

**The “Problem of Evil” in Light of The Hague, Lisbon,
Auschwitz, Manhattan and Capitol Hill**

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A philosopher’s primary job is not to resolve the great questions but to ask them. So let’s begin with the questions we will ask in this essay. What is the best way to understand the word “evil”? Does it really exist? And how, if at all, can we reconcile the apparent existence of evil with the belief in a “God” worthy of that name? We’ll address these questions in the context of several moments in history. But our story will begin where the so-called “problem of evil” is generally considered to have originated – with the literary figure known as Job.

When we first encounter Job, we learn that his life epitomizes both virtue and happiness. “[B]lameless and upright,” he “feared God and shunned evil.” (1:1) Yet he was as wealthy as he was righteous. Indeed, Job had ten children – one for every 700 sheep he owned or every 300 camels. As we are told, this paragon of virtue was “wealthier than anyone in the East.” (1:3)

Then came a Heavenly Adversary – a sort of divine prosecutor, who should not be confused with the figure known as the Devil. He suggested that Job be tested to see if his virtue would survive the removal of his happiness. God took the Adversary up on this challenge, killing Job’s children and tormenting Job to no end, until God learned that even Job’s patience had its limits. Job’s life became a living Hell, and one by one, his “friends” came to blame him for that fate, for they assumed that in a realm of divine justice, Job must have caused his own misery. But Job knew better, so he blamed his misery on the only figure he could: God, and in particular, God’s justice.

The Book of Job frames a question that philosophers have been asking ever since: *how can God exist if the correlation between human virtue and happiness is so weak?* Beginning in Chapter 38, that Book provides at least something of an answer. It begins with a rhetorical question from God to Job: “Who is this who darkens counsel, speaking without knowledge?” In other words, what right does a mere human being have to question the wisdom of the one who created everything that exists on the earth and in the heavens? Can any man even begin to match the power of the one who can legitimately say, “Everything under the heavens is Mine”? (41:3) If not, how can Job possibly appreciate the deepest reasons for whatever occurs in the cosmos?

Ultimately, God restored and even doubled Job’s material wealth. But even that booby price wasn’t provided until Job admitted to God that he had been suitably humbled. “I know,” Job began, “that You can do everything, that nothing you propose is impossible for You. Who is this who obscures counsel without knowledge? Indeed, I spoke without understanding of things

beyond me, which I did not know. Hear now, and I will speak. I will ask, and You will inform me. I had heard You with my ears, but now I see You with my eyes. Therefore, I recant and relent, being but dust and ashes.”

So there you have the first recorded answer to the problem of evil. Yes, God may work in mysterious ways, but we should have faith that God understands everything and has power over everything, and as mere mortals, we are in no position to question God’s choices.

The Hague

Perhaps that answer was satisfactory 2 ½ millennia ago. Yet with the passage of time, we’ve increasingly realized that human beings aren’t just like every other mortal. We’re also potential philosophers -- intellectually equipped to question accepted teachings even when they come to us in books known as “Scripture.” Some people choose not to utilize those questioning skills, but philosophers thrive on such God-wrestling. They hold up man’s sacred intellectual cows to the crucible of reason, follow her voice wherever she leads, and ultimately take a path that makes sense for them as individuals, even if it might lead to the garden of heresy.

It is in that garden that our story resumes. The time is the 1670s, and the place is the Hague – to be precise, in the humble abode of a lens grinder named Benedict de Spinoza. In the previous decade, Spinoza announced his freedom from the obligation to associate Scriptural teachings with philosophical truth. In the 1670s, he completed a book that would explain more broadly how to free ourselves from the bondage of ignorance. The book was the *Ethics*, and it began where an examination of the “problem of evil” typically begins: with a focus on God.

Spinoza had no trouble coming to have faith in “the one God.” Like Job’s deity, the God of Spinoza has primacy over all of reality. Spinoza’s world is anything but a Manichean realm characterized by an overarching struggle between the power of light and that of darkness. Rather, his was a monistic vision of cosmic unity supported by the metaphor that people are like worms in a bloodstream. Just as such a worm would fail to recognize that different particles of lymph and chyle are truly just parts of a single bloodstream, we commonly fail to realize that the different things we encounter in our universe are mere parts of a single infinite and interrelated fabric. At the core of this interrelated fabric, serving as the ultimate cause of all the things that reside within the fabric, and constituting the fabric itself, is none other than Spinoza’s God.

Still, the age-old question remains: if we all come from one majestic God, why is the correlation between happiness and virtue so weak? To Spinoza, this need not be such a challenging paradox. It only *seems* so puzzling because we have ignorantly anthropomorphized God in our own idealized image. God is not a human-like creature who creates the world according to a purpose. Rather, God is a non-personal power generator, one that is perpetually engaged in infinite and manifold acts of self-expression. Once we demythologize God and

recognize divinity for what it is, the “problem of evil” melts away. Here are Spinoza’s exact words: “To those who ask ‘why God did not create all men so that they would be governed by the command of reason?’ I answer only ‘because he did not lack material to create all things, from the highest degree of perfection to the lowest;’ or to speak more properly, ‘because the laws of his nature have been so ample that they sufficed for producing all things which can be conceived by an infinite intellect.’” (E.I.App., Curley, p. 446)¹

Spinoza doesn’t do away with God’s omnificence;² he does away with God’s *humanity*. His God still acts in largely mysterious ways, but we can no longer assume that underlying those ways is the spirit of pure beneficence. That is a term we can use to characterize our own actions, but we wouldn’t use it for a machine and shouldn’t use it to characterize the infinite intellect who naturally creates “all things from the highest degree of perfection to the lowest,” including what we commonly think of as evil acts of violence or injustice.

Not surprisingly, Spinoza was reluctant to use the term “evil” in the dramatic way we typically find it used in religious literature. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza defined “good” to mean “what we certainly know to be useful to us” and defined “evil” as “what we certainly know prevents us from being masters of some good,” (Part IV Defn’s., Curley, p. 546) He also stated that “I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model.” (Preface to E. Part IV, Curley p. 545).

I would agree with Nietzsche that Spinoza, fueled by his monism, essentially did away with the notion of evil as conventionally understood. This is clear from Spinoza’s statement that “As far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, *or* notions we form because we compare things to one another.” (Preface to E. Part IV, Curley p. 545) Consider also Spinoza’s claim that, “we desire nothing because we judge it to be good, but on the contrary, we call it good because we desire it. Consequently, what we are averse to we call evil.” (Prop. 39, Curley, p. 516) Presumably, we’d all agree that the dichotomy Spinoza is discussing generally goes by the terms “good” versus “*bad*.” If he were truly making room for the existence of evil, he would have used a stronger term for what is *qualitatively* different and more deeply horrific than most other things to which we are simply averse, like paper cuts or mosquito bites – hardly the kinds of “evils” that cause people to question their views on God.

¹ Citations to the *Ethics* are from Edwin Curley, *The Collected Works of Spinoza Vol. 1* (Princeton U. Press; Princeton, NJ, 1985).

² The term “omnificent” generally refers to having unlimited power. This term is used in this essay in the specific sense of possessing all the power that exists in reality, though not necessarily the power to create what does not exist in reality (like a squared circle, for example).

Lisbon

The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 was exactly one of those so-called evils that caused people to question their views on God. As was beautifully analyzed in Susan Neiman's contemporary classic, *Evil in Modern Thought*, that earthquake was as shocking to the European mind as to its geology. If Spinoza's philosophy had taken over the continent by then, perhaps the earthquake wouldn't have been so culturally transformative. But that was not the case. Europe, on the eve of Lisbon, had been far more taken with Leibniz than Spinoza. Despite making a pilgrimage to visit the Sage of the Hague, Leibniz was able to shake off whatever he learned from Spinoza and write that ours is the "best of all possible worlds," reflecting God's omnibenevolence as well as His omnificence. With 18th century science developing in leaps and bounds and revealing one beautiful natural law after another, it was difficult not to see traces of Providential design underlying every molecule. So Leibniz's optimistic philosophy remained in the ascendency and appeared to comport with people's common sense. That is, until Lisbon.

Tragically, tens of thousands of people perished either directly from the quake or from the tsunami and the fires of its immediate aftermath. Earlier in the century, Europeans brushed off deadly quakes, like the one that leveled Port Royal, Jamaica; in Neiman's words, 18th century Europeans felt that Jamaica "deserved whatever destruction it got [as] a place full of pirates and half-breeds."³ Lisbon was different – it was a European capital known for wealth and cosmopolitanism, not the kind of place a beneficent God could understandably destroy.

Yet who else but God was responsible for Lisbon? You couldn't attribute this disaster to human free will the way you could assign blame to a prolonged war. Indeed, Europeans found no exceptional vice to lay at the feet of Lisbon's population – no cause at all to view the quake as a response to "moral evil." Clearly, as Neiman argues, if there was evil at work here, it was so-called "natural evil," which in the 18th century meant the work of God. Among the 18th century intelligentsia, we're talking about a Cosmic Watchmaker God whose master craftsmanship was invariably on display, rendering all of us the beneficiaries. That at least was the stylish belief before Lisbon, where tens of thousands of innocent people were buried or burned, some of whom surely experienced excruciating pain until their bodies could not endure it any longer.

Famously, Voltaire was moved by the Lisbon tragedy and, as a result, lampooned Leibniz's teachings in the character of Pangloss. Leibniz's legacy will forever remain poisoned by Voltaire's pen. Whether it goes by the name of Panglossian or Pollyannaish, the attitude of excessive optimism can't thrive nearly as well once we've faced an era known for its "enlightenment." Even back in the mid-18th century, educated people had come to demand that

³ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, (Princeton U. Press, Princeton, 2015), p. 241.

a philosopher's teachings comport with common sense. And what sense does it make, after Lisbon, to conclude that an ever-loving and all-powerful God couldn't come up with a world with less suffering and injustice than this one? Leibniz was no longer around to answer that question, and the responses of his most prominent successor, Immanuel Kant, were hardly persuasive. Neiman reports that when the elderly Kant reflected back on his life, his writings defending optimism "were the only works of which he was ashamed."⁴

Auschwitz

It may not have appeared so strange to have skipped ahead in this story more than two millennia from the time the Book of Job was written until the time Spinoza's *Ethics* was penned. By contrast, skipping ahead less than two centuries, from the time of the Lisbon Earthquake to the time of the Holocaust, is likely more of an assault to the 21st century mind. We know all too well about the interim period. This is a period that includes:

- Kant, teaching us how little we can know about the realm of "things in themselves," including presumably the ultimate causes of what occurs in our universe;
- Darwin, providing us a natural explanation of the evolution of life, rather than one that requires a belief in intelligent design;
- Marx, proclaiming religion to be the opiate of the masses and ultimately inspiring a movement that took over much of the world; and
- Nietzsche, explicitly questioning the existence of evil and gleefully announcing the assassination of God by humankind.

By the end of the 1930s, atheism and agnosticism had become increasingly common, thanks in part to these thinkers. Yet we also witnessed the continued survival of organized religions, many of whose members sported highly traditional views of God and evil – views that would have made the author of the Book of Job proud.

Traditionalists have continued to walk this earth after the 1940s were over. Yet it is safe to say that the events of the '40s shook both the religious and the non-theistic worlds to the core. Stated differently, that was one decade where neither God nor humanity came out ahead.

Perhaps reflecting my ethnic bias, I will symbolize the events of the '40s with but one word: Auschwitz. Growing up two decades later, Auschwitz was my Tree of Knowledge. As a relatively young child, I came upon a book in my grandparents' house called "The Little Brown Book of the Hitler Terror." It was published in 1933, the year Hitler first came to power. Upon seeing the book, I became obsessed enough to read other Nazi-related literature and take in just how massive, horrific and profound the Nazi terror would become. To use any word but "evil"

⁴ *Id.* at 246.

for the Nazi's conduct would seem disrespectful to the victims, a number of whom came from my extended family.

Auschwitz was critical to my development as a youth because it taught me that we can't choose our theology without being respectful to the victims of that atrocity. It was one thing to entertain Leibniz's "best of all possible worlds" principle in the face of tens of thousands of deaths at the hands of Mother Nature. It was quite another thing to use that phrase to describe a realm in which injustice is the rule not the exception, casualties are measured in the millions, and suffering seems infinite. Clearly, I thought, evil exists. The better question is, does God?

Neiman, in writing *Evil in Modern Thought*, embarrassed herself a bit when she used Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as the cornerstone of her Holocaust analysis. Arendt's *Eichmann* was made famous for the phrase "the banality of evil." In this interpretation, the Nazi butcher, Adolf Eichmann, was especially fascinating because he was *not* the kind of hateful bastard whose malice aforethought would have made the Marquis de Sade's eyes twinkle. Rather, Arendt's Eichmann was the bureaucrat from Hell, a soulless everyman whose crime was to follow dutifully the most obscene of orders. A hero he wasn't, but in his heart, was he that different from the folks who hold us up for hours at the Dept. of Motor Vehicles? In other words, was Arendt's Eichmann truly *evil*?

Some would say that this question doesn't matter, because as Neiman later recognized in writing an Afterword to her book, Arendt's Eichmann was fictional. The real Eichmann was evil in all the traditional ways. Arendt, to use Neiman's words, "was taken in by Eichmann's performance on the stand"⁵ and failed to realize what a vicious, Jew-hating creature he was.

Fair enough – so maybe Arendt did misunderstand the character of the historical figure named Adolf Eichmann. But what she said about the banality of evil still stands. It is, in fact, perhaps the most lasting principle taught by Auschwitz. You see, it wasn't just the Fuhrer, and all the Reichsfuhrers, Korpsführers, Oberstgruppenführers, Obersturmbannführers, and Hauptsturmführers who led the Nazis' victims to their death in Biblical magnitudes. It was the law abiding people of Poland, the Ukraine, Hungary, Belorussia, Lithuania, Germany, and Holland, among others, who looked the other way and tended to their own garden, as Voltaire once said we must do, while their Jewish compatriots were anonymously sent away and slaughtered like vermin. Those passive perpetrators never needed to be vicious, hateful, or even anti-Semitic to gain their place in history. They merely had to commit sins of omission in order to share in the responsibility for Auschwitz. So I ask once again, were they *evil*? And to that question I add another, where in this living Hell was God?

Manhattan

⁵ *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 331.

Where was God? Suffering like the rest of us, that's where. Such was the answer of a Jewish theologian named Abraham Joshua Heschel who published his works after Auschwitz. From studying the Prophets of Israel, Heschel concluded that, far from being the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle or the mechanistic deity of Spinoza, God is more concerned with the plight of widows and orphans on earth than eternal ideas. Serving as a professor of Jewish ethics and mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan, Heschel became perhaps the most beloved figure in contemporary American Judaism. He gave us the God who was anything but indifferent to evil and is actually obsessed with it. Heschel also gave us a model of a post-war Jewish-American, equally concerned with justice in the political realm and spirituality in the religious one. When Heschel died at the age of 65, the gray-haired rabbi looked like a man of 95 who for decades allowed the suffering of Jews and gentiles alike to consume his mind and harden his arteries.

Perhaps more than with any other person, Heschel is associated today with his friend, Martin Luther King, Jr. Both would find similar fault with Spinoza's efforts to solve the problem by evil by retaining God's omniscience while scrapping his omnibenevolence. MLK used the term "sub-personal" to refer to a God like Spinoza's as a mere power reservoir. He and Heschel wanted a God we can worship as a "Thou" and who can serve as an ethical role model. Faced with the existence of Lisbon, Auschwitz, Jim Crow and Vietnam, they sought to retain a God of absolute empathy, even if this God could no longer lecture a Job with quite so much credibility.

After Heschel and MLK, other disciples followed, such as Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of the best-seller, *Why Do Good Things Happen to Bad People?* Clearly, though, not everyone was buying into their pure-hearted deity. For one thing, not everyone wanted to think of God as so impotent. Doesn't that defeat the whole point of religion if we have to think of God as just another suffering (super) person? Where, in that, is the sense of *ultimacy* that was at the heart of the religious project to begin with?

We all appreciate the human need for comfort when the skies go darkest. So perhaps it only makes sense that after Auschwitz, some of the most influential theologians would take the impersonal God of Spinoza and Aristotle and make a complete 180. Still, it may make even more sense that after Auschwitz, interest in religion among liberal Western intellectuals would continue to wane through the end of the last century. Not coincidentally, interest in "evil" was far from the front of everyone's mind.

And then came September 11, 2001. On that date, the world truly came together, linked by the emotions of fear and loathing. The objects of fear and loathing differed, depending on what camp one was in, but the dominance of those emotions – now that was universal.

Here in the Western world, we've learned plenty of lessons from 9/11. For one thing, we've learned that there is no place safe from evil. The folks in Europe had once learned this lesson in 1755, but that was when "natural evil" came to the fore. From Manhattan, we learned that *moral* evil is similarly ubiquitous, and no matter how securely you've positioned yourself, you can't guarantee an escape route – not even at the Top of the Trade.

We've also seen more vividly than ever just how multifaceted and deep-seated the world's evil has become. Not too many decades back, Hannah Arendt compared evil to a fungus, for "[e]vil can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface."⁶ But now, after 9/11, it is crystal clear that evil thrives far down in the recesses of our world. Thanks to Manhattan, it is generally accepted that one of the world's great religions, a faith with well over a billion peace-loving adherents, has also inspired legions of murderous zealots. Armed with a book known to many of us as the Holy Qur'an, these zealots are being taught to read their Scripture as a call to arms, a manifesto to give up one's own life if needed to cleanse the world of infidels. Manhattan has shown us that zealots can also be crafty enough to exploit modern technology and successfully carry out plans requiring years in the making in order to take as many lives and cause as much terror as humanly possible.

As the cherry on the top of a depraved cake, Islamically-inspired zealots complete their acts of horror by reciting a statement that ought by rights to be associated with high-mindedness and mercy. "Allahu Akbar," they say; "God is the Greatest." Ironically, such is perhaps the most photogenic face of evil, early-21st century style.

Capitol Hill

My daughter is the rabbi at Capitol Hill's Jewish congregation so I frequently find myself attending religious services there. For those who know me, it would not be surprising to hear that when I'm at shul on the Hill, I reach out to a God who is an offshoot of Spinoza's. Like the Sage of the Hague, not to mention the zealots behind 9/11, I derive no sustenance worshipping a God who is limited by separate forces of the universe, evil or otherwise. My God is existence itself and encompasses all that we know to exist in nature and an infinite number of things we can't begin to conceive of. That includes Lisbon, Auschwitz, and Manhattan – plus all the forces, human and otherwise, responsible for these disasters.

The God I worship is as powerful as the one who lectured Job, for every power in this and any other universe dwells within my God. But truth be told, I'm unable to find omnibenevolence in a God who tortured Job, buried Portuguese alive or slayed most of Europe's Jews. If asked to explain how, as a believer, I can accept the apparent existence of evil, I must follow Spinoza in objecting that our clerics have commonly created God in our own image rather

⁶ Hannah Arendt, letter to Gershom Scholem, as cited in *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 301.

than taking seriously what it means for God to be God. Any deity worthy of the Name really would necessarily act in ways that are mysterious from the perspective of a creature like you and me who could be compared to a mere worm in a bloodstream. If the ways of this mysterious God differ fundamentally from how a human-like cosmic planner would behave, why is that a criticism of God? Why isn't it simply recognition of our own limitations?

Like Job, I recognize how tiny we are compared to God and how impossible it is to understand more than a tiny part of nature (or God) when we ourselves are so closely bounded in time and space. To speculate about the ultimate causes of life's most beautiful and ugly events would be just that – speculation. Humility prevents me from projecting human-like emotions, whether based in love or hatred, to the deepest roots of these events. Honestly, because I value the trait of humility, I am happy to attribute life's injustices to the mysteries of the Divine. That would seem only respectful to God as our greatest benefactor.

Yes, you heard me. I referred to God – the source of life, warts and all -- as our greatest benefactor. Despite all the suffering and injustice, all things considered, life on this earth seems basically good to me. That follows from the fact that with few exceptions, we opt to live, not die. Indeed, we view premature death as a supreme tragedy. Yes, to some degree you can attribute this to our sheer animal instinct for self-preservation, but more than that is going on here. Most of us choose to live because we *like* to live.

Because I see God as my greatest benefactor, my faith in the Divine has survived decades of grappling with the so-called “problem of evil.” Yet the question remains, what exactly is this “evil” to which we refer? We've heard Spinoza's attempt to define the term and questioned that definition, but we haven't really attempted to improve on it. Perhaps we've addressed the term in the spirit of Justice Potter Stewart when he characterized hard-core pornography. “I know it when I see it,” Stewart wrote in the case of *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. But he was a Supreme Court Justice with lifelong tenure. This is a philosophical essay. We don't have the same luxury to cop out; we at least have to try to provide, if not a full blown definition, at least a few stabs at one.

So far, all our examples of evil have been instances of mass killings. Whether the murderers have been the source of an earthquake, the operators of gas chambers, or a group of pilots with a death wish, the one constant has been a major body count. Most of us have such an extreme love for life that we have no trouble distinguishing those events from the situations when things happen to which we are clearly “averse” but that don't elicit fiercely oppositional emotions. Paper cuts and non-toxic mosquito bites are universally viewed as bad things, but hardly “evil.” Is that because they don't involve death? Or is there more to the distinction than that? The answer, I believe, can be found on Capitol Hill.

Capitol Hill is supposed to be the crown jewel of American democracy. Representatives from all over the country come there to advance the interests of individual districts or states.

Lincoln referred to our system of government as being of the people, by the people and for the people. In theory, our leaders are accountable to all of their constituents and charged with the job of serving all those constituents, not just the privileged few.

However, as the old saw goes, whereas in theory, theory and practice are the same, in practice they are not. And sure enough, as of September 2017, a Gallup Poll found that Congress' approval rating was a whopping 16 percent. I'm surprised it was that high. The reality is that our legislators have figured out a way to avoid being accountable to their constituents, except of course for those who pay their freight. Whatever the donors want, the donors get, and the constituents – especially the poor ones -- be damned.

Gerrymandering is certainly part of the problem. That originates at the state legislature level but its effects are felt on the Hill. Most congressional districts have been drawn such that either the Democratic presence or the Republican presence is largely non-existent. In other words, on Capitol Hill, politicians have come to choose their voters as much as the voters choose their politicians. All an incumbent need do is appeal to the powers-that-be within his party and he can pretty much count on winning the primary, which is the only election that matters.

What's more, we're beginning to hear politicians become more candid in announcing who butters their bread – and the answer has little to do with their constituents. In this regard, I hate to single out Republican Senator Lindsay Graham, who is often one of the more reasonable voices on the Hill, but in a statement made in November 2017, Graham summarized succinctly what it is that motivates today's politicians. He was asked what would happen if his party couldn't pass the tax reform proposal the Senate was then considering. Graham surely knew how unpopular that bill was, which was hardly surprising given that most of the savings under the bill would benefit the super-rich, taxes would actually increase for many taxpayers, and our grandchildren will go deeper in debt. Nevertheless, in a moment of candor, Graham characterized the results of failing to pass the bill as follows, "The party fractures, most incumbents in 2018 will get a severe primary challenge, a lot of them will probably lose, the base will fracture, the financial contributions will stop, other than that it'll be fine!"

Surely, a similar statement could have been made for why Congress has failed to pass legislation requiring background checks for gun purchases despite the fact that nearly nine out of ten Americans support that legislation. There as well, Congresspeople balanced the will and the interests of their constituents versus that of their financial contributors and the other power-brokers of their political party. These days, I think we all know who is likely to come out on top.

Some people may look at this state of events, shrug their shoulders and say something like "Well, that's just politics." But not me – I refuse to inure myself to this state of affairs. I continue to look askance at any politician who supports the continued use of gerrymandering or

who serves his donors and party elites more than his constituents. Until our statesmen fess up and proclaim this land a plutocracy, not a democracy, then viscerally at least, I will view these statesmen as dishonest, misguided and, yes, as evil.

No doubt, that would not be a universal perspective. When such politicians yuck it up on political talk shows, we see them as no different from the rest of us. They hardly resemble a James Bond villain, let alone an Adolf Hitler or Osama Bin Laden. Moreover, if we made a habit of publicly referring to these donor-servants as “evil,” it could destroy the civility needed for constructive political dialogue and potentially even lead to violence, God forbid. At a minimum, we might want to separate the proverbial sin from the sinner and confine the e-word to the *conduct* in state legislatures and on the Hill, rather than the donor-servants themselves.

So fine, if you’d prefer, think of evil as a description of an event, a development or a movement, not a person. But let’s agree that you don’t have to directly conspire in mass murder to trigger that moniker. If you are letting someone buy your vote, and the foreseeable net impact of that vote is to profoundly and extensively wreak destruction on this planet, you are a party to evil. That applies whether you are making it easier to shoot innocent people at a concert, widen the already massive chasm between the haves and have nots in a society, or alter the climate so as to facilitate extreme weather events. Just because you might not have hatred in your heart doesn’t mean you can’t have blood on your hands. And just because the Banality of Evil didn’t apply to Obersturmbannführer Eichmann, that doesn’t mean it can’t apply to the conduct of Deputy Whips, Majority Leaders and Committee Chairs on the Hill.

Defining “Evil” in Light of History

Many would agree with Nietzsche and Spinoza that a word like “evil” as conventionally understood does more damage than it’s worth. To the extent this term suggests an actor that is fundamentally cut from a different cloth than the rest of us – one whose power emerges from the Devil or some other force that rivals the Divine – then I too must decry its use. For me, this realm remains the product of a single God or Substance, and no act of injustice or ugliness, however massive and depraved, will shake that faith.

But one thing I’ve learned from Spinoza is that as long as we respect the fundamental *denotation* of a word, we can stray from its most common connotation and still utilize the term with gusto. That was how Spinoza, despite being one of our most thoroughgoing heretics, made peace with such terms as God, freedom and love – in short, many of the most basic concepts in religious philosophy. Those words were as vital for Spinoza as for the most traditional of clerics. He may have bent their meaning, but he retained the core of the concepts they represent. Hopefully, I am doing the same when I contemplate the idea of evil.

Evil is not the same thing as being merely bad. I would argue that to qualify for the stronger term, we must be referring to *a force whose net impact on reality is profoundly and extensively destructive*. Yes, mass murder qualifies, but so does undermining the integrity of institutions that generally foster harmony – institutions like democracy, for example. In fact, if done on a massive enough scale, cultivating emotions that spread fear, hatred, envy and other such feelings can also be evil, as I understand the term. You don't need Hitler or Pol Pot to qualify as evil; you only need a force that sufficiently undermines what makes our planet or our society function well. In other words, you only need a force that functions on a large scale like a monster or a cancer – a force that motivates us to become, if not Superman, then at least an oncologist.

I recognize that there is a tendency to think of the e-word primarily in terms of what has been called “moral” rather than “natural” evil. Accordingly, many people would want to add a requirement of intentionality as a necessary criterion for making a force “evil” rather than merely “bad.” But I ask you – if in twenty years, two billion people on this planet, including the majority of your nuclear family, were to be killed because of an asteroid strike, rather than a nuclear one, how would you feel about that devastating asteroid? Would you not see it in essentially the same way that you'd see some of the human monsters we've spoken about before? I sure would.

In expanding the scope of “evil” to include the so-called “natural” variety, that is not to say I would advocate the liberal use of the e-word. To me, this is a term we should be extremely reluctant to throw about loosely. Take, for example, the concept of bullying. I have no trouble using the term “evil” to refer to bullying generally, which is truly one of the more loathsome types of conduct known to humankind. But I would advise against thinking of every person who has ever engaged in such conduct as evil. We all, at our worst, can be morally disgusting, and while not all of us have been guilty of bullying, I suspect that most of us have engaged in at least some type of reprehensible conduct. In other words, we are all capable of acting *badly*, but “evil” is too strong a word to apply to every person who has been guilty of mistreating another. Indeed, if we're all seen as occasionally evil, haven't we simply sapped the strength out of this potentially powerful word?

Is “evil” different *in kind* from being simply “bad,” or only different in degree? Candidly, I do see the difference largely as a matter of magnitude. But to those who ask why I would nevertheless use the e-word, I'd offer the same answer that I'd give to the atheist who asks a pantheist, “Why not use the word Nature instead of God, since that way you can avoid all the unfortunate superstitious connotations that would go with the latter?” My answer is that words like “God” and “evil” carry the emotional heft we need -- whether as worshipers of the cosmos or oncologists in the cosmos.

Invoking the name of “God” gives our life meaning. When we speak of “Nature,” we see a realm of finite things – beautiful perhaps, but invariably limited, and far more “it” than “Thou.” By contrast, when we speak of “God,” we see the Ultimate Benefactor, a Magical Muse, a Source of Enchantment, a Well of the Purest Substance, a Friend, a Commander of Conscience, a Beloved, a Challenge. In short, we conceive the notion of the *Ultimate* and aim to honor what that represents. While we can’t possibly hit the target, at least we can push ourselves as far as possible to a holy place.

Similarly, invoking the concept of “evil” gives our lives purpose as well. Evil is something we feel compelled to wage war against. “Bad,” by contrast, is something we find annoying, perhaps even dangerous, but it ought not give rise to the same call to arms. It doesn’t strike us as an existential threat to that which is good and beautiful. In short, it doesn’t summon emotions worthy of the term “religious.”

Can we dare afford such emotions in light of the lessons of 9/11 and the continued existence of faith-based zealotry? Indeed, we can and we must. We need only remember the wise saying attributed to C.S. Lewis: religion makes good people better and bad people worse. With all humility, we students of philosophy have to possess faith in ourselves as good, sane people. And so, when we identify profoundly and extensively destructive forces and summon the resolve to strike out against them, we have to possess enough self-confidence that we’ll do so in ways that are legal, proportionate, and if appropriate, civil. That’s how a good person responds to evil. He doesn’t accept it, ignore it, appease it, or rationalize it away.

We should have learned that lesson from Lisbon. It’s unconscionable that we’ve haven’t learned it after Auschwitz.