn, Law and Love: The Trials of King Lear 134 (2000).
how to produce a stable relationship between feelings of familial love and feelings of political identity. Even when the psychological concerns advance beyond the possibilities of ordinary politics, the goal remains pedagogic: how to train philosophers who can see the ultimate unity of being and the good. This is a world in which mistakes will be made, in which there are plenty of human deficiencies to be overcome, but not a world in which terror makes any appearance.  

To the degree that concerns with death do appear in the Republic, they are met by myths designed to meet the same pedagogic goals. Within the city, death is, first of all, a problem of courage: one must hold to politically appropriate beliefs even under the stress of battle. Elsewhere the message of Plato’s dialogues broadens to the relationship of death to other virtues: given what we know about justice and the good, it is irrational to fear death. Indeed, in the Phaedo, Socrates goes so far as to say that philosophy itself is a practice of dying, by which he means that the philosopher takes no notice of death. He takes no notice, because he has already withdrawn from that special concern for the self that others associate with dying. To the thinking mind, death makes no appearance because death, in and of itself, has no meaning. Meaning is located in the objects of reason, which are quite independent of any individual’s existence or nonexistence. Plato’s point is clearer to us if we consider a discipline like mathematics. Death makes no appearance in mathematics because the individual makes no appearance. Only in such disciplines of pure reason does the thinking soul truly find itself, for it overcomes the separation between thought and the object of thought. The terror of Oedipus, Plato suggests, rests upon a gap between appearance and reality. The philosopher forsakes appearances; his truth is not of this world. With that, the gap is to disappear.

8 In the Republic, the ultimate recalcitrance of the world to philosophical reconstruction is blamed on an inevitable failure of the cosmic cycles. Thus a cosmological rather than a moral myth is deployed to explain the source of inevitable failure. See Book VII, 546a–d.
9 Plato, Phaedo 63e–65a.
11 Similarly, there is no terror before death in Aristotle. For him, the philosopher is a man at home in the world because world and mind realize the same principles of reason. Whatever mysteries exist, they do not terrify. The world provides all the resources the philosopher
Yet Plato is hardly representative of a Greek absence of terror in the face of death. Plato’s view that philosophy is a practice of dying was not exactly designed to attract a large following. Such a claim was more likely to be the object of derision in comedy than of popular belief. In Plato’s Apology, Socrates speaks of the contrast between his own calmness before the threat of death and the terrified reactions ordinarily characteristic of those accused of capital offenses. Plato is himself responding to Homer’s description of Odysseus’s visit to Hades, where Achilles proclaims: “Better, I say, to break sod as a farmhand / for some poor country man, on iron rations, than lord it over all the exhausted dead.” The Athenians were no more likely to be Stoics than the rest of us. The Platonic denial of the reality of the mortal body does have a profound impact on the development of Christianity but not as a form of general prescription. A sanctified elite—whether philosophical or religious—might pursue this denial, but the Church had to support a larger community organized in the traditional patterns of familial and political life. The same can be said of the belief in a fully knowable universe. This ideal of the philosopher founds the Western belief in the universal reach of science. The modern man of science is the direct descendent of the Greek philosopher. Again, however, only a few can adopt a comprehensive scientific attitude toward the terrors of lived experience.

The classical philosopher could not conceive of the limits of reason; he could not believe that experience might be impenetrable to discursive inquiry. In Plato’s Apology, Socrates imagines life after death as a kind of uninterrupted pursuit of the kind of conversations he enjoyed in life. But terror is beyond discourse, just as death is the point at which speech runs out. If people do experience terror, if they seek a practical orientation in the face of terror, the philosopher’s answers are not responsive to the conditions within which individuals find needs to achieve the best of ends: happiness. The practical problem for philosophy is to establish the conditions under which the good man can be the good citizen, that is, the point at which there is a reciprocal relationship between the happiness of the individual and the well-being of the community.

12 Aristophanes’ Clouds portrays just such a comic Socrates.
themselves. The terrifying world was not the world of the philosophers. This impenetrable domain of terror was, however, the subject of tragedy. *Oedipus the King* may be the most effective presentation of the classical response to the impenetrable character of existence. That response shows us terror but not evil.

The experience of the play is terrifying in a double sense. Oedipus is terrified by what he comes to learn of himself: he is terrified to learn of the gap between appearance and reality. The audience is equally terrified not just for him but along with him, as it is drawn into the play and sees the world from his perspective. Strikingly, neither our terror nor his rests on a misuse of freedom. The horror of the play is metaphysical, not ethical: free, deliberate action, we learn, may be nothing other than a play of appearance. The failures of action represented in the play do not have their source in any failure of Oedipus’s soul—for example, lack of reason, weakness of the will, overbearing desire, or absence of sympathy. We cannot speak of a failure of forethought, a failure of courage, or a failure to control desire. Oedipus seeks to act virtuously despite the ill prophesies. He exercises reason in all the choices he makes. He does show himself to have a temper, but the source of the tragedy is hardly that. The disaster comes not from his emotional reactions but from his measured, deliberate actions. The problem is in the world, not in himself.

Oedipus tries to escape the fate that was prophesied for him as a youth at Corinth: that he would kill his father and marry his mother. He flees home and city. It cannot be a fault to try to escape such a horrible fate, especially when it means death and destruction for those one loves. Whatever we think about the inevitability of fate, we cannot think it appropriate to do nothing but watch the tale unfold. When told of the immeasurable tragedy that will be the tale of his life, Oedipus must do something. If we speculate about what he “should have done,” we are engaging in the same battle with fate that Oedipus chooses. The ethical choice in his situation is hardly not to deliberate any more than it is not to act. To think otherwise is to confuse the idea of fate with a prediction of a causal sequence. Our fate does not appear to us as the end of a scientific experiment that happens to be our lives.
Measured against the ordinary norms that govern choice, Oedipus is faultless. He saves Thebes from the Sphinx and then rules well. His ambitions are not for personal power but for the realization of justice in his community. Similarly, he loves well. His attachments to family are genuine. His concern is not for himself but for the well-being of his loved ones. He has virtues of character and of reason; he pursues justice with genuine sympathy for others. He achieves all those virtues that are within the power of the individual and the community. He deploys those virtues for admirable ends—to save family and city. When he has to choose between self-interest and the interest of others, he chooses the latter. Although he has fled his fate, there is not some dark secret brooding about his heart. He is not using others for private, undisclosed ends; he is not hiding his true interests from others. His actions are not what they seem, but not because he is in some way a hypocrite, a pretender, or a subject with a deep break between an inner and outer self. The break is in the order of reality, not in his soul. Nothing Oedipus believes to be true is true: his parents are not really his parents, his wife is his mother, his children are his siblings. Reality is not what it seems, despite his best efforts to understand.

Oedipus appears in the play’s opening as the good man and the good citizen. He is shocked beyond horror—terrorized—to discover that all these virtues are mere appearances, that at the center of his existence is a violation of the order of the universe. He is not in control of what he does, even as he thinks of himself as virtuous. He is not in control because that which he thinks he knows, he does not know. The problem is one of knowledge, but the problem is incurable. Thus his wife, Jocasta, tells him: “Why should man fear since chance is all in all / for him, and he can clearly foreknow nothing? / Best to live lightly, as one can, unthinkingly.” He is not himself a riddle to be solved like the problem of the sphinx. Again Jocasta: “God keep you from the knowledge of who you are!”

Reading more Plato or Aristotle would not help Oedipus. He lives in a world impenetrable to human reason: a world in which signs and omens are more truthful than one’s own eyes, more reliable than

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rationality and deliberation. He is not forced to kill his father when he would rather not. He kills his father, thinking that in his flight he has protected his father. He marries his mother, thinking that he is maintaining the royal order of Thebes. In a world in which things are not what they seem, deliberation is not a trustworthy guide to action. Yet reason is the only guide man possesses. Jocasta’s recommendation of thoughtlessness is not really an option. Even omens and prophesies must be interpreted, and a plan of action must be formulated. In that task, there is only reason to rely on. Omens are just more appearances in the world, requiring the application of man’s reason. Oedipus proves this by solving the riddle of the Sphinx. But just because one riddle can be solved hardly means that all the riddles of existence can be solved. Oedipus has done all that he can to avoid the terrible deeds that are his fate. The fault may be his but not because he is blameworthy. That is precisely the point: it is fault without blame.

Oedipus does those things that are most horrifying to man, family, and city. He destroys the very conditions of order of each. Human values rest on a necessary order—the divine conditions of all that exists. There is not some city in which it is permissible to kill one’s father or marry one’s mother. These relationships are the foundation of a human world. Outside these basic norms, we are not living in a human world at all. Oedipus breaks apart the ordered universe of man. He is cast off into the wilds of nature, the space between organized human communities. He is literally no longer of this world. Whether that makes him sacred or savage is an open question.

That the wisest of men, the best of political rulers, and the most loving of fathers can rend the universe in two suggests the failure of human knowledge. The true order of the world moves to a system of causes that is beyond our grasp. Plato may have thought that being and the good are one and the same, but Sophocles did not. Why do the gods so hate Oedipus? We cannot answer that question without

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literally entering a Sophoclean world in which our ordinary understandings of the order of reality are profoundly disturbed. We cannot know if Oedipus is the victim of earlier actions by the House of Laius, as if the gods keep their own tally of action and revenge. Oedipus asks, “Was I not born evil?” and “What have you designed, O Zeus, to do with me?” Alternatively we might think that Oedipus’s fate is the response of the gods to Oedipus’s own hubris in thinking he could outsmart them. When time loses its order, as it does with the immortal gods, we can no longer distinguish cause from effect; an effect can constitute its own cause. But if Oedipus’s predicted fate is a consequence of choices not yet made and character not yet formed, he can do no more about it than if he were suffering for the deeds of his ancestors. Or perhaps there is no reason at all for Oedipus’s suffering. We moralize endlessly about our lives, but perhaps the gods do not really care. Oedipus’s fate may be only ill luck without any explanation at all. All these possibilities terrorize.

The issue raised by these competing interpretations of the reasons for Oedipus’s fate is the question of the dimensions of human blindness. All converge on the idea that man’s knowledge is not adequate to the field upon which he acts. That field is one that is constituted by the gods, and about this man can know nothing. Outside the theater, we cannot see as the gods see, so we might as well not see at all: Oedipus puts out his eyes. Reason marks the point of man’s hubris; his belief that there is a symmetry between what he can know and what he can do. Man’s reason, however, is nothing more than cleverness, and cleverness runs out. Whether we have eyes or not, blindness is the human condition. In the end, riddles define the scope of human action because of the incapacities of human knowledge.

The terror of the play, then, lies in the dimension of the sacred. Man may be a plaything of the gods; he may be the object of the gods’ antagonism. In neither case is he a subject who can control his actions through reason. The human order that we create in good faith through politics and family may, at any moment, be shown to rest on a founda-

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18 Sophocles, *Oedipus* 822, 738. The translator’s use of the word “evil” for the Greek κακός should not be confused with the Judeo-Christian conception of evil. Its meaning is closer to bad or ignoble.
tion as terrifying as that of Thebes. We cannot know, because the ultimate reality against which our actions are measured is impenetrable to reason. “What man, what man on earth wins more / of happiness than a seeming / and after that turning away?”²⁻¹⁹ No man can be proclaimed happy until he is dead, for all that he thought to constitute his happiness may be shown to be nothing but disaster. In an inversion of the Platonic claim that the best life, philosophy, is a practice of dying, the Chorus proclaims that those who live are “equal with those who live not at all!”²⁻²⁰ This is not a reassurance but a statement of terror in a world in which the gods may not be benevolent forces.

We can, of course, read the play as not really about divine causation. Prophesy can be seen as just another form of knowledge, not as a form of divine intervention.²¹ In that case, Oedipus brings his own fate upon himself, and the gods merely see into the future. While today we might be attracted to a reading that strips the play of its sacred dimension, such a reading is hardly adequate. There is no moral puzzle to solve in Oedipus’s behavior, as if the lesson is to take a bit more care before one acts. To make it that is to turn it into comedy: mistaken identity is the very stuff of comedy.

There is, however, a closely related reading that is more compelling. This reading aligns the play with Plato’s inquiry into political psychology in the Republic. The narrative line of the play begins with the prophesy to Laius, the ruler of Thebes and Oedipus’s father. He is warned of the future behavior of his son. He tries to prevent this behavior, but he fails. He cannot prevent the appearance of a son who will slay him, claim political authority, and take possession of his family. That such a son will arise is not a product of chance—secular or sacred—but a necessary consequence of the structural conditions of power in the city. The possibility of parricide haunts every royal family. It is unavoidable as long as authority exists in city and family. Now, the play is not about Oedipus but about the structural conditions of politics, and how the structure of political authority shapes the psy-

²⁻¹⁹ Id. 1190–92.
²⁻²⁰ Id. 1188–89.
²¹ For another dramatic representation of this problem, consider Macbeth’s response to the prophesy that he will be king. Shakespeare, however, poses the issue in terms of a psychological drama—exactly the terms that Oedipus lacks.
psychology of those who are ruled. Oedipus as a unique person, characterized by his disfavor with the gods, disappears from view in the political-psychological account. The subject of this account is not the failure of reason but the workings of intergenerational ambition and jealousy: the son will assert himself in order to seize authority.

By murdering his father, Oedipus claims a power equal to, if not greater than, the source of his own being. By marrying his mother, he claims a kind of agelessness. He spans generations, confusing the chain of orderly succession. This is the ultimate rebellion of the powerless—to attempt to control time itself in the ages of man. The child has become father to the man. In an age of science fiction, he would be represented as literally father to himself. He comes as close to being the uncaused agent—the first cause—of his own existence as is possible in Greek representation. The violation of the order of the universe is the violation of the fundamental order of life and death. Oedipus claims the power of the gods themselves.

Yet Oedipus cannot claim this power without suffering horror at his own actions, for fundamentally he believes in the norms that he has violated. He would be the good son, the good ruler, and the good father. His character is to be hero, not antihero. The horror Oedipus feels is the affirmation of the city’s order in the face of rebellion. Thus the play begins with Oedipus, as King, announcing the penalty for the unknown murderer of Laius:

\[\text{Upon the murderer I invoke this curse—}\
\text{whether he is one man and all unknown,}\
\text{or one of many—may he wear out his life}\
\text{in misery to miserable doom!}\]

If we read the play as an assertion of Oedipal power rather than as a meditation on the failure of reason, then we see that power to be insubstantial. Lacking divine foundations, this new power cannot sur-

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22 This is the common reading of Antigone after Hegel. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* 221 (A. V. Miller, trans. 1975).
23 Oedipus’s intergenerational character should be considered in relation to his insight into the riddle of the Sphinx.
vive in any dimension: the city expels him, his mother/wife kills herself, and Oedipus physically blinds himself. In this condition of affirming the city’s order through his own suffering, he becomes a point of manifestation of the sacred. Through him, traditional order has overthrown rebellion and thus shown its own foundational power. In Freud’s account, this reassertion of civilization against the rebellious child occurs through the vehicle of guilt, which serves as the foundation of law. For him, the play gives outward expression to the internal suffering of a soul that wills its own existence by denying every limit on its own power.

Freud and Sophocles agree that Oedipus violates the conditions of political/familial order. Freud would locate the principles of order and disorder in man himself. He internalizes Nietzsche’s account of the moral history of the Christian West as a battle between the powerful and the powerless. For Freud, the outcome depends on the feeling of guilt by which the superego controls the id. Civilization is only as powerful as the resources of guilt. Evil, accordingly, is that force within the self that would destroy the conditions of the subject’s own repression. Knowing this about ourselves, we know that we have the capacity for evil. Psychologically we are already guilty by virtue of that very knowledge. Part of the subject wants to be Oedipus, while another part is terrified by the possibility. The triumph of civilization is the self-binding of the id, such that the subject affirms the orderly life of family and polity.

If we read the play in this Freudian way, we do turn Oedipus into an evil character. His suffering is now the appropriate response to his moral failing, and that failure is located in the will to be the source of his own being. This is a will that would make of the universe an image of the self, such that one never sees anything other than a reflected image of one’s own power. To accomplish that end, one must murder and violate ordinary moral norms. The suppression of this evil is, for Freud, the source of civilization. He, too, believes that the normative order is a tenuous affair, built on a kind of self-induced blindness.

26 See Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus, which portraits a contest between Thebes and Athens for possession of the body of Oedipus after his death.
28 Again, a comparison to Macbeth is appropriate.
For Freud, man cannot bear too much knowledge of himself. For Sophocles, he cannot take too much knowledge of the world.

That the play is accessible to such a reading may explain something of its enduring quality. Nevertheless, it is wrong to project this reading back into the classical context, for at the center of this reading is an assertion of the will in the face of death. This is indeed the problem of evil in our world, but to get here from the classical era our analysis must take up the myth of Adam and Eve.

For Sophocles, Oedipus’s conflict is not located in the soul. It is, rather, a battle between man and the divine but not the divine within man himself; this man is not created in the image of God. For Sophocles, the divine still inhabits the world. Oedipus lives in a sacred world that is not of his own creation. Oedipus is not striving for autochthony—killing his father and claiming his mother. He is striving to lead a virtuous life within the ordinary intergenerational cycles of politics and family. He has not been found out; he has been turned out. Oedipus is not responsible for this inversion of power. If anyone is responsible, it is the gods. In fact, every effort to assign responsibility is left indeterminate in the play, for evil is not at issue.

What is so terrifying here is the showing forth of a divine order that sets aside as mere empty appearance the objects of human understanding. The horror of Oedipus is mixed with the sacred from the very beginning. Prophesies and omens are needed to clarify exactly who Oedipus is. Oedipus shares that double quality of the divine as simultaneously sacred and polluted. In the presence of the polluted, we are very close—perhaps too close—to the sacred. For this reason, Oedipus’s broken, blind body becomes the object of a battle for possession between Athens and Thebes in Oedipus at Colonus. What is truly terrifying is the manifestation of the divine as a principle of sacred destruction. Indeed, this is too much to see; the terror is too great. Oedipus blinds himself and takes himself away from the sight of the human community. We can take just so much exposure to the sacred. Whether the divine shows itself as ordered creation or endless horror is beyond our control. To the human actor, it is one and the same.

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29 Nietzsche would take hold of this knowledge in the pursuit of a transformation of values. See F. Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals (W. Kaufman, trans. 1989) [1887].
world. It is only the difference between looking at life and at death. Both are equal parts of our world.

This showing forth is the point of the *mysterium tremendum*. Oedipus truly is touched by the gods. That makes him simultaneously sacred and terrifying. Man’s duty is to maintain the order of the world by expelling the polluted. It is to repair the rent in the universe by which the sacred shows itself in its full and terrifying force. But there is no rational theory by which to understand how the universe comes to be torn, just as there is no theory by which we can understand how mind becomes embodied or why life ends in death. Because the world is torn, the world is terrifying. That it is so is simply a fact that we experience. This fact is denied by the philosophers.

The rent in the universe is a measure of the gap between man’s knowledge and the order of existence. Ultimately, we are all as blind as Oedipus. Ritual must replace reason; prophesy, deliberation. If the ritual fails—as it always will—all that is left is the horror. The truth Oedipus learns, and the truth that he represents, is the truth that he becomes: man is blind. We know no more about life than about death. About death, it is always as if we are blind. We cannot see beyond life to death; we cannot make sense of the presence of death. The stories we tell about life turn out to be no more substantial than the stories we tell about death. Oedipus thinks he is father, king, husband. These are only words in an impenetrable universe.

Man experiences pollution as terrifying, but it makes no sense to describe the polluted as evil. It is not up to Oedipus to avoid the deeds he committed; it is not up to him to overcome them. His problems are metaphysical, not psychological and not moral. He does not prescribe a course of treatment for himself. He takes on a ritual of banishment, not a therapeutic intervention that will allow him to return to the norm. His behavior is the source of the disturbance, but we cannot say that he is evil.

Oedipus would move from a polluted figure to an evil actor were he to take up what he has done as his own actions, were he to assert

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a power to overcome death, were he to assert that he is the cause of his own existence and deny the principles of order within which he finds himself. In short, were Oedipus to affirm the person that he is, we would confront evil. To make any of these affirmations, however, Oedipus would have to understand himself as fundamentally free. He would have to understand his identity as the product of his own free will. He would have to define himself through his relationship to his will rather than to the gods. That person he would become is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Indeed, we are that person.

**TERROR AND THE INVENTION OF EVIL**

Sophocles leaves us no dream of a perfect world, a world in which the problem of Oedipus is solved. Pollution is a fact about the world, not a problem of human agency to be solved through knowledge or cleverness. Oedipus is doomed to wander from place to place, always reminding men of the terrifying truth of their own condition before the gods. The Oedipus myth has a shape much like that of Cain. We cannot know why Cain is disfavored or why Abel is favored. Like Cain, Oedipus is marked by his pollution, which arises from killing a family member. Each wanders the earth. For both, the divine sanction also has a sacred power: the power to found and protect a city. Oedipus and Cain always draw the attention of the gods—for good and bad.

This structural homology of Oedipus and Cain suggests that evil steps into the category of the polluted. Just as the polluted is simultaneously terrifying and sanctifying, so is evil. There is a danger of getting too close but also a danger of losing contact entirely. The double character of Oedipus—polluted and sacred—is replaced by a new double in the Judeo-Christian word—evil and love.

Something new appears in the idea of a covenantal religion. There could not be a concept of evil until there was a concept of the will. This is exactly what the classical Greeks lacked, which is why the Oedipus story is not about evil but about the confrontation of reason

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32 Compare Edmund in *King Lear*, particularly the opening of act 1, scene 2, where Edmund literally affirms his bastardy and directs the gods to “stand up for bastards!”
and revelation, of order and pollution.³³ In the Judeo-Christian tradition, a metaphysics of the will displaces a metaphysics of the hierophantic. The sacred no longer shows itself in the things of this world—for example, omens and rituals—unmediated by the human will.³⁴ The very concept of pollution is rendered difficult, for the world is the creation of God’s will and that which He creates is good. Nor is the sacred a matter of knowledge, as if we can reason ourselves to God—although a classical tradition of reason survives even within the Church. The relationship to the sacred is now founded on faith, and faith is a matter of the will.³⁵

Faith is beyond reason, but, like reason, it opens us to a world of meaning outside ourselves. The opposition of faith to reason appears with clarity in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac: Abraham must have faith in the unreasonable promise that he will found a nation even as he sacrifices his only legitimate son. Other immediate examples of this opposition include that most concrete expression of Christian faith, the catechism, which proclaims belief in a proposition that defies reason: the “consubstantial Trinity.”³⁶ Or in the even simpler incantation, in the mass for the dead, of Jesus’s statement, “He who believes in me shall never die.”³⁷ If faith in God is a product of the will, then failure of faith is no longer a matter of “weakness of the will”—what the Greeks termed akrasia. Rather, the failure of faith is sin made possible by a free will.

Sin is the failure to place the self in a world of sacred meaning. It is not the violation of a norm but the turning away from God. Of course,

³⁴ Of course, not completely. There remains, for example, the tradition of sacred relics, and the sacraments remain central to Catholicism. Pollution, too, remains a part of the Jewish tradition. Generally Christianity is competing with—and absorbing—elements of an earlier occultism in much of Europe right up to the early 1700s. See J. Butler, Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People 7–30 (1990).
³⁵ A classic expression of the subordination of understanding to faith is Saint Anselm’s: “I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand.”
one form of that “turning” can be violation, but there is a fear that even those who follow the law may still be in a state of sin. Sin is not the outward act but the inner failure of faith, that is, the inner turning of the will. That failure can result from the pride of reason as easily as from the desires of the body. In both cases there is effectively a turning in upon the self, a claim that the goal of the will is to express individual subjectivity; whether that subjectivity is thought of as the consequence of deliberation or of interest is not as important as the initial turning.

This idea of sin as a product of the subject’s will makes no appearance in the Oedipus drama. Pride is a virtue in a classical world. It could, of course, lead to a hubristic overreaching, but hubris is not sin. Pride suggests autonomy, independence, and self-reliance. Sophocles’ Oedipus begins the play full of pride for his accomplishments. That pride comes to appear as hubris, because he has a misplaced belief in his own reason: he has lived in a world of false appearances. In its place, Oedipus takes up an attitude of horror toward himself. Yet he does not overcome himself; there is no impulse toward self-transcendence. He does not move from a position lacking faith to one of faith; his problem is with the gods, not with his will. We can use neither the language of faith nor that of will to describe his condition.

Oedipus shows us one set of classical antinomies: sacred and polluted; Plato another: mind and body. Philosophy was seen as an attack upon the gods at least in part because it would substitute the latter antimony for the former. Philosophy would pursue contemplation in order to free the soul of particularity, whether that of the desiring body or that of the sacred. Neither of the dualisms of antiquity—mind and body, sacred and polluted—is adequate to a world in which the soul is experienced through a faculty of will. If the quality of the subject—his or her moral character—is a product of a free will, then the battle is not between body and mind but between the divisions of the soul itself. In this very sense, man has become a deeper problem to himself.

Immanuel Kant secularizes this idea when he insists that the measure of moral worth is not the outward act, which may be in accordance with law (civil and moral), but in the quality of the maxim the subject gives himself—for example, “maxims which neglect the incentives springing from the moral law.” I. Kant, *Religion with the Limits of Reason Alone* 25 (T. Greene & H. Hudsen, trans. 1960) [1793].
It is no longer enough to control the body’s intemperate desires. Nor is it enough to educate reason alone. A free will is subordinated only by its own free act.

Knowledge and evil, we know all too well, are no less compatible than desire and evil. In Genesis, knowledge follows the willful act. Indeed, knowledge of good and evil is the product of the violation. If so, knowledge cannot be the answer to the problem of will. Man gains knowledge but loses the presence of the sacred. Knowledge no longer leads to the universal, to transcendence of the body. Just the opposite: knowledge now appears as bound to the body and to individual subjectivity. Oedipus had reason but was defeated by an unreasonable universe; in the Judeo-Christian tradition, man has reason but is defeated by his own free will.39

In place of the classical dualism of the sacred and the polluted, we confront a new dualism of love and evil. Neither love nor evil can be understood apart from the relationship of the subject’s will to his own death—not the fact of his death but the subject’s awareness of his own finitude. Thus the knowledge that Adam and Eve gain and that defines their fallen condition is the knowledge that they will die. Evil arises out of the flight from death, whereas love expresses a faith in the possibility of the transcendence of death. Both express a metaphysics entirely different from that derived from conceptions of the sacred or of reason available to the Greeks.

All this is already present in the biblical myth of creation. God creates a universe that is good. It is perfect in that it is complete in itself; it needs nothing else. God creates Adam and Eve just as he creates the other beasts, in pairs.40 These original pairs are not unique subjects but rather contain the entire life of the species. This is the creation of Forms in the Aristotelian sense.41 All that the horse is or will be is

39 See Romans 7, 15.
40 In this discussion, I run together two different accounts of creation in the text. Distinguishing between these two accounts is important to the argument I develop in later chapters. At this point, however, I want to emphasize only certain elements present in the general account of creation.
41 Modern fundamentalists who insist that all species were fully present at creation are closer to Aristotle than they realize. On the importance of Aristotle’s metaphysics in understanding the nature of Christ and the Eucharist in medieval thought, see D. MacCulloch, The Reformation: A History 24–25 (2003).
present in the original creation. That particular horses appear in the
order of time is irrelevant to what it is to be a horse. The garden is a
world of essences, of paradigms, only instances of which could be
repeated through all future time. In the absence of free will, nothing
new is to happen. Indeed, nothing could happen, for there is no
ground or source of the new. Accordingly, naming the individual origi­
nals of creation is naming all instances of the species for all time. Adam
does not assign the beasts proper names.

Like the other species, Adam and Eve can themselves be thought of
as plural beings. In them, all men and all women are already present.
But unlike the other beings, their state of perfection requires an exer­
cise of the will; that is, they must will their own perfection. In mythical
terms, they must exercise will to remain in the presence of the sacred.
They fail, as does all mankind that follows them.42

Death is not present before the Fall, because death has no meaning
for the species. Death is not yet an event; neither is birth. An event has
a before and after, but at creation all time is present. Time itself would
be only iteration, not change. Of perfect iteration, however, there is
no measure. We literally could not tell one moment from another. Sin
breaks the temporal character of creation. Human time—a measure
of past, present, and future—begins with the Fall. This conception of
time as moving from present to future is implicit in the dual meanings
of labor, which is the source of the sequence of generations and of
the world of production. Before the Fall, Adam’s present is like the
immortality of medieval European kings: deathless in its form but sus­
tained through successive iterations. That a species can die, yet alone
that a new species can appear, is knowledge that must await nine­
teenth-century science. The knowledge that man can be the agent of
such species disappearances, as well as of new appearances, creates
one of the great moral burdens of the twentieth century.

In the beginning, Adam has one great discursive task: the naming
of species. Even after Eve’s creation, there is nothing further to talk

42 Augustine insists on the “corporate” character of Adam, from which follows his doc­
trine of original sin. In Adam’s sin, we all sinned because the Adam who sinned contained
the entire human race. See E. Pagels, Adam, Eve, and the Serpent 108–9 (discussing Au­
gustine’s City of God).
about. If nothing happens, what is there to say? There is no history to record and no future to plan. Life in the Garden is life without male or female labor. From our perspective, there is a sense in which Adam and Eve lack seriousness. For this reason, they are associated with the innocence of childhood. What they say in the Garden—apart from the naming and before the temptation—is not worth recording. It is ephemeral; it is of no consequence. Their talk to each other could not advance beyond idle chatter. The only object of their talk that could be serious would be the praise of God. But here words fail. There is nothing to reason about, no counterpoint against which to judge creation, no need to pray for anything further. Prayer could be nothing other than a naming of God. All that could be said is already said in the name itself.  

Discourse begins with temptation. Only now does something happen. The serpent appears. This serpent is not the species’ representative: snake. The serpent is singular—an individual—in a garden of plural beings. He does not appear in order to be named. Rather, when he appears, he speaks. As an individual, the serpent has speech. That speech is hardly idle chatter. The serpent is the symbol of man’s will, for its appearance marks the possibility of action. With its appearance, creation breaks apart into individual subjects, each of whom has a unique place in the sequence of time. There is no will in the abstract, no moment of pure will that corresponds to that denial of the individual self which reason seeks through unity with the abstract universal. Will has already individuated in the myth, because will is always the possession of a subject. With the appearance of the serpent, we move immediately from a world in which speech is naming to one in which speech is narrative. The possibility of the willed act marks a before

43 Something of this remains in the Jewish service. While it does present the fundamental narrative of divine intervention in favor of the Jews, at its center is an act of naming the unnamable, of speaking what cannot be said. There is an asymptotic approach to this mysterious center—the more Orthodox the congregation, the more the central act of naming recedes into “what cannot be said.” In the Garden we imagine the constraint lifted, which means that all speech would converge on the single name of God.


45 Interestingly, he becomes that only after the original sin. This is his punishment.
and an after, and that is the domain of narrative. Thus the origin of the subject brings together discourse, will, action, and time.⁴⁶

The serpent’s speech is neither that of reason nor that of the desiring body. It is the speech of action. There is not yet knowledge by which to judge the serpent’s speech. There is only authority, on the one hand, and temptation, on the other. These are the boundaries of the will. The serpent, accordingly, deploys the vice of the will: jealousy. Jealousy is temptation’s response to authority. It is a kind of self-construction that simultaneously involves recognition and denial of the authority of another. Eve would be like God in the knowledge of good and evil. To be such, she must deny God’s authority.

The result of this dialogue of temptation is an act: something new happens in the Garden. Its newness is symbolized in God’s failure to know of it. Here, the suggestion is that not even God can foresee a free act. His omniscience does not include the product of a subject’s free will.⁴⁷ His knowledge corresponds to the perfect and timeless state of creation before the act. Thus God learns of the act only after he sees the evidence of its occurrence. He finds Adam and Eve hiding in the Garden and ashamed of their nakedness.

Tempting Eve, the serpent speaks to her. We cannot separate the temptation from the speech. Entering into a dialogue, she is constituted as an individual. She becomes an individual when speech opens a range of choices. Confronting possibility, she thinks of herself as a subject who can exercise her will. This is the sense in which dialogue creates the subject.⁴⁸ If we spoke only the language of mathematics—that is, the language of abstract deduction—speech would not be linked to action. We would, in that case, be in the classical world of pure reason. In Genesis, speech, action, and subjectivity are all created at once. This speech that is not naming shows forth a world of possibility: Eve has a choice whether to eat of the apple.

⁴⁶ We could push the exegesis back further, noting that even before the serpent’s appearance God commands Adam and Eve not to eat of the trees. The command assumes the possibility of the willful act; it, too, is speech linked to action but in the authoritative-prohibitive mode. The possibility of the act is realized with the appearance of the serpent.

⁴⁷ This is a highly contested reading, resolving the “paradox of omniscience” against God. Augustine argued that divine omniscience included knowledge of the free act, as did those Protestant sects that took a strong view of predestination. See Augustine, On Free Choice of the Will 92 (A. Benjamin & L. Hackstaff. trans. 1964).

Just as this speech is a necessary condition of subjectivity, action is a necessary condition of dialogue. Speech directed at reason, rather than action, tends toward the null point of dialogue. Beyond a certain point, dialogue gets in the way of truth, which is the goal of reason. Truth makes a claim to settle speech; it closes down discourse. After a successful mathematical proof, there is nothing more to be said. Similarly, claims to truth tend to undermine political communities, which are built on free speech. A world of action, however, is a world of speech. Action has, for this reason, traditionally been associated with rhetoric, which is the art of persuasion. The Serpent’s speech, we might say, is the first rhetorical performance. God’s speech was creative, not rhetorical; Adam and Eve’s speech prior to the Fall was naming, prayer, or chatter. The Serpent shows us speech as action, which is the domain of rhetoric.

Because we are called upon to act, we are called upon to speak and to listen. Every act has its source in a subject. Every subject has his or her reasons. We try to persuade others to exercise choice one way or another by appealing to those reasons. What appears internally as choice appears outwardly as the object of persuasion. Both Adam and Eve succumb to persuasion. We need to refer to that speech—we listen to the narrative—to understand their actions. Action and speech, accordingly, are reciprocal phenomena. They are the constitutive elements of a subject whose defining feature is the will. Because action requires speech, an individual who understands that the source of the self lies in the will necessarily understands himself as a part of a community, for there is no speech apart from a community of speakers. The serpent, we might also say, is the original founder; politics begins in an act of the will.

Adam and Eve speak because they face a choice. If they can choose, they are subjects. The Oedipus story, too, begins with speech, but that speech is prophesy. That divine prophesy stands in sharp contrast to the Genesis account in which God lacks knowledge of Adam and

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49 See Plato, Republic, VI 506d–e (truth itself is beyond the capacity of language).
50 On action and speech, as mutually constructive of the political realm, see H. Arendt, The Human Condition 197–98 (1958).
Eve’s sin until after the fact. Prophesy does not open up a moral domain of action; it undermines the very idea of action. Oedipus is not commanded to do—or not to do—anything. Just the opposite. A prophesy is made that opens up the paradox of free choice in a deterministic world. Oedipus’s vice, if he has one, is not of the will; he does not disobey.

Oedipus and Adam provide us with two very different mythical representations of man’s place in the world. Oedipus’s story always points outward toward the divine conditions within which reason and action go forward: speech becomes riddles, choices accomplish their opposite. The problem for Oedipus is his inability to know what is real and what is not. The play poses the question: “What can we know?” The biblical story instead turns inward. It forces us to ask: “What is the source of disobedience?” The answer to that question is found not in a failure of reason but of will. Both stories tell us that we live in a disordered, unsettled world. Both are stories of failure: one of reason, the other of will. One denies us knowledge, warning that reality may be only a seeming. The other recognizes knowledge—we have eaten of the tree—but at the cost of a disobedient will. One is a story of necessity, the other of freedom. One puts us at the mercy of forces outside ourselves, over which we have no control; the other puts us at the mercy of our own will over which we fail to exercise control.32 We seem to have to choose between the failure of reason and the failure of will. Modern science may well have solved the riddles of knowledge that were impenetrable to Oedipus, but it has not taken us one step closer to solving the problems of the will. Natural horrors may have receded in a disenchanted universe, but the terrors of evil have only grown in the modern period.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, every action, even the mythical first act, is the act of a subject, because every action is the product of a choice between possibilities. Only with the introduction of a free subject can we speak of “what might have been.”33 Of course, we speak loosely in this way when we ask, for example: “What would the world

32 Interestingly, for Augustine the consequence of the original failure of the will is a loss of control of the body, particularly in its sexual function.

33 A traditional problem of theology comes from anthropomorphizing God at this point: Could God have created a different world?
have been like had it not collided with the meteorite that wiped out the dinosaurs?” But this is only a confusion of categories made possible by imagining ourselves as observers of—and thus free agents with respect to—the event in question. The category of “what might have been” is a human category that shapes the narrative of history, not the evolution of prehistory. But it is precisely this category that the prophesy of Oedipus denies.

The category of “what might be” has no existence apart from its imaginative construction in discourse. Without this category, however, we cannot speak of choice. Action, in other words, requires the possible. To understand an event as an act, we have to understand it in relation to possibilities that were not, in fact, realized. That which has been chosen is always seen in the light of that which has not been chosen. Both are equally real from the perspective of the subject. Discourse refers both to what is and what might have been. It refers equally easily to both, because each is necessary to the other. Thus the subjunctive is as necessary a condition for language as the present tense. Contemporary theoreticians make the point that there are no internal marks by which we can distinguish history from fiction: both are narratives. Precisely because the account of human action—history—must refer to what might have been, there is a necessary element of fiction in every narrative.

In the narrative we construct of our own lives, we experience an endless longing for what might have been. This does not mean that we regret the choices we have made. Still, no one fails to feel the enduring pull of at least some of the possibilities those choices excluded, for example, a choice to have no more children or to have none at all. We experience metaphysical, if not psychological, regret. This “might have been” exists in quite a different way from the “might have been” of another ice age, for these unrealized possibilities are as important

56 Games of chance pair these two categories by making the consequence of choice—for example, a bet—dependent on an event rather than an act.
to who I am as are the actual choices made. They are inseparable, because every choice gains its meaning in substantial part from that which has not been chosen.

Having acted, Adam and Eve feel shame toward each other. Shame necessarily accompanies action, because every action exposes the limited character of the subject to him- or herself. We not only choose, but we judge the choices we make. We take ourselves as subjects of an internal discourse. Indeed, we do so endlessly. We invest the limited resource that is the self one way rather than another, and we hold ourselves accountable. We make judgments about our judgment. We know that every choice is partial, and thus we know ourselves as vulnerable—as failing to be complete—at the very moment that we know ourselves as subjects of a particular character. Every choice for something is a choice against other possibilities. Because we must be less than we would be, we are ashamed. This is not a matter of violating a moral rule. We feel shame even when we have done nothing wrong.

At creation Adam and Eve do not know shame, because, without discourse or choice, they are not yet individual subjects. Shame is a reaction to the realized judgment, but there is not yet anyone or anything to judge. Shame first arises when the subject imagines himself to be observed, for in the thought of observation is that of judgment. We think of ourselves as “exposed.” An internalized sense of shame requires that the subject imagine himself standing in the place of another who is observing him. To feel shame, accordingly, is to feel simultaneously bound to and estranged from the self. I cannot take that position in the imagination until I have engaged another in discourse. But we cannot enter into dialogue without being judged and without judging the other. 57 Speaking and being spoken to, we are ashamed. As subjects engaged in the narration of our own lives as the product of free choice, we feel shame.

We cannot experience choice as something that matters without experiencing the subject as a finite, limited asset. Choosing x means giv-

ing up y forever. To speak of what might have been is to speak of the limited conditions of a human life; it is to invoke death. When we do not think choice matters, our decisions fail to register as elements constitutive of our own subjectivity. They do not enter into our own narrative. Indeed, we rapidly forget the content of such decisions; we do not long for them at all. Nor are we ashamed for having made them. We make countless decisions throughout the day: moving one way rather than another, eating one thing rather than another, flipping through the channels or scanning the newspaper. None of this is remembered; it all could have been otherwise. None of it matters, because nothing is at stake. It is not really chosen, although it may be preferred. Tomorrow we could behave differently; the decisions of today do not preclude their opposite tomorrow. But not everything is like this.

The subject emerges only when the understanding arises that choices matter because they do not come again. Possibility may be infinite, but choice is not. Action differs from behavior in just this element of choice. Of course, there is no defined domain of choice, as if some options are in and of themselves appropriate for choice and others only for behavioral preference. The diversity of human subjects allows for anything at all to become a matter of choice constitutive of the subject. Things or acts become valuable when they become constitutive of a subject who, in the very act of choosing them, must sacrifice other possibilities. We are “invested” in these choices. This investment cannot be measured in economic terms, for it rests on a distinction between value and preference.

The consequence of choice, then, is the knowledge of what might have been and therefore of the reality of death. More precisely, knowing of our own death, we confront choice. Choice matters, because we die. The objects of our choice are valuable, because they make us something rather than nothing. We know that nothing as death. One way to flee from the knowledge of death is to flee from choice.\(^5\) If we lived forever like the Greek gods, we might have personal decisions to make, but they would not matter. That we might be playthings in their

\(^5\) The ethos of entertainment and the pathology of depression are both forms of the flight from choice and recognition.
deathless world is, in part, the horror of Oedipus. It is death that makes us serious. The human subject, as well as the human world, is constituted by choice in the face of the knowledge of a personal death.

In the biblical account, death is the consequence of choice. That representation projects the necessary conditions of human action into a mythical narrative in which conceptual conditions are reified. Death becomes the punishment for choice. That is more or less how we experience our own subjectivity: constituting ourselves as unique by virtue of our freedom to choose, we always appear to ourselves as having failed in that choice. We must fail, because every choice is equally a negation. For this failure, we believe we suffer the burden of death. We are always already fallen. Our sin appears to be original. We are ashamed.

Choice means that we have some control over our will: a capacity to evaluate our plans and to decide what the principle of our action should be. Looking forward, our actions always seem to us to be the product of our plans, that is, we think about what we will do and thus “plan ahead.” Accordingly, our actions always appear to us to be the result of choices already made. Kant correctly insisted that free choice represents a break in the chain of physical causality, because there is no scientific or empirical explanation of an action based on a principle. To account for it, we must provide a narrative of the subject, an account of the deliberative process by which the subject chose and thus of the values and principles which he affirmed in that process.

That events in the world can have their source in principle is a complete mystery from the perspective of knowledge. Yet, to the acting subject, it is no mystery at all. It is just the necessary condition of the moral task he finds himself confronting at every wakeful moment. More than that, because he experiences his action as the product of his plans, the world of practice appears as one already imbued with principles. To have beliefs about what we should do is, at least implicitly, to have principles that are separate from the acts themselves. Those principles are available not only to inform our future choices but to evaluate the choices we have already made. We understand ourselves always already to have acted—or failed to act—on principles. We question whether these were the “right” principles
and whether they have been applied correctly. Because man is a
problem to himself, inevitably he perceives errors. The principles as
well as their applications are contested by the subject himself.\footnote{The paradigmatic example of this self-contest is Christ’s experience of doubt. For a
classical version of radical self-doubt, see Plato’s \textit{Phaedo}, 60e–61b, where Plato describes
Socrates composing songs just before his death. When asked why, Socrates responds that it
is just possible that his philosophical mission in life had been based on a misunderstanding
of an oracle that told him to “make music.”} Again,
death makes us see that every life is bought at the cost of what might
have been.

We cannot experience choice without experiencing the dread of
choosing—or, indeed, of having chosen—wrongly. Again, with choice
comes shame. To choose wrongly is to be the wrong person; it is to
miss the one chance of being that which we “know” we should be.
There are any number of ways this thought is expressed in the Western
tradition: the Romantic idea of realizing a true inner self, the Jewish
idea of a self constituted by following the law, the Christian idea of
being born again, the existentialist idea of taking responsibility for the
self. Having the capacity to choose, and caring about choice, we reflect
upon the principles that should guide choice. But we have no uncon-
tested source by which to measure the correctness of our choice. The
only measure of that choice is the life we lead. By the same token, the
measure of the life we lead remains the life that might have been. We
can no more escape the one than the other.\footnote{This is the message of the final myth presented in Plato’s \textit{Republic}, the Myth of Er.}

Possession of a capacity for choice does not, in the abstract, tell us
why we should care about the choices we make or fail to make. We
care because we appear as a project to ourselves, and we appear as
such a project because of the knowledge of our own finitude. Each of
us, as the saying goes, “has just one life to lead.” We care about choice,
because we care about the constitution of the self as a unique subject.\footnote{See the discussion of “self-love” in H. Frankfurt, \textit{The Reasons of Love} 97 (2004)
(“[Self-love] is a condition in which we willingly accept and endorse our own volitional
identity. We are content with the final goals and with the loving by which our will is most
penetratingly defined”)}

Knowledge of death is the condition of our awareness of ourselves as
unique subjects. Only a subject aware of his own death has a moral
responsible for creating his life. We would eat of the tree of knowledge, but we cannot do so without taking up the burden of death. Had Adam and Eve chosen instead to eat of the tree of life, there would be nothing to say. Nothing would have changed. There would be only the timeless replication of the species.

After the Fall, sin is constitutive of what it means to be a subject. This is Adam’s real sin: he becomes a person. Before that, he was man, not a man. The subject experiences himself as already fallen because he always experiences himself as a project that is only partially accomplished and that has already partially failed. One never finds the self in a state of perfection to be maintained but always in a state of yearning, a state of dissatisfaction with the present. This is the existential condition of shame. The absence of such a yearning appears to the moral agent not as a state of beatitude or peace but as a kind of moral stupor. It is a forgetting of the urgency of life in the face of death.

If Adam’s sin is that he becomes a person, then there is an infinite longing for a return to that state in which there was no subjectivity, no differentiation of the subject. One traditional expression of that longing is to imagine the self beyond death. The Platonic myth dissolved the individual subject into a pure knowledge of Ideas. In the Judeo-Christian world, in which the subject is the product of the will, that answer is not possible. The will requires an affirmation of the subject at the same moment that there is a transcendence of finitude. The longing of the subject must be responsive to the sense of self as fallen, which means an understanding of self as an individual facing the reality of his own death.

Self-transcendence—at least in the West—is not the dissolution of the finite in the infinite but the affirmation of both, that is, of the infinite in and through the finite. For this reason, no explanation of heaven has, or could, overcome the problem of the one and the many: Would we be one or many in eternity? We must be both. That collapse of the one and the many is at the center of Christianity: God is one and three. The Son is both apart from and the same as the Father; he both dies and lives. The sacraments replicate this ambiguity of the one and the many in the daily life of the members of the Church. To participate in the sacraments is—until the next moment of action—to
be without sin. To be without sin is to be without subjectivity; one
exists not as a subject but as a part of the body of Christ, which is the
Church. To be without sin is to approach the point at which the will
disappears. This, however, is not the human condition. So the mystery
of the sacrament can never be anything but episodic. We are thrown
back into our individual lives, facing the limits of our own choices and
the knowledge of our own death. This longing of the finite self for the
infinite opens a space for good and evil. We know the “good” form
of this self-transcendence as love; its pathological partner is evil.

The metaphysics of will is impenetrable to the Enlightenment mind
and to the whole movement of modern rationalism. Enlightenment
means to take responsibility through the exercise of choice under the
guidance of reason’s identification of right principles. If we believe
that a domain of action can be perfectly ordered by reason, not only
evil but love, too, slips from view. There is neither love nor evil in the
conceptual world of the laboratory or the market. If we believe that
politics could be perfectly ordered by reason, then politics, too, could
be a domain without love and evil. Liberals often entertain this dream,
banishing that which resists reason to the domain of the private. What
remains would be a politics of administrative rationality, on the one
hand, and judicial reasonableness, on the other. Reason may dream
of such a perfected politics, but reason has always been a weak force
in the face of the will—exactly the point of the myth of the Fall. Liber­
als are always shocked by the resistance of politics to reason. We forget
at our peril that politics remains a domain of love and evil. Reason
alone will not take the self from deliberation to action.

The world imagined from the perspective of the will does not end
with an account of reasonable deliberation and its failure, or of ration­
ally justifiable principles and enlightened institutional design—or
their failure. Rather, the world of the will includes ideas of the macro-

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62 The miraculous powers of the saint are related to this magical quality of a “subjectless”
soul. The saint becomes an intermediary between the praying subject and God.
63 See I. Kant, “An Answer to the Question ‘What Is Enlightenment,’” reprinted in Kant:
Political Writings 54 (H. Nisbet, trans., H. Reiss, ed. 1971).
64 This emphasis on the marketplace and the courtroom is just what Larry Siedentop
65 See Kahn, Putting Liberalism in Its Place.
cosm in the microcosm, of self-transcendence, of temporal simultaneity, of mystery and magic. If we imagine self-transcendence not as uni-
ification with the other through love but as the destruction of the other, then we approach the domain of evil.

CONCLUSION: LOVE AND EVIL

The inquiry into evil begins from an awareness of the experience of sin as the condition of a finite being with an awareness of the infinite. In this chapter I have begun the elaboration of the elements of a theory of evil. These include the self-creation of the subject in the face of a knowledge of death, the place of the will in the constitution of that subject, and the endless need to transcend the conditions of subjectivity. Evil is never far from death: not biological death but the existential condition of knowing of our own death. Nor, however, is it far from love. The metaphysics of our normative order—the structure the world must have to support the values we find there—seems always to leave open two possibilities: love and evil. Both show us the continuing presence of forms of experience that are not accountable to reason. The outbreaks of evil in the last century remind us that reason had not penetrated deeply into the sources of meaning that actually motivate political orders and individuals.

Man is, by nature, an incomplete being within which the whole of existence—what is and what might be—shows itself. He always combines the finite and the infinite. Knowing that we will die, our condition is beyond the possibility of repair by reason. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, man experiences the human condition as a metaphysical scandal. He is, we might say, metaphysically jealous of God. This scandal continues in a secularized form today. That a being who contemplates the whole of creation from the Big Bang to the Cosmic Crunch is limited to the merely material conditions of his experience is no less shocking than Adam’s fall. Adam’s condition after the Fall is a mythical representation of this shocking antimony for he has eaten of the tree of knowledge—and is thus like God—but he is condemned to the conditions of his own singularity in time and space. In short, he combines knowledge and death.
Man would encompass the whole of the universe, but he is always thrown back upon the very real limitations of his own subjectivity, his own choices, and his own time. From the perspective of reason, there is no way out of this antinomy, except by denying one side or the other. One either affirms the whole and thereby denies the conditions of subjectivity, or one affirms the limits on the subject and denies the possibility of the infinite. This is a familiar antinomy in the West, one that appears in various domains and guises: epistemic (transcendent vs. empirical accounts), ethical (deontological vs. utilitarian accounts), and ontological (idealistic vs. realist accounts).

No particular choice we make can overcome the burden of our own death and the awareness of finitude as an experience of shame. To overcome this state of fallenness, we seek a state of being beyond choice. Evil is the effort at self-help by the fallen will. It is an effort to overcome the conditions of finitude and thus of death itself. It is, however, a strategy of denial, of projecting shame and death on to the other. Evil claims for the self the power of life and death. The motion of evil is the flight from death through murder. The motion of love is self-transcendence through sacrifice for the beloved. Love invokes a power over death by turning death into sacrifice. Sacrifice and murder, love and evil, mark the basic antinomy of the will in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The sides of this antinomy, I argue, are perilously close to each other. A politics of sacrifice is also one of murder.66

The particular, finite being we know ourselves to be has an unlimited capacity for love or for evil. This intimate connection of love and evil is the reason that all our cultural creations are suspect. With only the slightest change of perspective, our highest accomplishments can be revealed as structures of evil. Thus Walter Benjamin famously proclaimed, “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”67 Whatever we do, we are “ashamed.” This double sense is carried forward in postmodern theory in the ambiguous quality of the central concept of power. Is power good or evil? Is it the source of cultural productivity or the source of

66 This is the central claim of chapter 5 below.
individual constraint? Is some power good, and some evil, or is it always a question of where one stands in relationship to the assertion of power?\textsuperscript{68} The entire world can, in a moment, appear as a structure of evil.

Evil is not simply a condition to be eliminated. It is the point of the “all too human.” Man cannot conceive of his death without conceiving of a self that can overcome death. This is what it means to experience the self as fallen. We exist in that ambiguous moral state that is the intersection of the human and the divine, the profane and the sacred. This is the point at which the possibility of evil emerges simultaneously with the possibility of love. A study of evil, then, is a study of the human condition from beneath. It is a study of love gone wrong.

\textsuperscript{68} I explore this double-character of power in Kahn, \textit{Law and Love}. 