

The Vivisection of Evil

*Its Roots, Nature, Methods, and the
Ethics of Combating It*

Grant D. Schultz

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Preface

Why devote an entire book to the subject of evil? The bloodiest century in human history in terms of the number of lives ended (via genocides, wars—totaling over 170 million lives) that began with the Russian Revolution, has passed. But the human tendencies to commit evil and suffer under it do not seem to change, meaning great evil can erupt anywhere, anytime.

The twenty-first century has ushered in an age of advanced technological surveillance and artificial intelligence. Governments and corporations with greater funds for such technology are disproportionately able to leverage it (relative to individuals), meaning that if they turn evil, they will be far more successful at it.

Facts such as these require an exploration of what can be done to counter evil. This in turn requires an increased understanding of the roots, nature, and methods of evil. As this analysis will show, many commonly held assumptions about good and evil are not warranted, thereby requiring a change of perspective. It will also expose uncomfortable truths and highlight responsibilities we bear.

I write from the perspective of a Protestant Christian. Because the Bible commands readers to do good and avoid evil, this investigation is a matter of sincere personal interest. A theistic perspective also provides the needed basis for the definitions of good and evil and the discussion of the ethics of battling evil. However, I sincerely hope readers of all persuasions will engage with this book because much of the content is non-religious in nature, such as the chapters on the nature and methods of evil.

As my investigation paints a bleak picture of earthly life, I would be

remiss if I did not encourage non-Christian readers to consider appropriating the Christian's source of hope, the good news of Jesus Christ. Finally, it is my sincere hope that the knowledge in this book might lower the amount of evil committed and experienced in our world.

Chapter I – Defining Evil

Although people are all too familiar with the reality of evil, no universally agreed-upon definition of evil exists. In fact, it is often impossible for individuals to analyze an arbitrary act and agree whether it is evil or not. An adequate definition would enable people to classify some acts (possibly including their circumstances) as being evil or not, and to decide whether there are acts that morally neutral. A better definition would enable sharply delineating the boundary between good and evil, making it possible to classify every act or motive as one or the other. An ideal definition would be objective, and hence not subject to the changing tide of culture or the agendas of individuals. No definition satisfies all these criteria, which greatly hampers reasoning about the concept.

Before settling on working, albeit inadequate, definitions of good and evil, it is helpful to review traditional definitions.

For the hedonist, pain is evil, while good is that which is pleasant. The flaw in this definition is that physical pain is not always to be avoided. As finite, material beings, pain can warn of disease or injury and decrease the likelihood of accidental or intentional harm to self. If there were no such thing as pain and if pain were not capable of overwhelming every other sensation, humans could readily harm themselves in pursuit of supposed pleasures. In addition, an inability to feel personal pain would prevent the empathy that often stops mutual harm. Therefore, finite, material beings must be able to sense pain for their individual and communal good, and so pain in and of itself is not a useful indicator of evil.

The utilitarian/consequentialist believes that *an act is good if it benefits the individual or society, and an act is evil if it harms.* This results in many unresolved questions, such as who determines whether an act will help or harm, how to resolve disagreements, and how to account for the fact that finite human beings cannot know the outcome of a particular act with sufficient accuracy. Consequently, utilitarianism typically defaults to selfish hedonism.

Defining evil as *immorality (or sin)* implies the existence of yet another standard against which actions can be measured, hence changing the problem without solving it.

In common usage, evil can simply denote that *an act was unusually harmful and that it defies all attempts at explanation*. For example, a mass shooter is commonly labeled as “insane” because the motives and actions are incomprehensible. This definition, however, allows the term to be entirely subjective.

Materialists (those who view all of reality as being merely matter and energy—nothing supernatural exists) sometimes deny evil and good in their entirety. Richard Dawkins says that the world features “no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.”¹ If nothing metaphysical exists, then reality must be fundamentally morally neutral. At the same time, materialists frequently use the term “evil” for actions they deem abhorrent, including rape, genocide, child abuse, and homophobia. Materialists rationalize this contradiction by admitting there is no objective source for the definition of evil, thus making themselves moral relativists. However, this rationalization would deny the objective evil of the Holocaust because it was a legal act, and most Germans did not disapprove of it. The materialistic framework cannot resolve such contradictions.

Relativists insist that right and wrong (and hence good and evil)—if they can be defined at all—must be defined in personally or culturally relative terms. At the individual level, the assumption that evil is relative implies that no one can incorrectly define evil, meaning disagreements about the definition are nonsensical. Consequently, assertion of a specific definition of evil must become a national or cultural argument to ground it in mere popularity. At this higher level, disagreements are less likely, but the approach succumbs to the same systemic problems: It assumes that no culture can be incorrect in how

¹Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, (UK: Basic Books, 1995).

it defines evil, and that cultures cannot find fault with each other. Consequently, a genocide happening half-way around the world must be tolerated as a culturally relative phenomenon.

Relative standards often result in disagreement because individuals typically want terms defined for their own benefit. A thief for instance does not want theft to always be evil. Relativism also implies that there is no such thing as objective moral progress since, by definition, there is no absolute standard of good to continually approach. Therefore, relativists can only presume that they are advancing toward an unchanging point of goodness. But subsequent generations can choose a new standard of goodness at any time and reorient toward it, proving that in relativism there was no fixed definition after all. Relativism therefore undercuts itself at every step.

*A dualistic view considers good and evil as equal but opposite, with good typically being a creative force and evil being a destructive force, such as in dualistic religions like Manichaeism.² The justification for the supposed parity of good and evil is that if the two forces were not exactly balanced, one could permanently overcome the other. But for this to be the case, good and evil would first have to be constantly targeting each other for eradication, which is not the case. Second, neither good nor evil could originate *de novo*. If they could, then a stable balance might not be possible. Confusion here may stem from the fact that on the good/evil spectrum there must be a center point, meaning good and evil must be balanced about that point. Therefore, a dualistic view of good and evil does not withstand close examination.*

Philosophers and theologians have also grappled with the definition of evil with similarly unsatisfactory results.

²A member of the Eckankar cult once told the author that good and evil were exact opposites that always remain in exact balance. Accordingly, there is no need to try to do good, because as soon as one does a good act, a balancing evil will happen someplace else to exactly cancel it out.

Augustine of Hippo defined evil as a “*privation of the good*,”³ meaning that evil is not a thing in and of itself, but is instead a lacking of that which is good.⁴ This definition is only somewhat helpful because, just as with evil, no definition of good satisfies the ideal criteria. In addition, some evils seem not to be a lacking at all, but stem from an existing characteristic of a person who does evil (such as having a desire for sadistic pleasure).⁵

A supposed problem with Augustine’s definition is that it is indistinguishable from defining good as the *privation of evil*.⁶ However, this criticism fails. Consider the comparison of good and evil with light and darkness: no one would call light the absence of darkness because darkness is already considered to be a physical absence. In fact, to define darkness, we must specify what it is the absence of, namely light. Light can exist without darkness, but darkness is not understood except in reference to light. Similarly, good can exist on its own, but evil cannot exist without reference to good.

However, the comparisons of good with light are disanalogous from other perspectives. For example, light can be removed and reintroduced, leaving the resulting state indistinguishable from the first, while earthly evils (murder for example) exist that no amount of earthly good can undo. Consequently, Augustine further equated evil with *choosing a lesser good over a greater one*, meaning that an evil act is essentially a perverted attempt to strive for good. For example, when someone cheats in a competition, they are striving for the prize, which is itself a good thing, but via an immoral method. This conclusion is not at all obvious, as many think acts of pure evil are

³Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, Book XI, Chapter 9.

⁴Others, including Abraham ibn Daud [see Rabbi Wayne Allen, *Thinking about Good and Evil*:

Jewish Views from Antiquity to Modernity (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 116.] have defined it this way, but Augustine appears to have been the first.

⁵Todd C. Calder, “Is the Privation Theory of Evil Dead?,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4, Oct. 2007, p. 373.

⁶Calder, p. 375.

possible.

Many philosophers consider evil to be a point along a continuum from bad to wrong to evil to, ultimately, wickedness, and they expend much effort discussing what distinguishes the various words, all without objective basis. For example, Calder uses the modifiers “pure,” “radical,” “diabolical,” and “monstrous” in conjunction with the word “evil.”⁷

Singer states that “An evil action is one so bad, so awful, so horrendous that no ordinary decent reasonable human being can conceive of himself (or herself) doing such a thing.”⁸ Note the progression from “bad” to “awful” to “horrendous,” groping for language sufficiently extreme to reinforce a definition. Yet the attempt at circumscribing evil remains intensely subjective, leaving terms such as “decent” and “ordinary” undefined.

In another work, Calder states that an “act is only evil if the harm is desired, or allowed to occur if the harm is desired, or allowed to occur, for an unworthy goal. A goal is worthy of a harm when it makes for a state of affairs that is on balance more valuable than if the harm had not occurred; otherwise, the goal is unworthy of the harm.”⁹ This definition, however, fails to indicate what constitutes a more valuable state of affairs.

Haybron states that to be evil is “...to be consistently vicious in the following sense: *one is not aligned with the good to a morally*

⁷Todd Calder, “The Concept of Evil”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta ed., <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/concept-evil/> (accessed May 9, 2020).

⁸Marcus G. Singer, “The Concept of Evil”, *Philosophy*, 79, no. 308 (April 2004), 196 (Cambridge University Press on behalf of Royal Institute of Philosophy), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3751971> (accessed May 23, 2020).

⁹Todd C. Calder, “Is the Privation Theory of Evil Dead?”, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 44, no. 4, (October 2007), p. 378.

significant extent” (italics his).¹⁰ However, he does not define what is “good” or “significant,” nor does he argue that consistency is necessary. Similarly, Card says that “evil is reasonably foreseeable intolerable harm, produced by inexcusable wrongs.”¹¹ But his assertion leads to questions with no answers, such as how much harm is tolerable, when are wrongs excusable, and what acts qualify as wrongs?

Formosa¹² attempts to provide a more thorough definition of evil, arguing that an agent must be morally responsible, the degree of harm must exceed some limit, and that the motive must be bad. However, he conforms his terms to modern sensibilities and intuitions, resulting in great subjectivity.

Other aspects of evil discussed by recent philosophers include whether it is rooted in character or action, whether motives by themselves can be evil, and whether an act must be enjoyed by the perpetrator to be classified as evil. The most critical point for the sake of the discussion in this book is that evil is a reality and that it harms (relatively) innocent people, thereby requiring appropriate responses regardless of these other considerations.

No non-theistic philosopher or ethicist can provide a non-problematic definition of evil because they are limited to relativistic definitions. Although it will not be problem-free either, only a foundation originating outside of humanity can be an adequate basis for defining evil.

¹⁰Daniel Haybron, “Moral Monsters and Saints,” p. 8, available at <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Moral-Monsters-and-Saints-Haybron/d1c50a0465445f19c041fd4abd9d93152bace334> (October 28, 2001), (accessed 5/16/2020).

¹¹Claudia Card, *Confronting Evils: Terrorism, Torture, Genocide*, 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹²Paul Formosa, “Evils, Wrongs and Dignity: How to Test a Theory of Evil”, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 47, no. 3, 235-253, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-013-9380-2> (accessed May 23, 2020).

Chapter II – The Biblical Perspective on Evil

For Christians, the Bible must be the primary source for the definition of evil.¹³ As with any belief system, however, Christianity encompasses diverse adherents with differing interpretations of the Bible. Although this would seem to undermine the use of the Bible as a basis for defining evil, as argued in Appendix A, the method of interpretation used throughout this book is cogent and attempts to place the highest priority on the ideas the original author(s) are attempting to communicate—something every sincere writer cares about.¹⁴

In the Old Testament (OT), the word for *evil* is the Hebrew word *ra* (rah), which is variously translated into English as *evil*, *disaster*, *wicked*, *bad*, *harmful*, *adversity*, or *wrong*. (These are examples used by the NIV.) In fact, although they are derived from the same Hebrew root word, some English translations of the Bible use words such as *calamity* or *disaster* instead of *evil* when God instigates an event.

The New Testament (NT) primarily uses two Greek words for *evil*: *kakos* and *poneros*, the former (Strong's 2556) meaning *bad*, *wrong*, *wicked*, or *evil*, and the latter (Strong's 4190) meaning *evil*, *bad*, *wicked*, or *malicious*.

Although the meanings of these ancient words are similar, the circumstances in which they are used shed much light on their meaning and semantic range. When the Hebrew word *ra* is used to

¹³If the Bible is true in all its claims, then it is the only true source of the definition for all mankind—Christian or otherwise.

¹⁴Christians disagreeing with my interpretations will also disagree with my methods. This is expected.

speak of people or their actions, the OT makes an important distinction. First, the following OT verses use *ra* to refer to sin or wrongdoing with intent:

The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil (*ra*) all the time. (Genesis 6:5)

For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil (*ra*). (Ecclesiastes 12:14)

Second, the Hebrew word *ra* is used to refer to evil God Himself enacts and takes the credit for.

Yet he too is wise and can bring disaster (*ra*); he does not take back his words. He will rise up against that wicked nation, against those who help evildoers. (Isaiah 31:2)

I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster (*ra*); I, the Lord, do all these things. (Isaiah 45:7)

The Lord Almighty, who planted you, has decreed disaster (*ra*) for you, because the people of both Israel and Judah have done evil (*ra*) and aroused my anger by burning incense to Baal. (Jeremiah 11:17)

“Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, ‘This is what the Lord says: Look! I am preparing a disaster (*ra*) for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil (*ra*) ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.’” (Jeremiah 18:11)

“This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘Listen! I am going to bring on this city and all the villages around it every disaster (*ra*) I pronounced against them, because they were stiff-necked and would not listen to my words.’” (Jeremiah 19:15)

‘If you stay in this land, I will build you up and not tear you down; I will plant you and not uproot you, for I have relented concerning the disaster (*ra*) I have inflicted on you.’ (Jeremiah 42:10)

Those who live in Maroth writhe in pain, waiting for relief, because disaster (*ra*) has come from the Lord, even to the gate of Jerusalem. (Micah 1:12)

In the OT, *ra* is broadly used to encompass man’s intentional wrongdoing and the evil that occurs when God is chastening human beings. In this sense, *ra* is a superset of sin: all sin is evil, but there are evils (those done by God, for example) that are not sin.

One common understanding is that God does not actually do evil, but rather He removes His protective hand and allows Satan and/or humanity to do the evil He has planned. Consequently, Bible translations such as the NIV often use a word such as *disaster* instead of *evil* when God is acting, thereby making Him seem less culpable for evil, which lessens subsequent theological difficulties.

The OT references to evil expose a troublesome fact about God’s character. Christians often prefer to think of God as being pure goodness, i.e., never doing evil for any reason. But as the above verses show, God is willing to inflict evil to deal with evil. Notably, dealing with evil is the only circumstance in which God does this or sanctions human beings doing it. To be clear, there is no instance in Scripture in which God does evil without there having been sin at the root of it.

Therefore, moral standards for God and those for humans are necessarily different. Just as parents and children operate under

separate standards since parents have greater abilities and responsibilities, so it is with God and humankind. In fact, there is no situation in the Bible in which the Creator and the created live by the exact same set of rules.

This asymmetry between Creator and created is demonstrated by the following NT passage,

If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them. (James 4:17)

Does this moral statement apply to God also? As an omniscient being, God is aware of much good that He could do but chooses not to. If it applied to Him, then He would be guilty of sin. Because we do not consider it sin for Him, the only viable alternative is that the concept of sin simply does not apply to God. This shows that the moral standards are different for the Creator and His created.

Although the word *ra* is not used of God in the following biblical cases, they nonetheless represent God doing harm to His creation and taking full credit for it: the flood of Noah (Genesis 6:7), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24), and the closing of the Red Sea over the Egyptian army (Exodus 14:27-28). The Bible explicitly states that God orchestrated these events that resulted in the death of many human beings.

God also allows His creatures to enact harm under certain circumstances. The following OT verses give examples of God-ordained harm:

“If a thief is caught breaking in at night and is struck a fatal blow, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed...”
(Exodus 22:2)

““If a woman approaches an animal to have sexual relations with it, kill both the woman and the animal. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their

own heads.” (Leviticus 20:16)

“A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads.” (Leviticus 20:27)

“But if the accused ever goes outside the limits of the city of refuge to which they fled and the avenger of blood finds them outside the city, the avenger of blood may kill the accused without being guilty of murder.” (Numbers 35:26-27)

Therefore, killing (a great evil by most standards) is not always imputed to the killer(s) as sin. This is also evident in accounts of specific biblical characters, in which they do evil in the process of purging God’s creation of a greater evil. For example, it is written of Josiah,

He [Josiah] did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and followed completely the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left. (2 Kings 22:2)

followed by

Josiah slaughtered all the priests of those high places on the altars and burned human bones on them. Then he went back to Jerusalem. (2 Kings 23:20)

Nowhere is it stated that Josiah sinned in slaying the priests. Others in the Bible who kill without necessarily incurring guilt include Samson, David, and Joshua.

In the NT, the words for *evil* are used with different emphases and in different circumstances. Here also, the variety and nature of the circumstances are enlightening. Consider the following passage:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. (Matthew 5:38-39)”

Although Jesus commands listeners not to resist an evil person when they inflict harm against the listener, this verse does not address a situation in which a person is forced to harm another on behalf of an evil person, nor does it outline actions if an evil person is harming someone in the presence of another. Rather, it merely covers the simplest case of someone directly harming the listener.

The following passage lists evil behaviors that come from a person’s heart:

He [Jesus] went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil (*kakoi*) thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy (*poneros*), slander, arrogance, and folly. All these evils (*ponera*) come from inside and defile a person.” (Mark 7:20-23)

The listed offenses are all personal, either internal (secret) sins or sins against another individual and/or God. The following verses are similar:

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil (*kakon*); they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only

continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:29-32)

To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil (*kakon*): first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor, and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism. (Romans 2:7-11)

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil (*poneron*); cling to what is good. (Romans 12:9)

Do not repay anyone evil (*kakon*) for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil (*kakou*), but overcome evil (*kakon*) with good. (Romans 12:17-21)

Where Paul says above, "Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone," it must be recognized that the absence of unanimity on the part of other people would be problematic if this passage were construed as a strict moral absolute. Therefore, it must be a general moral statement. (See Appendix B for an explanation of this distinction.)

Other Bible verses warn readers not to be experts in worldly ways that

initiate evil. But the following verse cannot be construed to mean that we must remain ignorant (i.e., naïve) of evil, because evil is done to us, thereby forcibly educating us about it:

Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil (*kakon*).
(Romans 16:19)

Additional biblical passages round out the range of uses of words for *evil* in the NT:

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil (*kakon*) with evil (*kakou*) or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For, “Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil (*kakou*) and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil (*kakou*) and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil (*kaka*).” (1 Peter 3:8-12)

Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil (*kakon*) but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil (*kakopoion*) has not seen God. (3 John 1:11)

It might be argued from verses such as 3 John 1:11 above that Christians are not to do evil, whether initiating it or responding to it. This is reasonable at first glance because the verse by itself does not list any exceptions. However, we must incorporate all that the Bible says on a subject at every interpretive opportunity.

Thus, with the exceptions of passages such as Romans 13:1-7, and I Peter 2:13-17, the focus of the NT regarding evil is on interpersonal relationships (between people and between God and individuals). Although readers are admonished not to initiate evil and to respond to evil with good when possible, neither the OT nor the NT address complex issues of evil, such as war.

From this analysis, the single word that most closely aligns with the biblical concept of evil and the human experience of it is *harm*, with a particular focus on *harm done with intent*. This definition is similar to those definitions given by others (religious and secular) for most occurrences of human evil. Consequently, we can break the concept of harm into the following taxonomy.

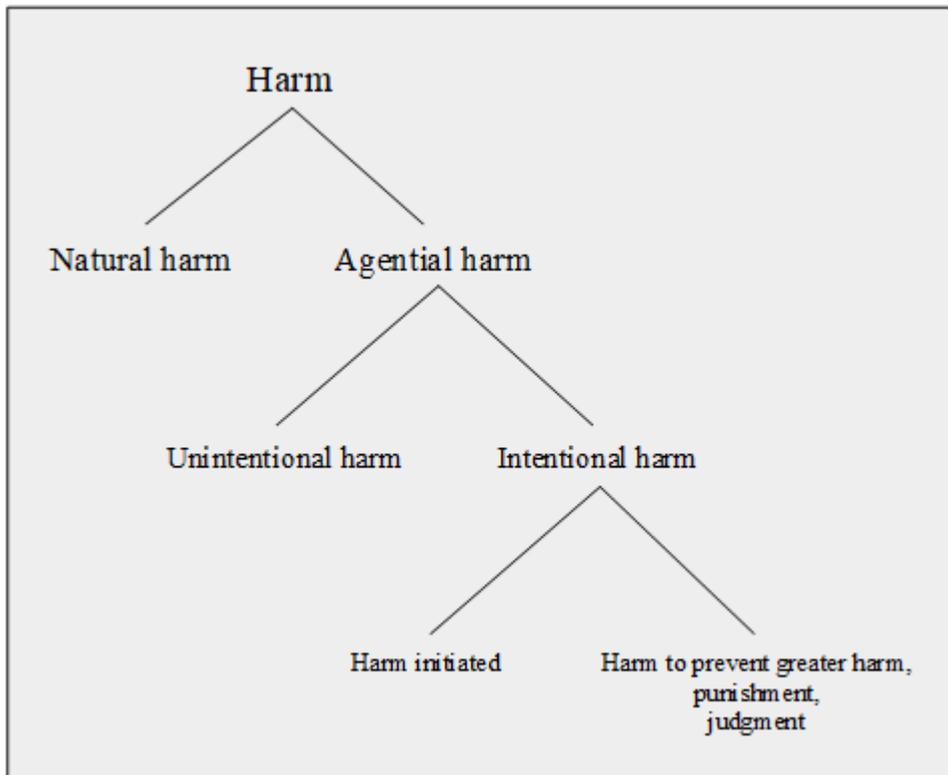


Figure 1. Taxonomy of Evil

In Figure 1, natural harm refers to natural evil, or that which occurs without any apparent agency behind it, such as injury and destruction due to storms, tsunamis, and diseases (if they are not intentionally spread or made worse by human intervention or lack thereof).¹⁵

Accidents that involve natural causes coupled with human agency lie

¹⁵It is worth noting that even calm nature, absent storms, etc., will not treat us well. Any attempt to survive away from civilization will have a decidedly negative effect on our health and life expectancy. In this sense, natural harm toward us is fallen nature's normative way.

in an area between natural and agential harm. For example, if a house collapses due to a storm and an occupant is injured, could the house have withstood the storm if it had been more solidly constructed? Human finiteness prevents unambiguous classification of such an event.

The remaining forms of harm in the figure all contain a component of agency. Unintentional harm stems from human agency, but is primarily due to some manifestation of human finiteness:

- carelessness (i.e., distractedness and failure to prevent harm)
- lack of knowledge regarding the cause of an illness (leading to possible mistreatment)
- the inability to know that a machine is about to malfunction and cause injury
- an ostensibly harmless word spoken to a stranger, which causes a painful memory to arise in the stranger's mind.

The OT says God held the Israelites accountable for sins they committed, even if they were not aware of them. (See Leviticus 4-5.) These lie in the area between unintentional and intentional harm. The NT does not directly address sins committed unawares, so we do not know how God views them today.

Intentional harm is that committed via agency, including harm done against God's will (sin) and the final form, wherein God and/or human beings do harm in response to an existing evil. Because God never initiates evil and cannot sin, He only commits the kind of harm that is corrective, judgmental, or serves to protect others from greater harm. Men also participate in this form of harm, as in law enforcement, when a criminal is harmed in the execution of justice.

The OT records men executing intentional harm, as when Elijah orders the deaths of the prophets of Baal after the competition to see who would consume a sacrifice (1 Kings 18:40). In this case, the Bible does not explicitly state that the killings were counted to the killers as sins, while in other cases, such as when God calls on a pagan people to

punish Israel for idolatry, the pagans' actions are counted as sin because God subsequently punishes them. Because both cases can be found, it is difficult to say whether God counts such actions as sins in NT times.

The taxonomy in the figure thus covers the cases of harm within the human experience and makes essential distinctions clear.

Harm is further defined as *deviation from purpose*. For the theist, purpose ultimately comes from God. (In contrast, atheists acknowledge no ultimate purpose for existence, which consequently prevents a definition of evil within this framework.) Human beings (i.e., created beings) must have purpose(s) for their existence that originate outside of themselves, but neither nature nor human instincts can fully elucidate these purpose(s) because the Christian believes nature and instincts are corrupt (due to the Fall) and thus not in their pristine state. Only God, the Bible, and reason correctly applied can even partially inform the Christian about his purpose(s)

Further complicating the discovery of humanity's purpose(s) is the fact that they can exist at multiple levels. Humans have overarching purpose(s) for existence (e.g., to glorify God), but God also commands humans to reproduce, fill the earth, raise children properly, live virtuously, work, minister to others, and spread the Gospel of Christ.

Less-obvious purposes also vie for an individual's attention and thus may not appear to be simultaneously satisfiable. For example, application of an intellectual gift in science is difficult to employ while caring for a baby, even though an individual's purposes may include both at different times. These conflicts parallel moral dilemmas. Similar to how moral dilemmas can be resolved (see Appendix B), however, conflicting purposes can be resolved by prioritizing things and satisfying multiple priorities with minimal action.

Low-level purposes also vary with circumstances. In one circumstance, an individual's purpose may be to render aid to one who is sick, while another circumstance may require someone to speak a kind word to

someone else who is hurting. But medicine that can heal in one circumstance can harm in another, and an apt word at one time will cause despair in another. This means that a specific act can represent conformance to purpose in one circumstance and deviation from purpose in another. Therefore, what is considered evil may also vary with circumstance. This is consistent with evil as defined here.

In addition to the human purposes explained in the Bible, there also may be additional purposes we have of which only God is aware. Perhaps He could inform humanity, but there is the further possibility that God has purposes that only He can comprehend. Even if He tried to reveal them, human minds would be unable to understand. This should not surprise, if indeed God is vastly intellectually and morally superior. Humans cannot knowingly act on such purposes, meaning that harm (i.e., deviation from an unknown purpose) may occur without our awareness, an unavoidable consequence of human finiteness.¹⁶

In the case of harm to prevent further harm, the one responding must deviate from the ideal of doing no harm at all. But the one initiating harm makes it necessary to respond. The response may put the initiator back on a better path, or simply prevent them from continuing to do evil. Harm to prevent further harm is more ethically complicated,

¹⁶This definition implies that one question posed by some philosophers, namely whether something counts as evil if no human being ever detects that harm was done, can be answered with certainty: it can. Because we are finite creatures, it clearly is possible for harm to happen without us knowing. This in turn means we can sin unawares. Following this to its logical conclusion implies that the mere fact of our finiteness guarantees our sinfulness. The Fall was not therefore necessary to introduce sin. If harm we did unawares did not count as sin, God would not have made provision for such acts in Leviticus 4-5 and 22:14, where God tells his people how to make atonement for sins committed unawares. I am not sure what to make of this, theologically speaking. Perhaps without the Fall, our sins that were committed without awareness would not have counted against us—but that is only speculation.

but that complexity only arises because someone initiated evil.

Therefore, evil, harm, and deviation from purpose are consistent when understood in the context of theism, where God is the ultimate source of purpose.

The very suggestion of doing harm to slow down or stop a greater evil immediately raises an urgent question: Would there still be a useful moral distinction between those initiating harm and those employing harm to stop a greater harm? The ordinary distinction between those who do evil and those who do not would no longer be applicable. Of course, upon closer analysis, that former distinction turns out to have been incorrect. The dividing line here is a new one: On one side of the line are individuals, groups and nations who choose to initiate evil. It may be a single act, or an on-going pattern of harm. Think of the Germans or the Japanese in WWII, or the Soviet Union at its most evil. At the level of the individual, think of the power-hungry dictator, the common criminal, or the schoolyard bully. Their evil is only stopped by force, caprice, when they run out of victims within easy reach, or when they simply come to the end of human ability.

The other side of the line consists of those who do not characteristically initiate evil act(s), but whose ideals and actions are directed against those who do, and whose actions against evil will cease as soon as the greater evil is stopped. Their goal is to advance good and hinder evil. Think of those in legitimate law enforcement, or Allied nations such as the United States in WWII. This side of the line is exemplified in the actions of a police officer who only kills an armed robber who is threatening the life of an innocent person, and then does no further harm. At the international level, it is manifest in the nation that ceases hostilities as soon as the initiator surrenders and then does not begin its own retributive conquest.

In a world radically damaged by evil, this new boundary will still be blurred and imperfect. On the generally good side in a war, there will still be atrocities committed by a few. Honest law enforcement will eventually find a corrupt officer among its ranks. People will

occasionally misidentify the sides. Human beings are finite and sinful, so it is not possible to get it right every time. However, these human limitations do not affect the validity of the placement of the dividing line between those who initiate evil and those who respond.

Harm, as defined here, cannot be measured quantitatively, nor can arbitrary harms be ranked.¹⁷ Nevertheless, harm is a matter of degree, not a concept that can be divided into discrete segments by arguing over words (*bad* versus *wrong* versus *evil*, etc.). This analysis considers all harms as evil.

As noted, this definition of evil does not satisfy the ideal requirements because it does not allow a perfect delineation of evil from good. The definition does, however, ensure that the concepts all remain rooted in God's ultimate purpose(s) for His creation and in His unique purposes for individuals; they are not rooted in subjective opinions. Therefore, all sin can be classified as evil, and, as far as we can discern our purposes, we can tell when we have deviated from them.

It must be stressed that the shortcomings of this definition of evil do not necessarily indicate that the definition is wrong or not useful. On the contrary, if it is correctly derived, then it may be the best definition possible given limited human knowledge.

¹⁷One might think a calculus could be defined, similar to Jeremy Bentham's hedonic calculus, but applied to evil. This is not possible, for the same reasons that exact numbers cannot be plugged into Bentham's hedonic calculus: we have no objective way to assign exact numbers to the various terms.

Chapter III – Atheism and the Problem of Evil

Defining evil from a theistic foundation is more expedient than starting from an atheistic perspective because theism avoids the fatal problems of relativism. This chapter addresses atheistic arguments against God that are based on the existence of evil. Repudiation of these arguments will further solidify the theistic foundation on which this book rests.

For atheists, the existence of evil supposedly demonstrates that either God does not exist, or He is not good and/or all-powerful and/or all-knowing. If He had those characteristics, then He would not tolerate evil or have allowed it to come into existence.

Atheists occasionally grant that evil could serve a punitive and/or corrective purpose and hence be allowable from a good God. But they then highlight the existence of great evil, which they variously define as evil beyond that which could be punitive, corrective, or morally justifiable. They reiterate that, if God exists, He cannot be good.

Furthermore, atheists insist that God should fully inform humans of the reasons why evil is allowed to exist. They insist that humans could better bear up under evil if answers to why it is allowed were readily available, so therefore God is obligated to reveal His reasons. But because He has not supposedly done so, He therefore fails the atheists' test again.

According to Plantinga¹⁸, a *theodicy* is a possible explanation that reconciles God's benevolence and omnipotence with the existence of evil. In Augustine's theodicy, evil does not exist within God, nor was

¹⁸Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974, repr. 2002), 10, <https://www.scribd.com/doc/124605177/God-Freedom-And-Evil-Alvin-Plantinga> (accessed 9/2/2020).

it created by God. Rather, evil is a privation (lacking) of goodness that arose from man's free will, meaning it is an indirect consequence of God creating humans with free will. This definition allows for God's complete goodness and simultaneously explains how evil could exist.

To achieve its aim, a theodicy need only show that an explanation is reasonable. Other theologians and philosophers, including Irenaeus, Origen, and others in modern times, have constructed explanations to reconcile God's goodness and other qualities with the existence of evil.

In distinction, a *defense* is an argument that God could have reason(s) for allowing evil, but does not attempt, as with a theodicy, to specify what the reason(s) may be. Thus, a defense is an attempt to show there is no contradiction between the existence of evil and the existence and nature of God.

Atheists deem the construction of theodicies and defenses to be a failure, but they overreach even in claiming that evil exists because they deny the very thing required for defining evil: an objective source as a basis. Without God, right and wrong and good and evil are mere human constructs. As atheist Will Provine says, "No ultimate foundations for ethics exist...".¹⁹ Without a fixed definition of evil, atheists' arguments fail before they begin.

However, the lack of a rigorous definition is not the only error atheists make when arguing against God from the existence of evil. Atheist Ryan Stringer²⁰ has defended a variation of the argument against God's existence and/or His omni- characteristics from the existence of evil. One good defense of God and His omni- characteristics qualities against the existence of evil is to question whether humans can know enough of God and His abilities and intentions to make any argument

¹⁹William B. Provine and Phillip E. Johnson, debate at Stanford University, April 30, 1994, <http://www.arn.org/docs/orpages/or161/161main.htm>, accessed 9/2/2020.

²⁰Ryan Stringer, *Evil and Skeptical Theism*, 2012, https://infidels.org/library/modern/ryan_stringer/skeptical-theism.html, (accessed May 2018).

from evil succeed. Stringer attempts to defend his argument against this epistemological counter. The fact that Stringer's argument is directed at one of theism's best defenses and still fails to achieve its ends is therefore significant.

Stringer's argument is summarized as follows:

Premise 1: If God exists, then there is no gratuitous evil in the world.

Premise 2: There is gratuitous evil in the world.

Conclusion: Therefore, God does not exist.

Stringer first defines "gratuitous evil," a concept he needs to make his argument work. But his definition is deficient because it does not define a particular level of evil that is unambiguously recognizable or measurable by both atheists and theists as gratuitous. He only defines evil in subjective terms. Second, Stringer limits the substance that must outweigh evil to good, or at least the prevention of even greater evil, which he does not define rigorously. This is made clear where Stringer says, "...a morally sufficient reason for God to permit or create evil must be found in something good." The theist need not agree to this, any more than she should have to agree that only pleasure can outweigh pain, since pain can be outweighed by the satisfaction of having achieved a worthy goal despite it. To assume that no other virtuous thing can make up for evil is a claim for which Stringer provides no justification. Furthermore, his statement also entails that only earthly (i.e., visible) good can compensate for evil, which is not a claim any theist would be compelled to accept. This leaves the concept of gratuitous evil useless.

Although theism rejects the idea that sinful human beings can balance good and evil, even approximately, Stringer assumes that we can do a calculus with good and evil (two substances we cannot rigorously define) to ascertain whether one outweighs the other.

...the good must not only outweigh the evil, but it must sufficiently outweigh it in that the combination

of the two must render the world greater in overall goodness than the alternatives without the evil (which captures the idea that God is not justified in permitting or creating evil if there is a better or equally good alternative lacking the evil).

The theist simply need not agree that sinful human beings are capable of balancing good and evil, even approximately, to make this determination with certainty.

In addition, Stringer claims that he knows God's options, or at least knows God should have other ones:

...that these are the only two options available to God is very dubious. For starters, evil-free options are certainly conceivable and do not seem to be incoherent, which suggests that there are such options.

Usage of terms such as "dubious," "conceivable," "do not seem to be," and "suggests" fail to make for a rigorous philosophical argument. It is possible that God has other options but may also have prior or higher commitments that constrain what He will do or allow. Stringer inadvertently acknowledges the human inability to conceive of some factors when he says,

Because we cannot discern (or even conceive of) the goods that provide the morally sufficient reasons for God to permit or create the world's terrible evil, we can infer that there is no morally sufficient reason for God to permit or create some of the world's evil.

However, human inability to conceive of a reason is useless in arguing that no sufficient reason exists. Therefore, Premise 1 is not something any theist would be expected to accept.

Regarding Premise 2, the existence of gratuitous evil is not controversial, but this work argues that no ironclad definition of evil

exists, certainly not one that informs robust arguments against God.

Stringer continues by arguing that humans should grasp God's sufficient reasons for allowing evil, if such reasons exist:

...if there are morally sufficient reasons for God to permit or create the world's apparently gratuitous evil, then we probably will discern them because many of us appear to be fully developed moral agents and competent critical thinkers with complete epistemic access to good, evil, and the logical connections between them.

Stringer provides no evidence that humans are “fully developed moral agents” (perhaps again assuming his conclusions—no God, hence there is no higher moral authority). He also assumes that humans have full knowledge (“epistemic access”) to all the connections between good and evil, but he omits any other factors. Overall, Stringer assumes his conclusion, which allows him to claim that humans are sufficiently knowledgeable to reason precisely about evil, as compared to the theist's belief that humans do not have sufficient epistemic access to God's thoughts.

Stringer refers to humanity's lack of knowledge in these matters as “skeptical theism,” which is a misnomer since it may imply that one is skeptical of theism itself, which is not the case. Stringer is skeptical of skeptical theism because he says it implies that either gratuitous evil is an illusion or, as the only other alternative, that

God has morally sufficient reasons for evil that remain mysterious, so he (a) intentionally created us with a thirst for this knowledge [of what his reasons for allowing evil are] yet without epistemic access to it and (b) remains silent instead of explaining it to us or even providing comfort and reassurance that such reasons exist.

Again, Stringer implicitly assumes that humans are not subordinate, but that God must be bound by human logic and abilities. The theist, however, believes that, although God created humans with curiosity that extends beyond our finite intellectual capabilities, God has not remained silent, nor has He left humanity without comfort. Humanity's feelings of entitlement to a fuller explanation are of no consequence.

An all-powerful being, in Stringer's mind, should be able to explain anything:

...it is a very common occurrence for multiple human minds to understand the same complex material. Therefore, an all-powerful, all-knowing being could have made us more intelligent so that he could explain it to us.

Logically, then, humans would have to be as intelligent as God himself to comprehend what God comprehends. This is an unreasonable expectation. Christians have always understood that they are intellectually inferior to God. According to John Calvin, "Would we have the power of God so limited as to be unable to do more than our mind can comprehend?"²¹ Therefore, it may be the case that God cannot fully reveal all His reasons for allowing evil to His finite creatures because to understand everything that God understands would require that we share God's mind. The limitation is not on God's abilities, but on his creatures'.

It cannot be argued that human minds are able to grasp any idea that can exist. That would require demonstrating an understanding of every possible idea to its fullest depth. The fact that multiple human

²¹John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, ch. XXIII, sec. 5, 585,
<http://www.ntslibrary.com/PDF%20Books/Calvin%20Institutes%20of%20Christian%20Religion.pdf>
 (accessed 9/14/2020).

minds can understand some human-derived concepts does not constitute evidence that all concepts are accessible to human understanding. This part of Stringer's argument also fails.

Other arguments that use the existence of evil to disprove the existence of God fare no better, as they all rely on some subset of the following premises, none of which align with a theistic perspective:

- Good and evil can be defined with sufficient precision to enable human beings to weigh them against each other.
- Human understandings of good and evil are close enough to God's, such that correct conclusions can be reached from them.
- The logical implications of God's omniscience and omnipotence are known and understood by humans.
- God's intentions are well-enough known for human beings to reason with correctly.
- All prior commitments God may have are known.
- God is only concerned with good and evil, and every other virtue or sin is directly exchangeable to those two things.

Consider the analogy of a father working diligently on the family's taxes at the kitchen table. His three-year old son wants nothing more than to play with his father. The father tries to explain that he cannot play now, but the son cannot understand why. No amount of explanation will suffice. It is not within the son's ability to fully understand.

How much greater then are the ability and epistemic gaps between humans and God? As the Creator of the universe, He has abilities and knowledge that exceed current or future human understanding. This is not simply a matter of incomplete scientific or intellectual knowledge—rather, God's circumstances, responsibilities, knowledge, and intentions necessarily surpass the ability of any finite creature to fathom. Even a list of human concepts (like the one just given) of God's supposed concerns is inadequate because mundane human concepts like "responsibility" may not even apply. Human language

likely lacks words for what such a Being deals with.

This analysis need not replace existing theodicies. They may be correct as far as they go. But no theodicy can capture the entire picture because that too would presume that apologists have fully grasped the picture from God's perspective, which is impossible. For the atheist then, any attempt to overturn a theodicy or defense is the failed project. Although theodicies are only approximations, arguments that atheists rely on to disprove or discredit God and His goodness fail utterly considering the above analysis.

Chapter IV – The Roots of Evil

The roots of evil are aspects of human nature (individual and collective) that, when combined and manifested, result in every actual evil, from a child shoving another child on the playground to totalitarian systems in which tens of millions of people die. These roots are sufficiently intertwined that complete separation of them is impossible—they must be discussed together.

Much of the analysis in this and the following sections is from a psycho-social basis, not from a spiritual or religious basis. Although some may argue that evil is fundamentally a spiritual issue, evil has direct causal relationships with various aspects of human behavior. Therefore, it is reasonable and profitable to explore its nature from psychological and social perspectives. Furthermore, limited human understanding of the spiritual realm necessitates a focused analysis on evil from more mundane angles.

If evil began when human beings chose to put their desires ahead of God's purpose(s), then the first root of evil is selfishness. (For the atheist, the instinct for self-interest is quite plain, and serves to ground this root of evil.) Most intentional evil contains a significant component of selfishness. In a world where food and other resources are limited, all living creatures must be somewhat selfish if they are to survive. However, corrupt human nature guarantees that some will take selfishness to extremes, where others must intervene to stop them. The amount of individual human selfishness falls along a spectrum, from sacrificially unselfish to brutally selfish. It is clear that the selfish often take from the unselfish, to the detriment of the latter.

Human degrees of selfishness are tied to an individual's sense of self-importance, which also varies. People with a low sense of self-importance are likely to suffer from depression and exhibit low self-

esteem. They are less likely to trouble other people, often allowing themselves to be trampled in the competition of life, and they are less likely to initiate evil. The Bible praises those of downtrodden or humble spirit (e.g., Matthew 5:2-10).

Human personalities can also demonstrate passive or dominant traits. Passive people do little harm, can be cowardly, and never dominate anyone. In contrast, dominant personalities often try to control others. In this sense, dominance is selfishness extended beyond self and is the second root of evil.²² Selfishness and dominance thus combine to greatly influence the shape of the hierarchies that we find ourselves in throughout life, from the grade-school playground, to the workplace, to politics and international affairs.

The degree of dominance a person exhibits does not change much during life. This means that the dominant tend to remain so. They are very pleased with this, but this is the exact opposite of what one would desire if there were earthly hope for an end to human oppression. Counterfactually, if the range of dominance was narrow, it would be more difficult for people to dominate one another. But because of the wide range, the human race seems destined for oppression. This is the third root of evil.

Dominate personality traits can, however, be employed in beneficent leadership. Good leaders are invaluable to families, companies, churches, institutions, and nations. A good leader is a humble, wise person who takes his or her responsibilities seriously and is genuinely concerned about the welfare of those he or she is leading. Such a leader is not motivated first by a desire for power or selfish gain but primarily for the satisfaction of having done the right thing and having genuinely helped people.²³

²²Psychologists make a distinction between dominance, and in the extreme, aggression. Aggression is dominance that rises to the level of threatening or committing physical harm in order to attain or maintain a superior position. We will speak here of dominance but understand that aggression is included.

²³Religious leaders, particularly in the Christian tradition, have a unique

Effective leaders can accomplish things that weaker assemblages of people cannot, by rallying those under them to work together toward a single goal. But this is the Scylla and Charybdis of leadership: a leader who is dominant enough to drive followers toward a great goal also has the potential to wield dominance for harm. A leader mild enough to never harm anyone will not be able to rally people effectively. Of course, some dominant leaders do not intend harm, but they may be so focused on their goals (or self) that others are incidentally harmed.

The privilege of leadership should belong to those who have earned it by attaining a high status in maturity, wisdom, and intelligence; it should not belong only to those who were born with a dominant personality. (Of course, the dominant rationalize that they indeed developed their leadership skills themselves.) Unfortunately, most non-leaders are not able to select leaders for their maturity, wisdom, or intelligence because they do not even realize these are the characteristics they should seek. Beyond that, most are also unable to distinguish between dominant, narcissistic people claiming to have the requisite leadership characteristics, and those genuinely possessing them. Thus, humanity seems destined to be ruled by people who, because of their dominant nature, abuse their authority.

Most people are followers, destined from birth to be dominated by others. Following is less stressful than leading because no one is constantly challenging a follower for supremacy. One does not have to accept as many risks or take as much responsibility. It is easier to blend in and exist passively.

calling as servant leaders. Following the example set by Christ, they must humbly lead, teach, and serve. This is a different dynamic than found in other types of leadership and brings unique challenges. Among these challenges are being held to a higher moral standard and having followers who only do so provisionally. Of course, wolves can don shepherd's clothing; the dominant also exist in religious circles. But here, there is typically less power or money to be seized compared with, say, being dominant in government.

Tragically (because of the harm that can subsequently befall them), followers have an innate need for someone they can admire. Those who lead for selfish reasons satisfy this need by embodying attractive characteristics, including charisma and unusually high self-confidence. Followers can vicariously participate in a such a leader's apparent virtues by association (i.e., following) and by adopting (as best they can) the beliefs and ways of the leader. This is the psychological basis of Toynbee's idea of *mimesis*.²⁴

Of course, following a truly beneficent leader is not a bad thing, but every human leader is imperfect, meaning that, in addition to their admirable qualities, leaders may have traits that nobody should admire or emulate. Therefore, all *mimesis* of humans must be provisional. It was Toynbee who warned and encouraged that

...it is only in a society which worships the One True God that there can be a promise of exorcizing what...was described as the perilousness of *mimesis*...[T]his *mimesis* of God can never expose human souls that devote themselves to it to those disillusionments that are apt to attend the *mimesis* of even the most godlike human beings... The communion between the Soul and the One True God cannot thus degenerate into the bondage of a slave to a despot, for in each of the higher religions, in diverse measure, the vision of God as Power is transfigured by the vision of Him as Love; and the presentation of this Loving God as a Dying God Incarnate is a theodicy²⁵ which makes the Imitation of Christ immune against the tragedy inherent in any *mimesis*

²⁴Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, abridged by D. C. Somervell. Vol. I. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 275ff.

²⁵Toynbee's use of the word theodicy here is a different meaning than was used earlier in this book. Here, he means a presentation or manifestation of God to man.

that is directed towards unregenerate human personalities.²⁶

In exchange for having leaders to admire, followers must give their support to those leaders. Although people often admire sports figures, actors, singers, talk-show hosts, and comedians, all those leaders require in return is money plus adulation—which is quickly turned into more money. Followers can also look to political or military leaders. The price of following this type of leader is higher and not usually voluntary: taxes, votes, military service, and in a corrupt society, bribes. However, when a leader can no longer be followed in good conscience, one must forsake allegiance to him. This is always within a person's rights, as all will be held accountable by God for the decisions made in this life. The fact that the leader will be held to a higher standard (see Hebrews 13:17 and James 3:1) does not excuse the follower for not forsaking allegiance.²⁷

Having emotionally identified themselves with a leader, followers must defend the object of their mimesis with an intensity proportional to the perceived cost of losing them. They may even feel dread at the possibility of the overthrow of a cherished political leader. Thus, even when a leader demonstrates an evil character, there is less cognitive dissonance for followers to continue supporting them than to turn

²⁶Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, abridged by D. C. Somervell. Vol. II. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 107-8.

²⁷Christian followers in the United States are also in a unique position: Membership in religious organizations here is voluntary. This means that following is always provisional. Under protestant Christianity, where Christ is the only true priest, one need not unquestioningly follow any mere mortal beneath Christ. This sets up a tension with church leaders who may expect to be followed unquestioningly. This in turn explains why, with our nation's Christian background, we are free to hold leaders in every institution to account. At the very least, a dissatisfied follower can simply remove himself from an organization whose leader(s) he no longer supports. Not all religions and cultures enjoy this privilege.

against them.²⁸

This flaw of human nature that allows most people to be inspired, or fooled, by charismatic, dominant individuals and then trapped into following them in evil guarantees that humanity will nearly always be ruled by tyrants. These perilous dynamics involving followers are the fourth root of evil.

Because the roots of evil, as discussed in this chapter, run to the core of human nature, they cannot be eradicated by human effort. Therefore, apart from God, humans' moral future will always resemble its bleak moral past.

²⁸It is instructive that intellectually shallow individuals are far more likely to defend their human leaders at any cost. Those who think more deeply and who thus hold primarily to ideas and ideals rather than people, are far quicker to jettison a leader who turns out to be corrupt.

Chapter V – Intellectual and Psychological Phenomena that Facilitate Evil

As finite creatures, we experience many intellectual and psychological phenomena that enable and/or amplify evil. For example, some habitually overstate their knowledge or skill to others, possibly because abstaining from showcasing one's intellect may be perceived as ignorance. But to overstate knowledge or skill, either unknowingly or knowingly, can result in harm, as the boasting individual may be placed in a position of responsibility for which they are not qualified.²⁹ If the one making the exaggerated claim is sufficiently charismatic or persuasive, others will not be able to detect that the claims are false.

A related intellectual blind spot is the inability to detect misinformation, which can occur when there is a lack of requisite knowledge by which to judge new information. Consequently, someone with more knowledge about a subject can take advantage of a person who does not have the same knowledge. A common example is non-science-based medicine, in which someone sells a remedy that will supposedly restore proper function of the human body, but the premise is based on nuanced and false explanations. Someone with limited knowledge of anatomy or medicine could be persuaded to purchase the remedy.³⁰ Politicians also make frequent use of this

²⁹This is not the Dunning-Kruger Effect, which is the claim that the less knowledgeable generally tend to over-estimate their knowledge, while the more knowledgeable tend to under-estimate theirs. There is controversy over whether the Dunning-Kruger Effect is indeed a valid psychological phenomenon. Here we do not claim this is a general tendency, but rather speak specifically of those who are compelled to overestimate their knowledge in front of others. Ordinary experience shows that such individuals do exist.

³⁰There are many marketing names for non-science-based medicine: folk,

intellectual blind spot to misinform or under-inform their constituents about policies or upcoming legislation, making them appear clear and effective when, in fact, they will have many unintended negative consequences. Those less informed about human nature and economics may not be able to foresee the negative outcomes and consequently support whatever appears to advance their agenda. Humans' limited knowledge creates a universal vulnerability to this blind spot.

The inability to see more than two alternatives in a situation is a hallmark of intellectual shallowness. Commonly known as black-and-white or all-or-nothing thinking, this intellectual blind spot prevents a person from seeing anything but two extremes. We all experience this blind spot in at least one phase of life, because it is how we begin our intellectual lives as children. Until people have escaped this phase, they are not even aware that this blind spot exists.

Similar to blind spots in intellect, people also are commonly blind to their own emotional immaturity. Such individuals have not experienced as wide a range of emotional states, nor have they improved their emotional control. The emotionally mature person often recognizes the limited range of emotions and diminished ability to constructively handle emotions in the emotionally immature person. This disparity can enable unintentional harm when someone expects more maturity of a person than they can provide. Harm can also occur when an emotionally immature person's simpler emotions are manipulated by another.

Those who manipulate others most often are the dominant among us. Humans typically associate the intensity of an individual's dominance with testosterone (T) levels, and studies have shown a correlation

traditional, herbal, holistic, integrative, alternative, et al. The names must continually change because, as people discover that most of the remedies have no positive effect, a particular branding becomes tainted, and must be abandoned.

between testosterone levels and dominance.^{31,32} Unfortunately, competition itself has been shown to affect T levels: T levels of winners tend to increase, while T levels of losers tend to decrease.³² This is just one reason why the dominant tend to remain happily so.³³ High T levels drive people to satisfy their personal lusts with impunity. Consider the behind-the-scenes lives of John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton, who were each involved in numerous extramarital affairs, and Wilt Chamberlain, who boasted about his flagrant sexual promiscuity. Athletes at a recent Olympic Games were supplied with enough condoms to have protected sex around 42 times each in the Olympic village.³⁴ Successful politicians, entertainers, sports figures, and high-ranking businesspeople are generally at high risk for such behaviors.

Elevated T levels have also been shown to correlate with criminal behavior:

[M]en with higher levels of T are more likely to be arrested for offenses other than traffic violations, to buy and sell stolen property, incur bad debts, and use a weapon in fights (Booth and Osgood 1993). Those with a T level one standard deviation above the mean are 28% more likely to engage in criminal behavior

³¹Other biological and psychological factors come into play, but for our purposes we need not explore them all. We will simply use T as a shorthand way of referring to the complete set of factors.

³²Allan Mazur and Alan Booth, "Testosterone and dominance in men," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 21 no. 3 (1998): 353-363, http://www.cogprints.org/663/1/bbs_mazur.html

³³P. H. Mehta and R. A. Josephs, *Testosterone*. In R. Baumeister and K. D. Vohs (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage), http://www.spelab.org/uploads/2/7/8/4/27842457/mehta__josephs_2007_.pdf (accessed July 21, 2020).

³⁴Cosmo Luce, "How Much Sex Are Athletes Having In The Olympic Village? Hint: It's A Lot," *Elite Daily*, (February 5, 2018), <https://www.elitedaily.com/p/how-much-sex-are-athletes-having-in-the-olympic-village-hint-its-a-lot-8004318>, (accessed January 10, 2019).

than those one standard deviation below the mean.³⁵

An elevated T level confers another aspect of dominance that facilitates harming self and others: lack of self-doubt.³⁶ This phenomenon makes incorrect intuitive or snap judgments less likely to be overridden by subsequent analysis. Careful reflection is not for the dominant, even though it is patently more important for leaders than for anyone else. Dominant individuals rationalize their lack of self-doubt by insisting that their original analyses were always completely correct and that their plans failed for some other reason—usually another person. Increased T levels are also associated with a decrease in fearfulness and an increase in the emotional response to perceived anger in others, both of which facilitate more evil.

Closely related to dominance is narcissism, which is characterized by a heightened sense of self-importance and entitlement; it represents a pathologically elevated self-esteem. Therefore, it amplifies the evils that stem from selfishness and dominance. It is often recognized as an annoying trait in others, but it also can be a source of great cognitive dissonance in self due to the mismatch between the sufferer's inflated view of self and the lack of confirmation of this belief received from others. The narcissist believes wholeheartedly that he deserves to be first. His needs and wants take precedence, even to the detriment of others. Compliments are always welcomed by a narcissist if they are delivered with a sufficient appearance of sincerity. Among pathologies of the mind, those that provide perceived benefits to the sufferer without otherwise impairing them are generally incurable, including narcissism. Not only is there no known successful way to treat the condition, but those manifesting narcissistic tendencies often do not want to be cured. To the narcissist, the problem lies with others' failure

³⁵Mazur and Booth, *ibid.*

³⁶Gideon Nave, Amos Nadler, David Zava, and Colin Farrell Camerer, "Single dose testosterone administration impairs cognitive reflection in men," *Psychological Science*, 28, no. 10 (January 2018), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316001989_Single_dose_testosterone_administration_impairs_cognitive_reflection_in_men (accessed August 13, 2020).

to recognize their superiority.

Machiavellianism is a related negative personality trait characterized by callousness toward others, which enables and justifies manipulating them for selfish gain, all without regard for morality. Those afflicted prioritize power and money instead of building social capital and taking care of family. “Any means to an end” is a common sentiment, and so cheating, an attempt to gain unearned preeminence, is a common means for getting ahead. As with narcissism, there is no known cure, nor does the sufferer seek one.

Psychopathy³⁷ is a psychological disorder characterized by antisocial behavior; aggressive pursuit of selfish goals; superficial charm and influence; and bold, uninhibited, and selfish traits, including thrill-seeking and power-seeking. People with psychopathy also exhibit a very limited emotional range, including the inability to experience empathy for others, the inability to experience remorse, the ability to lie convincingly, and a lack of conscience. Like other psychological phenomena, psychopathy exists on a continuous scale, so it is difficult to precisely state the prevalence of psychopathy in the general population. However, estimates range from 0.1% to 2%. In the prison population in the United States, approximately 30% of inmates are thought to have psychopathy,³⁸ indicating that psychopaths are not easily tolerated by normal human beings.

Psychopathy has also been linked to abnormalities of the brain,³⁹ as

³⁷In current psychological understanding, psychopathy is closely related to sociopathy and Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD). The definitions of these pathologies are in flux, and some consider them to be the same thing.

³⁸Jari Tiihonen, Marja Koskivi, Markku Lähteenvuo, Pekka L. J. Virtanen, et al, "Neurobiological roots of psychopathy," *Nature Molecular Psychiatry* 25 (2020), 3432–3441, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41380-019-0488-z>, accessed July 4, 2021.

³⁹Mika Johanson, Olli Vaurio, Jari Tiihonen and Markku Lähteenvuo, “A Systematic Literature Review of Neuroimaging of Psychopathic Traits,”

revealed in fMRI brain scan comparisons of people with psychopathic tendencies and those without. The exact location(s) in the brain and nature of the differences are still being researched. The relevant underlying fact is that symptoms such as decreased empathy and fear occur because parts of a psychopath's brain lack connections to other parts. Individuals without psychopathy can associate harmful acts against others or dangerous activities to similar harm or risks to self, while a person suffering from psychopathy does not anticipate the same potential outcomes, leading to their lack of fear and conscience.⁴⁰

As with other mentioned psychological disorders, there is no known treatment for psychopathy. Not only do those afflicted not want treatment, but they often actively resist treatment or feign cooperation with doctors to avoid being helped. A cure for this abnormality would require altering the neural wiring of the victim's brain.

Because of their superficial charm and ability to deceive others, psychopaths often take advantage of emotional and intellectual blind spots in others. When a psychopath feigns empathy and understanding, individuals not trained in recognizing psychopathy accept their claims because they are unaware that a person could lack such feelings. Lobaczewski describes a psychopath's use of superficiality to deceive others:

Front. Psychiatry 06 February 2020,
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2019.01027/full>,
 accessed July 23, 2021.

⁴⁰If the psychopath is actually missing connections between parts of his brain that deprive him of a conscience and the capability to reason properly in moral matters, can he be said to be a fully-functioning moral agent? If he is not a fully-functioning moral agent, then does he actually have a soul? Is it possible for someone without a conscience to become a true Christian? Is it possible that psychopaths are (at least in the absence of a miracle) among those whom God has hardened (Rom. 9:18), the objects of his wrath (Rom. 9:22)? These are deep, open theological questions.

In the thought process of [psychopaths], a short cut way develops which bypasses the handicapped function [i.e., their psychopathy], thus leading from associations directly to words, deeds, and decisions which are not subject to any dissuasion. Such individuals interpret their talent for intuiting situations and making split-second oversimplified decisions as a sign of their superiority compared to normal people, who need to think for (sic) long time, ... Such “Stalinistic characters” traumatize and actively spellbind others, and their influence finds it exceptionally easy to bypass the controls of common sense. A large proportion of people tend to credit such individuals with special powers, thereby succumbing to their egotistic beliefs.⁴¹

The psychopath does not inherently understand the need for moral boundaries and constantly tests limits to determine what others will tolerate. Because psychopaths do not have fully functioning consciences, they believe that other people have inhibited mental faculties, which the psychopath sees as a disadvantage. Others are viewed as weak, limited, and inferior. As a result, psychopaths tend to probe for weaknesses in others because they want power and knowing

⁴¹Andrew M. Lobaczewski, *Political Ponerology: A Science on the Nature of Evil Adjusted for Political Purposes*, Red Pill Press (1998), 114. While Lobaczewski’s views on psychopathology are quite insightful, he does stray into areas where he is not an expert, and occasionally cites anecdotal evidence. For instance, without citing any actual research, he asserts that exposure to carbon monoxide while a child may insulate that person against later influence by psychopaths (p. 223). But the editors of the English edition of *Political Ponerology*, Laura Knight-Jadczyk and Henri Sy, are even less careful in their thinking, the former expressing great paranoia in her footnotes. At one point she suggests that because the US government campaigns against cigarette smoking, they might be attempting to keep children from receiving needed amounts of carbon monoxide, with the goal of making them more susceptible to psychopathic influence (p. 223, note 105)!

people's weaknesses gives them advantages.

Psychopaths who are sufficiently manipulative can advance in business or politics because they are strongly inclined to want power over others.⁴² However, they often cannot understand why others are not as aggressive as they are. Psychopaths can eventually overextend themselves and demand more from those under them than can be reasonably expected. Because they are charismatic and appear strong, psychopaths can attract followers, who then accompany them into evil.

Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are psychological disorders that arise from the root of selfishness because each involves the pursuit of selfish gain. Each disorder also prominently features traits of dominance, in that sufferers place self above others.⁴³ Interestingly, those with one of these pathologies have their own blind spots: When they appear to be getting their way, they can be quite unaware of being manipulated by those who understand their pathology. For instance, they may think their lies are being well-received if those listening act receptively, because the sufferer cannot empathize closely enough with the listeners to detect their internal doubt.

Another harmful psychological phenomenon is addiction, which is defined as an artificial dependence on something, a developed need that would not exist in the absence of exposure.⁴⁴ For various psychological and biological reasons, some individuals are more susceptible to addictions to such things as drugs, tobacco, alcohol,

⁴²Psychopaths that are of less than average intelligence are less likely to succeed in life, despite their Machiavellian tactics. Those of above average intelligence will be more likely to advance. This gives the impression that psychopaths are all of above-average intelligence because that type is more visible. But this may only be a selection effect.

⁴³Together, narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy are currently known as the Dark Triad because of their malevolent effects.

⁴⁴Currently, there is a distinction made between *addiction* and *dependence*. These terms are in flux, and the distinction need not concern us here.

gambling, sex, and pornography. Studies have shown that irregularities in how dopamine is processed in the brain are at least partially responsible. (Activities that commonly result in addiction are known to cause the release of dopamine.)

Entire industries (legal and otherwise) exist to feed addictive dependencies—always for monetary gain, resulting in a proliferation of evil. The following rationalizations are often employed in defense of such industries: it is legal to sell these things, no one is being forced to buy them, and the vendors did not actually create the demand. But such rationalizations are quite hollow upon closer examination, and do not relieve the vendors of the responsibility for causing and sustaining more addiction.

Addiction is never beneficial to the sufferer; there is always an impairment that accompanies being controlled by someone or something else. The impairments can be short-term or permanent, as when alcohol damages the brain.

Collectively, these pathologies extend the reach and magnify the effects of evil. They are so deeply rooted in the fallen human state that there is little hope of eradicating them. Factoring them into our understanding of how evil operates is perhaps the most that can be done.

Chapter VI – Small-Scale Evils, their Nature, and Methods

The smallest of evils (in terms of its reach), individual selfishness, can manifest itself merely as keeping something valuable to oneself. But this tendency quickly exhausts the supply of things it can obtain and keep on its own and must begin coveting the things of others. These are commonly material things, which leads to theft and worse. But a person can also covet affection and other emotional goods that can only be fulfilled by others. This leads the selfish to manipulate those around them. This is a significant problem in the postmodern world, where subjectivism and emotivism hold great sway and feelings are elevated to the status of arbiters of truth.

The emotions are particularly vulnerable to manipulation, which facilitates much harm. They require maturity and skill to keep under control and can easily overrule the intellect. Under their influence, people take actions they would not choose if they were operating from a less ephemeral basis.

The following examples showcase situations when people use the emotional vulnerabilities of others to bring them harm:

- in an abusive relationship, where the one suffering the greatest harm is manipulated into staying
- in a consumer/advertiser relationship, where the consumer's emotions are manipulated (perhaps via appealing to vanity or status)
- when a politician manipulates citizens' emotions to gain their support, and eventually to gain more political power.

A mature recognition of the controlling power of emotion can prevent these types of harm.

While the emotions can successfully manipulate people, more control may be achieved via deceit. While this approach darkens the character of the deceiver, most such individuals do not seem to care. Manipulators and liars tell themselves that achieving a particular goal does in fact constitute earning the things so obtained. After all, it does take effort and skill to successfully deceive others. If people perceive that they are at a systemic disadvantage, they can more easily rationalize deceiving others.

When manipulation and deceit fail to obtain a desired goal, outright dominance is the next approach. The most primitive manifestations of dominance come from bullies, who arise as soon as children find themselves in groups, and do not leave our lives after that point. Bullies are a microcosm of evil.

There has long been a misunderstanding in popular psychology that a bully is a person of low self-esteem who attempts to regain it by pushing other people down. But this explanation presumes the following: that someone of low self-esteem can stand up to those of higher self-esteem long enough to bully them and that bullying someone else could raise a person's self-esteem. Research does not bear out either of these presumptions. A simpler explanation is that a bully is someone of pathologically high self-esteem (e.g., a narcissist or a psychopath) who does not care what others think. Bullies simply believe that they are better than everyone else and that they therefore deserve preeminence.⁴⁵

A related misunderstanding is that bullies have fragile egos, which explains their sensitivity to any challenge to their status. However, a simpler explanation is that a bully is always on-guard, as a person at the top of any hierarchy must be, lest he lose his position.

Bullies use a special *modus operandi* when they dominate others that is calculated to maximize their gain and minimize their risk. First, they

⁴⁵Roy F. Baumeister, "Violent Pride: Do people turn violent because of self-hate or self-love?" *Scientific American*, (April 2001): 96-101.

seek victims: a desired victim has something the bully wants, but is relatively passive, perhaps even depressed. (Such people can even be driven to suicide by a bully.) This approach lowers the risk of repercussions to the bully, who becomes adept at spotting potential victims.

Potential victims are next tested by applying verbal pressure (e.g., insults) or physical force (e.g., pushing). In this way, the bully judges a victim's reactions to gauge the potential success of outright intimidation. This testing also manifests itself as various power tactics in the workplace or in politics. If the bully gains anything from the victim, this rewards the bully, who will press for more in the future. Bullies can also assess potential victims in terms of physical strength. Someone markedly weaker is always a potential victim, as bullies are willing to use physical dominance whenever needed.

If the bully cannot have a desired level of dominance over a victim, they may settle for persistent and incremental harassment but stop short of causing an angry reaction. At some point, the victim will be pushed too far and explode in some sort of outburst. The tactic for the bully is then to immediately shift blame for the outburst to the victim. This makes use of the fact that people are more likely to notice the outburst instead of the accumulated pressure applied by the bully. This also takes advantage of the bystander effect, combined with the fact that others may have already sided with the dominant bully. This dynamic is also common in normally cooperative relationships such as marriage, where one party wishes to retain the upper hand and is willing to continually pressure their spouse via verbal and psychological means.

All these dynamics are to the advantage of the bully; none accrue to the victim.

People who commonly assert dominance to the detriment of others typically fall into one of two groups. Either they have sufficient intelligence, self-control, and empathy to channel their dominance, or they lack those virtues and become society's criminals and despots.

The fact that these two groups share common underlying psychological factors, and some in the first group cross the line into the second, is instructive. One of the few differences is that the former acquire and hold their status by more legitimate means, while the latter obtain and keep theirs by such means as force and terror.

It has long been known that when groups form, dominant individuals spontaneously emerge as their leaders:

[D]ominance involves the tendency to behave in assertive, forceful, and self-assured ways. As an abundance of research has shown, individuals higher in trait dominance tend to attain more influence in face-to-face groups than others—they...gain more control over group processes, and hold disproportionate sway over group decisions. For example, one meta-analysis of 85 years of research found trait dominance to predict who emerges as the leader in groups more consistently than any other individual difference dimension examined, including intelligence.⁴⁶

Dominance is not merely asserted, however; it can be conveyed by many means and perceived unconsciously by others. For example, those who speak more will exert more influence over a group⁴⁷ because people are swayed most by the information source that occupies their attention most (i.e., all other things being equal, not biased against the source, etc.). Dominance is also projected by those

⁴⁶Cameron Anderson and Gavin J. Kilduff, “Why Do Dominant Personalities Attain Influence in Face-to-Face Groups? The Competence-Signaling Effects of Trait Dominance”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96, no. 2 (2008): 491–503, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/217b/77d022856736db43ddd6eb12bbfb753590ec.pdf>, (accessed August 13, 2020).

⁴⁷Marianne Schmid Mast, “Dominance as Expressed and Inferred Through Speaking Time: A Meta-Analysis.” *Human Communication Research*, 28, no. 3, (2002): 420–450.

with the loudest voices.⁴⁸ Volume is an indicator of physical strength and overall forcefulness. Such a voice can be heard by more people and is less likely to be challenged. Loud talkers can block out other voices by interrupting and speaking over them. Even an innate characteristic such as low vocal pitch is correlated (in men at least) with being perceived as dominant.⁴⁹ ⁵⁰ ⁵¹ Of course the dominant rationalize that they deserve to interrupt others and always have the last word, because they believe they are smarter.

Overconfidence enables dominant individuals and groups to hold disproportionate sway over others. Many people are easily fooled into believing a confident speaker, because they assume the confidence must be well-founded. Research has shown that overconfidence is frequently rewarded in group settings.⁵² Much harm can be caused, such in politics, when decisions are made based on feelings of confidence, but with no deeper basis.

Charisma often allows individuals to successfully influence others through emotion rather than through reason. As described by Dan

⁴⁸K. J. Tusing and J. P. Dillard, “The sounds of dominance: Vocal precursors of perceived dominance during interpersonal influence,” *Human Communication Research*, 26, no. 1, (January 2000): 148–171.

⁴⁹David Andrew Puts, Steven J.C. Gaulin, Katherine Verdolini, “Dominance and the evolution of sexual dimorphism in human voice pitch”, *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 27, no. 4 (July 2006): 283-296, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1090513805000966> (accessed August 13, 2020).

⁵⁰David Andrew Puts, Carolyn R. Hodges, Rodrigo A. Cárdenas, Steven J.C. Gaulin, “Men's voices as dominance signals: vocal fundamental and formant frequencies influence dominance attributions among men,” *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 28 (2007) 340-344.

⁵¹Sarah Wolff and David Andrew Puts, “Vocal masculinity is a robust dominance signal in men,” *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology*, 64 (2010): 1673-1683.

⁵²Jessica A. Kennedy, Cameron Anderson, and Don A. Moore, “Social Reactions to Overconfidence: Do the Costs of Overconfidence Outweigh the Benefits?” IRLE Working Paper No. 103-11 (2011), <http://irle.berkeley.edu/workingpapers/103-11.pdf> (accessed 2018).

Sperber, the “guru effect” allows people to sway others by circuitously bypassing reason.⁵³ Once a person discovers that these manipulative behaviors bring rewards, they are reinforced, and innate selfishness guarantees that they will be used for personal advantage as often as possible. More superficial, foolish, and dangerous ways of letting people gain influence can scarcely be imagined.

Dominance in competition requires the ability to tolerate high levels of stress, which an elevated T level conveniently confers. This is unfortunate, as it means most people who make to the top offices in business and government are people most do not want as bosses or rulers.

For person-to-person competition, the simplest interaction is the dominance contest:

[D]ominance contests [are] the manipulation of stress levels. An exchange of threats or attacks is seen as an attempt by each animal [person] to "outstress" or intimidate the other by inducing fear, anxiety, or other discomfort. Stress is experienced as both a feeling of discomfort and a syndrome of neurological responses. The animal that outstresses his adversary is the winner.

The model becomes clearer if we consider a concrete example (Mazur et al. 1980). Consider two strangers, A and B, whose eyes meet, by chance, across a room. Let us say that one of the strangers, A, decides to hold the stare. The chance eye contact now becomes a dominance encounter. A's stare makes B uncomfortable. B may then avert his eyes, thus relieving his discomfort while, in effect, surrendering, or he may stare back, making A uncomfortable in return. In the latter case, the staredown would continue, with each individual attempting to outstress

⁵³Dan Sperber, “The Guru Effect,” *Rev. Phil. Psych.*, 1 (2010) 583–592.

the other until finally one person succumbed to the discomfort (and the challenger) by averting his eyes. The matter thus settled, the yielder usually avoids further eye contact, though the winner may occasionally look at the loser as if to verify his victory.⁵⁴

Such a contest of wills could end in a physical fight if the two individuals engaging in the contest are both sufficiently dominating but insufficiently self-controlled.

In daily interactions, the above dynamic plays out via the visual dominance ratio, which is calculated as the proportion of time spent looking at the other person's eyes while speaking, divided by the proportion of time spent looking at the other person's eyes while listening. A higher number indicates dominance and a greater ability to tolerate stress. This phenomenon plays out between employers and employees, spouses, friends, and neighbors, as well as diplomats and world leaders.

A strong urge to dominate others can become overt in the form of verbal or physical threats and intimidation, such as the use of threatening words, demand of another person's attention, extreme physical closeness, personal testimony of physical harm to others and threats of further harm if someone does not cooperate. If those actions do not achieve the aims of the dominant person, then they may resort to physical force or violence, in which size, strength, and preparedness for combat determines the winner. Unfortunately, preparedness for physical fighting only accrues through practice. This is how the rest of the animal kingdom operates, and it demonstrates that the dominant who go to such extremes are no better.

Once such methods of dominance prove themselves useful, they

⁵⁴Allan Mazur and Alan Booth, "Testosterone and dominance in men," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 21 no. 3 (1998): 353-363, http://www.cogprints.org/663/1/bbs_mazur.html

become reinforced and habitual. A dominant person learns to recognize signs of submissiveness in others and often targets those individuals. Traits that irrevocably mark a person as less dominant include stuttering or any other dysfluency of speech; slowness to respond; naturally withdrawn or closed-off body language; awkwardness or clumsiness in mannerisms; indecisiveness; and physical responses to confrontation (e.g., retreat, gulping, sweating).

These signs of submission are innate, and most people cannot suppress them. Possession of these traits will prevent one from ever becoming a high-ranking leader, regardless of how wise or beneficent such a person might be. Others will fail to sense dominance in them, either overtly or viscerally, and will take note that the individual so afflicted is not already dominating others. Therefore, others will either not follow such a person, or will be easily led away when someone more dominant comes along. The result is that non-dominant yet beneficent and wise people rarely make it to the top of any significant leadership ladder.

Some will assert that a less dominant person can overcome their submissiveness and successfully challenge a more dominant person, but if a submissive person ratchets up his outward dominance (thereby raising his internal stress level beyond what he can long tolerate), the more dominant person will simply do the same, thereby restoring the imbalance. People with dominant personality traits can maintain an elevated stress level longer than people with less dominance.

Dominant people always insist on being given respect. Disrespect causes anger and requires immediate words or actions to clarify who is in charge. It never causes the dominant person to pause for self-examination. Of the two ways to earn respect (by humbly being more intelligent, wise, or virtuous than others, or by demanding respect even to the point of provoking fear in others), the dominant will certainly accept the former kind, but in its absence will insist on the latter.

Drastically mismatched dominance levels in pairs of people (spouses, roommates, etc.) cause intense stress in the less-dominant member. If

the more dominant person is the slightest bit sadistic, they can cause psychological damage to the less-dominant person, even to the point of inducing suicide. Abusive relationships are far too common, as a more dominant person seeks out and latches onto a very non-dominant person, to the latter's great harm.

In each of the above dominance behaviors, the individuals employing them gain superiority over others without necessarily being more wise, virtuous, or intelligent. Therefore, these tactics are frequently used for evil ends: they use deception, subconscious means, empty persuasion, psychological manipulation, and force to achieve unearned, undeserved preeminence and control over others' freedom, money, and labor.

The English writer Samuel Johnson said, "So far is it from being true that men are naturally equal, that no two people can be half an hour together, but one shall acquire an evident superiority over the other."⁵⁵ He did not realize that this "evident superiority" is of the most superficial nature.

⁵⁵James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, vol. II (1791), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1564/1564-h/1564-h.htm>, last accessed August 1, 2021.

Chapter VII – Large-Scale Evils, their Nature and Methods

At the highest scales are evil political systems, with authoritarian systems being the broadest class. An authoritarian system, such as a dictatorship, features restricted freedoms and a government run by a single person (or group). Such systems are typically evil in the way of a bully: not overly sophisticated or in possession of any high aims or intelligence but still quite capable of oppression. Beyond authoritarianism lies totalitarianism, the greatest amalgam of evils, both in variety and extent, that fallen man has yet devised. They are the bully metastasized.

Despite the totalitarian state's claims of pursuing lofty ideals, such as fairness for workers, conquest, prosperity, creation of a superior race, etc., survival of the state and maintenance of power for the individuals at the top of the political hierarchy is their highest priority. This creates the artificial necessity for all the specific evils in which totalitarianism excels. Each such evil has corresponding weaknesses that it induces, and these weaknesses must be hidden or denied. (Of course, totalitarian nations can have great destructive power, but raw destructive power is not a true measure of strength; it is rather a measure of fear, brutality, and desperation.) This need to hide every weakness also mirrors the bully, who must always appear strong to avoid being challenged.

To ensure continued power, the totalitarian state must control its citizens as tightly as possible, in what they think, say, and do. Propaganda must be continually disseminated, and information can only come through strictly controlled channels to ensure people keep believing the party line. This artificial unity reinforces the illusion of strength, while lack of independent thought, speech, and action is a great weakness. To guarantee maximum conformity, surveillance of the people must be complete. Much energy is wasted ferreting out dissent and crushing it, but the alternative of allowing people to doubt their leaders is intolerable.

The leaders of totalitarian systems know they are failing and mistreating their people and, consequently, must hide from them the less oppressive state of the outside world. This is of course done under the lie of preventing bad external influences from harming the state and people. Such continual lying leads directly to the invention of new terminology to reframe their actions: brutality becomes “masterfulness,” treachery becomes “strength,” launching a destructive war becomes “glorious conquest,” and sacrificing the nation’s military becomes “courage,” while the inability to commit genocide becomes “cowardice.”⁵⁶ But the need to lie so profligately takes moral strength from the regime, while producing nothing of lasting value.

A nation that lies to its own people must also lie to the rest of the world. For example, the Soviet Union lied about its internal productivity and hid many of its evil doings for most of the twentieth century, which caused distrust from other nations and increased the friction in all dealings with it. This need to lie to everyone is just one of the many reasons totalitarianism cannot tolerate genuine Christianity: Christ’s commands to be transparent and honest make it entirely incompatible with such governments.

Frequently, the brightest minds cannot be sufficiently conformed to a totalitarian system, and so must be expelled or eliminated.⁵⁷ Nor is that nation’s collective intelligence helped by the fact that the brutal are generally unintelligent, and so the processes by which totalitarian governments winnow themselves down to the most brutal also contribute to the nation’s intellectual shallowness. They harm themselves through bad decision-making, such as how the Soviet Union inadvertently caused its own famines and shortages. To attempt

⁵⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 74.

⁵⁷Germany’s dismissal of Jewish scientists and professors had a negative effect that historians can actually measure. See Fabian Waldinger, “Bombs, Brains and Science: The Role of Human and Physical Capital for the Creation of Scientific Knowledge”, *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, December 2016, 98(5), 811-31.

to compensate for this destruction of intelligence, they must steal much of their technology from more advanced, free nations.

All totalitarian systems have utilized some type of slave labor, the form that results in the least possible productivity per person of any system. This further weakens a totalitarian nation by increasing the likelihood of widespread poverty. Slave labor, the dispirited people, and the necessity of so many to populate the police and military to stand guard over and spy on the people leaves too few to produce needed goods and services.

Because a totalitarian government is the supreme power, the people do not have individual rights to life, liberty, property, or self-determination. This pervasive control also denies individuals the necessary motivation to work hard and to grow as human beings, which also weakens a people. By encouraging people to turn in fellow citizens who criticize the state, these systems psychologically and spiritually asphyxiate their population, creating an extreme loneliness by breaking down all trust.

The hierarchical command-and-control structure of a totalitarian nation is a source of great inefficiency, and thus of much unneeded harm. The clear lines of accountability ensure that orders are followed with maximum conformity. This arrangement satisfies those up the hierarchy because large numbers of people are acting in unison, which reinforces the illusion of strength. However, because those following the orders are unable to deviate from them, they cannot modify them to suit the specific needs of those immediately under them—even if they cared to. Where orders are mismatched to the governed, harm occurs that could be avoided by local control/decision making. Nationwide price controls are an example: they enforce an absolute fairness, even though not all regions of a nation suffer the same economic problem. Price controls also ignore the fact that goods should naturally be cheaper closer to where they are made, but areas without economic problems are forced to conform, causing lost sales, lost profit, and waste through spoilage.

The pathological self-confidence of totalitarian leaders means they are most concerned with whether they are being respected and obeyed, instead of being focused on solving their nation's problems. Such systems do not allow for feedback so that adjustments can be made, and specific problems addressed. The very act of offering feedback implies that the orders or laws are not perfect, which is an unacceptable thing to assert in a totalitarian regime and implies that subordinates are not completely willing to follow orders.

Furthermore, a leader in a totalitarian regime does not have the time or mental capacity to process the feedback of all subordinates; there would simply be too much information. Even if a leader was willing, he only has the cognitive capacity to process a summary of what is happening, with the details necessarily being lost. However, neither leaders nor followers typically understand that this is a systemic problem of all strict hierarchies that can only be avoided by allowing more autonomy at lower levels—something anathema to the powerful. This fundamental problem occurs whether one is considering laws in a totalitarian nation, orders in a military hierarchy, or directions given to employees in a highly politicized work environment.⁵⁸ Regrettably, power, and hence evil, tend to centralize towards hierarchical command-and-control.⁵⁹

To achieve maximum conformity, totalitarian nations use threats,

⁵⁸This further implies that growing central governments, even in relatively free nations, will be increasingly inefficient and unresponsive to the people. It is not merely a matter of human nature and uncaring bureaucrats, but of information flow—something no politician, political scientist or bureaucrat can ever solve. The only solution is to distribute power, and thereby lessen it.

⁵⁹For the systems theoretical basis for the above, see Yaneer Bar-Yam, “Complexity rising: From human beings to human civilization, a complexity profile”, in *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS)*, developed under the Auspices of the UNESCO (EOLSS Publishers, Oxford, UK, 2002), available at <https://necsi.edu/complexity-rising-from-human-beings-to-human-civilization-a-complexity-profile>, last accessed 3/11/2022.

imprisonment, torture, murder, and other evils to enforce a reign of terror. As a result, everyone who is not killed lives in fear. Such a system weakens its people through unrelenting psychological stress. This process dovetails with the desire of the state to strengthen itself by eliminating all opposition: scapegoated race(s), class(es), or individuals provide the fodder for the engine of death, which maintains the environment of terror. The people being eliminated are dehumanized through propaganda followed by removal of citizenship, participation in the community, dignity, then food and clothing, and, ultimately, their lives. Malnourishment and mistreatment wear victims down, depriving them of their ability to think and act rationally. Through this process, they are forced to live their final days as sub-humans, which makes it easier for the regime to claim they were always less than human.⁶⁰

Totalitarian systems take evil to new depths, experimenting to devise improved methods. For example, in WWII, on their eastern front, the Germans used trial-and-error to determine that the following method worked well for mass murder:

- isolate the people who are going to be killed, perhaps telling them they are going to be relocated
- with little warning, march them out of their city to an excavated killing pit

⁶⁰The authoritarian boss and the toxic workplace are a microcosm of an authoritarian/totalitarian political system. If you argue with or criticize the boss, you can be dismissed, transferred, or demoted (executed). Such a workplace will have doctrines you cannot question or criticize. Independent thinking will be unwelcome. Workers typically cannot trust one another, and backstabbing is common. Employees are thus encouraged to be more interested in status and appearance than in concrete results that support the business. One must watch everything they say. A superior can treat every subordinate like dirt. Respect for superiors is expected because fear is maintained, not because the leader is worth following. Everyone not motivated by a desire for power hates their job completely. As with nations, so do Machiavellian tactics thrive in such a workplace.

- lead groups of approximately 40 people to within sight of the pit so they cannot spread fear to the rest of the people
- form a gauntlet of soldiers near the killing pit so victims cannot flee
- force the victims into the pits and shoot them there.⁶¹

This process took advantage of the fact that people faced with imminent death are normally too shocked to fight or otherwise react.⁶² It was remarkably successful at achieving what it intended.

Nazi death squads were kept moving to prevent members from settling in a particular location and were never deployed to their home districts to prevent encountering family or friends. Once members had participated in acts of brutality, they were guilty of crimes against humanity and could not return to normal life.⁶³ Their consciences would begin to decay, or they would develop severe psychological problems and become unfit for further duties involving mass-murder.⁶⁴

A similar honing of evil occurred inside the Nazi death camps, where guards who were sympathetic toward the condemned were thrown in with the condemned. As a result, those running the camps were winnowed down to the most brutal.⁶⁵

⁶¹Richard Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 141-2

⁶²Rhodes, 251.

⁶³Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962.), 372.

⁶⁴David Rousset, *Les Jours de Notre Mort*, Paris, 1947, as cited by Arendt: "On the other hand, perversion was artificially produced in otherwise normal men. Rousset reports the following from an SS guard: 'Usually I keep on hitting until I ejaculate. I have a wife and three children in Breslau. I used to be perfectly normal. That's what they've made of me. Now when they give me a pass out of here, I don't go home. I don't dare look my wife in the face' (p. 273)."

⁶⁵Eugen Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 21-22.

Perhaps the worst evil that totalitarianism has devised is what it does to its victims right before it kills them. The Nazi concentration/death camps exemplified this pattern of evil. By starving victims and applying beatings and torture, the Nazis forced the Jews and other prisoners to herd fellow prisoners into the gas chambers and to burn their bodies afterward so the Nazi leaders would not have to personally carry out the most gruesome aspects of mass murder.⁶⁶ This also made the victims complicit in their own genocide, thereby breaking down any remaining resistance they might have had.

Totalitarianism's greatest strength is thus its greatest weakness: its sheer destructiveness. While it employs evil to erase opposition and force obedience, it must simultaneously destroy nearly every strength and virtue of its people, leaving only skeletons of human spirits. The totalitarian state deems evil actions to be an acceptable trade-off for maintaining power, proving that survival of the state is their highest goal.

Leaders of authoritarian/totalitarian nations have typically been extreme narcissists, and possibly psychopaths as well, which explains their pathological focus on military strength as well as order, discipline, and bravery. Traits such as compassion and creativity are rarely mentioned, but weakness and cowardice are always condemned as befits an authoritarian leader's propensity for conquest. By condemning weakness, the dictator can call upon the citizens and soldiers to produce more and fight courageously. If it comes to the brink of losing a war, the dictator is always willing to sacrifice his people. Such a leader attracts society's most brutal people because they relate to the leader and feel that someone finally understands them. They sign up to serve and are welcomed in.⁶⁷

Totalitarian leaders often end up distrusting everyone due to how they treat those beneath them. Therefore, once they have initiated a reign

⁶⁶Kogen, 233, 239

⁶⁷Lobaczewski, 215.

of terror, one can accurately predict that the leader's evil acts will (barring outside conquest or complete collapse of their nation) continue indefinitely. No brutal authoritarian leader has ever turned benevolent.

The only legacy of totalitarian systems is the untold harm they have done to humanity and civilization. For this reason, it is incumbent upon all people to understand their nature, in order to oppose their formation and existence to the maximum extent possible.

Chapter VIII – Asymmetries of Earthly Good and Evil

Although good and evil are commonly considered to be exact opposites, they are very asymmetrical in their natures, with evil actions (and those committing them) having the earthly advantage far more often. It is necessary to understand this state of affairs in greater depth to enable more effective action against evil.

Many of these asymmetries are grounded in the reality that artifacts have a natural tendency to wear out over time and with use. The Apostle Paul loosely refers to this phenomenon when he speaks of creation being in “bondage to decay” (Romans 8:21-22).

As an example, consider an intact window in a house. It serves to keep animals and inclement weather out, while letting light in. The window cannot fulfill these purposes if it is broken, cracked, or clouded. Dropping it during installation, accidentally striking it with a heavy tool, or being hit by a large hailstone, are sufficient to ruin it. Over time, the frame can rot. There are many ways it can become useless, but only a few ways to keep it useful because every aspect that people care about (transparency, air-tightness, etc.) must remain in near-original condition.

The above example highlights two characteristics of artifacts, which when combined, produce the general tendency to decay. First, there are many more states the artifact can be in which are non-functional relative to the object’s given purpose, compared with functional states. This means that careless acts or natural decay are more likely to move the artifact away from its intended purpose than they are to keep it near that purpose. Second, it is harder (in terms of requiring more skill, effort, money, etc.) to bring a damaged or neglected artifact back to its intended purpose.

Now consider a related scenario where a vandal throws a rock through the window. This intentional act only takes a few seconds, costs the vandal nothing, and requires little physical effort. But repairing the window will take as much time as if the window's breakage had been accidental or natural. This illustrates that agency typically amplifies the advantage that harm has over preservation.⁶⁸

The advantage harm has over preservation is also evident for humans. People accumulate damage to their bodies through illness, injury, and misuse. Emotional damage is more insidious still, as everything from a careless word to outright emotional or physical abuse can accumulate, making people bitter and cynical. Psychological harm is more easily done than undone, due to natural tendencies to remember unpleasant things more readily than good.⁶⁹ A bad habit is easier to form than to unlearn, and an addiction that only takes a month to develop can take years to escape.

Although humans can trivially kill each other, they cannot restore a life that has ceased for more than a few moments. War clearly shows the asymmetry that destruction has over creation: bombs, bullets, and scorched-earth policies depurpose things orders of magnitude more readily than they can be created or restored.

With all other things being equal, a military attacker (i.e., someone initiating harm) generally has the advantage over a defender. The former has the easier job of destroying physical fortifications, while the latter must preserve them. An attacker can choose one place to strike, concentrating his firepower there only, whereas a defender must watch his entire border. The element of surprise thus gives even

⁶⁸ There is an interesting parallel between the decay and breakdown of artifacts and the definition of evil from Chapter II. When an artifact loses its ability to fulfill its purpose, it must have simultaneously suffered some sort of harm. This can be agential harm, as in the case of a vandal breaking a window, or it can be a natural form of harm, as when the frame of a window slowly rots.

⁶⁹ This is known as the *negativity effect*, or *negativity bias*.

greater advantage to the side initiating harm.⁷⁰ More mundane examples which demonstrate the element of surprise are:

- A person initiates a false rumor and therefore has the advantage of making the first impression on a listener. Subsequent attempts to correct the rumor will struggle to overcome the first impression.
- A company introduces an inferior product before their competition can get to market, thus setting the product standard.
- A well-placed fist thrown without warning ends a physical fight before it begins.

While harmful acts can have their full intended effect even if unmatched to the victim, good acts are only maximally effective (or least minimally harmful) when carefully chosen for their recipients. For example, medicine must be properly matched to the patient and her condition to maximize the probability of successful treatment, and education is most effective when it is customized to the student. Words intended to comfort another are only appropriate if the speaker knows the hearer and understands his circumstances. Finally, a hostage is rescued with the least harm if the authorities know the exact circumstances under which the hostage is being held.

Therefore, for good acts to have the best chance of success, doers of good must have accurate information. Good acts thus depend on truth, and those who want to do good must desire truth. (This refers to truth

⁷⁰By those with an evolutionary view of human history, it is hypothesized that in prehistoric times, the more aggressive tribe had the advantage of surprise, and stood to gain food and women by attacking first. It has been suggested by David Livingstone-Smith that this tendency to strike first could even be evolutionarily bred into us by this point, meaning we shall not be rid of the tendency any time soon. How discouraging for those who take an evolutionary viewpoint! David Livingstone-Smith, *The Most Dangerous Animal: Human Nature and the Origins of War*, New York: St. Martin's Griffin. 2007.

as understood by the correspondence theory of truth, in which truth is measured by the degree to which it matches external reality.) Good acts may be thwarted or inadvertently cause harm if the information utilized does not accurately reflect reality. Consequently, people who perform good acts depend on openness, and have little use for secrecy or the element of surprise.

In contrast, secrecy is most advantageous where selfishness plays a large role. This includes situations involving politics, business, sports, and love. This dichotomy between openness/good and secrecy/evil is in accord with Jesus' words on the subject; see John 3:20-21.

To have the best cumulative effect, simultaneous good acts must be coordinated. This requires those participating in the good acts to have the same accurate information. If the coordinated good lies in the moral arena, then everyone involved must adhere to the common standard of moral goodness. God offers this standard through His Word, but sinful humans clearly do not always agree on how to interpret and apply the standard. Thus, even among those who acknowledge the same biblical standard of goodness at a high level, disagreements still exist regarding the details, which prevents acting in full coordination. Such considerations regarding coordination do not affect those intending evil, which is to evil's advantage.

In an analogous manner to physical objects, information recorded in physical form (in the human mind, on paper, in a computer, etc.) is easier to destroy or damage than to create or preserve. It is also trivial to alter or forge. This a direct consequence of the fact that there are many more inaccurate or false ways to record information than true ways. Corrupted information is never self-correcting⁷¹ except by checking it against its original source, and once all original records are damaged or destroyed, the original truth cannot be recovered with

⁷¹I am not referring here to the fact that information stored in computers can be preserved via error-detecting and correcting codes. Not uncommonly, the error-correcting information must itself be unharmed if the original information is to be restored accurately.

certainty. Again, physical reality works against truth and therefore against good. Verifying that information accurately reflects reality is not an easy undertaking, and most people cannot verify even a fraction of the information they receive daily. This inability guarantees that truth will always have an uphill battle.

Falsehoods such as a feint in war, a campaign lie to deceive voters, and manipulative advertising are often used to cause or enhance harm. Compared to truth, falsehoods are trivial to invent or generate by twisting truth. Thus, good acts rely on something that is more easily forged or corrupted than preserved. Those desiring to do good acts are thus at a systemic disadvantage.

Because habitual liars alter truth in well-controlled and rehearsed ways, their lies have an appeal that the truth cannot match. The addition of unverifiable detail to embellish an account only enhances this effect. For example, a psychopath is a practiced liar, so he is relaxed when testifying in front of others, while a truth teller will be under more pressure to recount things with accuracy and will thus appear more stressed. Only where details are verifiable does the truth teller find any advantage.

An asymmetry that favors good is evident in the behaviors of those who initiate good versus evil actions. The latter must employ lies, rationalizations, euphemisms, arguments, or alibis for what they are doing. They do this even when in complete control of a situation, perhaps out of concern that they might not always be in that position. In contrast, those doing good typically do not have to disguise their intentions and so do not suffer from this added cognitive load.

Naivete drastically increases one's chances of being harmed by evil acts. Criminals are adept at targeting individuals who are unaware of a particular way of being victimized. Initiators of evil thus force the details of their evil acts to be known and understood by the relatively good. If people do not want to become victims, they must educate themselves on ways evil acts are likely to be brought against them and then must react to avoid the danger. A desire to avoid evil thus causes

relatively innocent people to waste time and resources defending against potential harms that may never be realized. It is this dynamic that forces parents to inform their children at an early age about the existence of dangers such as pedophiles.

In contrast, those who initiate harm see little need to educate themselves about the ways of the good (at least as far as adopting them), as they pose little threat. Only regarding the danger of being apprehended by the authorities do people planning evil even need to glance at good. Those desiring good thus have no natural way to force their ways to be known to others in a positive way. Good ways cannot be forced onto those who desire evil, nor are evildoers cleaned up by mere exposure to good people.

When faced with harm that cannot be overcome or avoided, the first preference of those desiring good is typically to leave the circumstances (job, neighborhood, etc.). Because they cannot generally reform evildoers, good people often have few other choices. Those characteristically initiating harm thus have a passive way to repel those who prefer good, while those who do good have no corresponding passive way to repel those desiring evil.

Psychopathy and other mental disorders prevent individuals who characteristically initiate harm from experiencing self-doubt or introspection, thereby suppressing the conscience and facilitating further evil. People who initiate good acts, however, continually examine their motives and methods, restrict their actions correspondingly, and feel genuine guilt when called to account for having done something harmful (either selfishly or when done to thwart a greater harm).

Those accustomed to initiating evil know many of the above asymmetries, and they know of the above self-imposed limitations under which those doing good must operate. They use this knowledge to calculate the range of likely actions good people will consider to predict how far their harm can go before eliciting a restraining response. This enables those initiating evil to act with greater cunning,

efficiency, and impunity. Good people recoil at the possibility of having to put themselves in an evil person's (or institution's) place to perform the corresponding projections. Therefore, good people are usually less circumspect and less prepared as a result.

Based on this analysis, the majority of these asymmetries favor evil. Without direct intervention by God, evil wins on Earth—a fact that does not even require a religious foundation to make evident.

Chapter IX – What Must Be Done About Evil?

²*“How long will you defend the unjust
and show partiality to the wicked?
³Defend the weak and the fatherless;
uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.
⁴Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”*
(Psalm 82: 2-4)

The vivisection of evil would be a mere academic exercise if it did not lead to practical answers about how Christians should live. But the very idea of acting against those who initiate evil evokes strong reactions. Clearly this is a difficult matter, and it must be examined carefully.

For the Christian, there is no greater command than to follow Christ, and no greater expectation than that suffering persecution for doing so is inevitable (Matthew 5:11-12). Biblical guidance for the persecuted includes the following:

- pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44)
- continue to preach Christ, as exemplified in the post-conversion life of Paul
- do not resist evil but suffer nobly and maturely; confront one’s persecutors with words only. (Matthew 10:19-20, 1 Peter 2:23)

Can the Christian combat evil while obeying the above commands? Or is every bad thing that occurs to be counted as persecution and therefore suffered passively? If the latter, then Christians are prohibited from combating evil in any way.

Christian pacifists argue that Christians are indeed prohibited from proactively or reactively causing harm in response to evil. This position is usually based on Jesus' words in Matthew 5:38-41, 43-45:

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ ³⁹But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles... ⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Because this passage addresses human behavior and does not deal exclusively with God, it can induce contradictions if applied absolutely. (See Appendix B for an analysis of the Bible, moral absolutes, and the potential for moral dilemmas.) Therefore, finding that there are exceptions to its commands should not be surprising. In considering this possibility, first note that the examples given in the verses above only involve person-to-person interactions where the target of the evil is the person being addressed by Jesus. This does not explicitly cover situations in which someone is being harmed in a believer's presence or where a believer is responsible for the safety of the person being harmed, such as the protection of children.

Note next that the specific evils mentioned by Jesus are mild ones. None rise to the level of even permanently injuring the victim. To apply the above passage to greater evils such as murder, acts of corrupt government officials, and genocide would be an unwarranted extrapolation. If the Jesus were instructing Christians to allow small evils and large, He would have said to permit the large; then *a fortiori*,

the small should not be resisted. But because this passage only tells Christians to allow the small, it is not valid to extrapolate that great evils must be allowed also. Therefore, Jesus' command above is general rather than absolute.

There are several NT passages that admonish the Christian to not do evil. In 1 Thessalonians 5:14-18, the apostle Paul says

¹⁴And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. ¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray continually, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

This passage also speaks only of small-scale evil and is very general. It also cannot be construed to prohibit all action against evil under all circumstances. In 1 Peter 3:8-17, the apostle Peter says

⁸Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. ⁹Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. ¹⁰For,

“Whoever would love life
and see good days
must keep their tongue from evil
and their lips from deceitful speech.
¹¹They must turn from evil and do good;
they must seek peace and pursue it.
¹²For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous
and his ears are attentive to their prayer,
but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

¹³Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” ¹⁵But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

This passage likewise does not mention any specific harm that rises to the level of war or even murder. Nor does it include an example of harm being done to another when a Christian would be responsible for preventing it. Note also that Peter rhetorically asks, “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?” The presumed answer is “no one,” meaning he is not including situations where harm would happen to someone trying to do good (for example, someone trying to smuggle a Jewish child out of Nazi Germany). Therefore, to allow for known exceptions, Peter must not be stating a moral absolute, but rather is writing of the general case. Such a passage does not constrain a Christian’s response to evil to complete passivity.

Some Christian pacifists stretch their logic a step further and refer to Romans 13:4: “[...a ruler is] a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.” (This argument only works with a translation that employs the word “revenger.”) Since revenge is forbidden to the Christian, the pacifist is now cornered into arguing that no Christian may work in the military or law enforcement. But that would in turn imply that Christians could only be ruled over and defended by non-Christians, which would be absurd and foolhardy. Nowhere does Christ say that His followers cannot work in the military or law enforcement.⁷²

⁷²While the absence of a prohibition does not automatically mean it is permitted, it does shift the probabilities in favor of it, if its prohibition would be expected to be mentioned.

Finally, Christian pacifists argue that Jesus was completely non-violent, both in His life and in His death, and He thus exemplified how the Christian should live and, if necessary, die. However, the argument that all Christians' actions are restricted to those Jesus took in His life is a specious argument. It is not possible to say with certainty what Jesus would have done in the worst situations people have faced in the twentieth century. Furthermore, the prophecies in Revelation predict significant harm being done at the command of Christ.

Therefore, the Bible cannot be construed to prohibit Christians from using harm against evil, which undermines the argument for Christian pacifism.

There are also secular arguments for pacifism. A simplistic view of evil sees it merely as the you-pushed-me-so-I'll-push-you interaction of children on the playground. It is then argued that this phenomenon scales all the way up to the level of nations. Avoiding the propagation of evil then requires total pacifism, regardless of the scale of the original evil. This argument also has many problems. Powerless victims of evil acts cannot get revenge, and their inaction does not bring an end to evil. Furthermore, not all harm causes a desire for revenge. Consider the counterexamples of Germany and Japan, who did not send warriors against the United States in revenge for their defeats in World War II. Evil acts can also originate *de novo*, from selfishness, an idle imagination, or through spiteful, paranoid, or mentally ill people.

It is conceivable that small acts of evil could be absorbed (i.e., suffered with no retaliatory response of any kind) to limit or prevent the propagation of evil. In effect, the victim would endure the evil to satisfy the initiator. But such a tactic is naïve since most initiators of evil are not so quickly satiated. With large-scale evils, however, the approach of absorbing them is even less likely to meet with any success, because there are people and nations whose evil actions will continue until they are forcibly stopped, regardless of how their victims behave. Think not just of evil leaders such as Hitler or Stalin,

but members of organized crime, corrupt politicians, thieves, and psychopaths. There is no absorbing the evil they commit because they do not care about their victims' responses, nor is one act of evil ever enough. Success rewards them and propels them forward.

Furthermore, those who initiate evil want others to believe that pacifism is the correct path to take in dealing with evil. In other words, they prefer pacifism in everyone else. This is reason enough to reject it.⁷³

Secular arguments for pacifism are thus unfounded.

Considering the biblical passages that address the Christian's relationship to government, perhaps it is still the case that Christians must always defer to governmental authorities to deal with acts of evil. Romans 13:1-7 is one such passage, and is frequently cited as defining the relationship of the Christian to government:

¹Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ²Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. ⁴For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a

⁷³It is also noteworthy that cowardice shows itself as inaction, and inaction dressed up with articulate rationalizations closely resembles pacifism.

matter of conscience. ⁶This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

Similarly, 1 Peter 2:13-17 states

¹³Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ¹⁵For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. ¹⁶Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. ¹⁷Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

However, if the above passages were interpreted as strict absolutes, then problems would again arise. If every government were "established by God" then that would include the governments of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, et al, implying that the rulers of those nations held "no terror for those who [did] right"—which they clearly did. Therefore, to avoid a contradiction, the passages above cannot be referring to governments that hold terror for those who do right, and the Christian is not obligated by the above passages to obey such governments.⁷⁴

⁷⁴It is a question worth asking: Besides the fact that the Bible states it, what is it about government (assume a generally but not perfectly good government) that enables God to sanction its decisions? It is certainly not that such governments are somehow sinless—however such a concept would apply to a group of individuals as a whole, because no agent of any government is completely sinless. (Even in relatively good governments, there are still individuals who become corrupt, steal, abuse their authority, and so on.) What else could it be? Although there

There are also signs in the behavior of evildoers that indicate that people need not rely solely on government but are permitted to respond to evil individually when necessary: Evildoers choose to threaten, harm, kill, or deceive individuals. They also single out the weakest and most naïve first as they make the easiest targets. Because those initiating evil target individuals in these ways with the aim of optimizing their chances of success, they have already conferred on individuals the right to respond. Therefore, people are not required in all cases to defer to government as their only source of protection.

The next question that must be explored is whether we are required to respond to evil. The following reasons make it clear that there are compelling reasons to act:

Responsibility to God. Everything in this world belongs to God because He created it all. Since that is the case, and because God made arrangements for the salvation of peoples' souls, God must place some value on human lives. Therefore, people are required to care for their lives, and that must include defending against unjust harm. Failure to do so exhibits negligence as stewards.⁷⁵

may be reasons we are not privy to, the only other possibilities I can think of are 1) that in a civil society, responsibility for apprehending and punishing evildoers is diffused over many people, and 2) when justice is administered, government avoids the appearance of mere revenge, because the punishment meted out does not come directly from the victim(s), but rather from a relatively disinterested group of people. But from officers of the law to judges and executioners, it is still sinful individuals who carry out the particulars of apprehension, prosecution, sentencing, incarceration, and execution.

⁷⁵It must be noted that nowhere does the NT overturn the OT principles in regard to self-defense. As before, the absence of mention does not allow us to conclude that OT principles definitely apply in NT times. However, the lack of mention of their being overturned does at least increase the probability that they are still in effect, since we would expect that to be mentioned in the NT if they were not.

The duty to protect others. Children, for example, are placed with their parents in part to receive protection from them. What good parent would not carry their child away from danger? But if the threatened harm originates with another person, our responsibilities do not diminish. Therefore, people can be required to harm those who clearly intend harm to a child. Leaders in business, government and family are responsible for those they manage, care for, or rule over. It does not matter whether they acknowledge God or not; they all ultimately answer to our creator. As Rutherford states,

A king, as a king, and by virtue of his royal office, is the father of the kingdom, a tutor, a defender, protector, a shield, a leader, a shepherd, a husband, a patron, a watchman, a keeper of the people over which he is king, and so the office essentially includeth acts of fatherly affection, care, love and kindness, to those over whom he is set...⁷⁶

Accountable oversight, therefore, may require harming people who intend harm.

The impression Christians give others. People who suffer great harm through no obvious fault of their own, and who subsequently receive no help from ostensibly good people, will perceive a world of great indifference and injustice. Are Christians to withhold help until certain that others have already been harmed and only then do good unto them? As Bonhoeffer asks, “Has the Church merely to gather up those whom the wheel has crushed or has she to prevent the wheel from crushing them?”⁷⁷ Christians cannot let the relatively innocent think that those who are supposedly closer to God do not care, or worse yet, favor evil. This compels Christians to intervene and respond to evil acts unjustly directed against others.

⁷⁶Samuel Rutherford, *Lex, Rex* (Colorado Springs: Portage Publications, 2009, ISBN (e-book) 978-1-61501-000-4), Question XII, Arg. 2, p. 86.

⁷⁷Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 317.

Giving the benefit of doubt to the more innocent first. For those who cannot speak for themselves (e.g., children, or those condemned to die in a genocide), it is far more defensible to rescue them (which will likely require harming those threatening them) than to let them suffer and die.

The Golden Rule. All humans would want to be rescued from evil, so every person is responsible for rescuing others.

The alternatives to fighting evil are unacceptable. When war has been declared, there are only two choices for a defender: fight or surrender. If surrender (which is a form of cooperation with the enemy) is unacceptable, then a defender must fight.

Appeasement may seem like a viable alternative to fighting, but actually gains nothing for the defender. It is merely a transparent attempt to save face without directly engaging the aggressor. At a deeper level, appeasement tries to temporarily satisfy the aggressor. But each time the defender appeases, the aggressor is growing stronger and bolder. Their plans to dominate have not changed. Appeasement is thus a tenuous form of cooperation, which is reason enough to avoid it.

The effects on others of allowing persistent evil to continue. If a person (or nation) is allowed to continue doing selfish and harmful acts, it is likely that they are being psychologically (or sociologically or politically) rewarded via their successes, which reinforces the behavior to the detriment of others. We are not required to allow this unfortunate phenomenon of human nature to take its natural course.

Personal guilt. Protecting someone from harm is an act of good, and it is a sin to not do an act of good (James 4:17). Verses in the OT also command people to fight evil (Psalm 82:2-4). Therefore, failure to act against evil causes guilt.

Humans commonly use fallacious rationalizations to avoid acting against evil and, as a result, end up assisting evil. One common

rationalization is “What I do won’t make a difference because it will only slow evil down, not stop it entirely.” But the fight against evil is not all-or-nothing. Slowing down a persistent evil will likely reduce the total amount of harm done. Another rationalization is “What I do won’t make a difference because I can’t be sure that I will be successful.” It is true that success is not guaranteed, but inaction fails those who are being harmed.

Consider what would have happened if someone had sabotaged the rail lines leading to a Nazi death camp a year before the end of WWII. Furthermore, consider that the damage would have only delayed trains headed to the camp by one day, meaning that Jews already on trains headed there would have still arrived. But given that the Nazis were eventually defeated, it would also have been the case that they would have abandoned the camp sooner, which would have reduced deaths. The act of sabotage would still have had significance, even if not realized for a year. Even if the saboteur thought the Allies were going to lose, the act of sabotage would have given all later Jews destined for the camp one more day of life. The uncertainty does not diminish the necessity of committing the act of sabotage. Obligations to fight evil must not be defeated by rationalizations.

From the above analysis, it is exceedingly clear that people are required to respond to evil, and to do so when the guilt in not acting would exceed the guilt in acting. This is not a simple matter to decide since there are no perfect means of weighing evils available to human beings. But if the reasons given above require it, then action must be taken.

Chapter X – How Must Evil be Fought?

As is clear from the analysis thus far, human finiteness interferes with the ability to define and recognize evil. When it comes to responding to evil, similar problems arise. A limited ability to detect an imminent evil act limits human ability to respond in time. (This is the element of surprise that favors evil.) A limited ability to detect if an evil act is a one-time occurrence or part of a larger pattern of evil acts factors into the determination of whether the act needs a response. Once it is determined that an evil act needs a response, human finiteness prevents knowing whether a particular response will succeed, and hence what the response should be.

None of the above militates against the responsibility to fight evil. Rather, the above limitations merely mean that evil must be responded to in a more careful and restricted fashion. Christians should not respond to evils that are directed against them personally because of faith in Christ; such persecution must be suffered with grace, as demonstrated by Jesus and the apostles. Likewise, Christians should not respond to minor evils, or evil actions that cause no lasting harm (Matthew 5:39-41), because responding would detract from required responses to larger evils. Responses should typically be limited to situations in which the magnitude of evil is more than sufficient to warrant action and measures taken against it will be obvious or minor in comparison.

Once a particular or on-going evil is recognized and identified as requiring a response, Christians must possess the following additional characteristics, to further preserve and clarify the fundamental distinctions between those who initiate evil and those who respond.

Christians must be ready to spread the Gospel. Spreading the Good News of Jesus must always be the first step in any response to evil; it should be a perennial step regardless of anything else. More Christians

means more people equipped to understand and oppose evil. For the Christian, it may be easiest to witness for Christ when under intense persecution because there is less to lose. If a Christian finds himself in a slave labor or death camp and he speaks out for Jesus, he will be threatened with death. The jailers, torturers and executioners cannot bear a reminder that God is in fact watching them, nor can they stand to hear that the condemned would dare hold them accountable. For the Christian, hope does not live exclusively in this world, meaning Christians can continue to witness and oppose evil until death without concern of losing anything of eternal importance.

Christians must be ready to do good. Doing good must include offering spiritual, emotional, and physical healing for those hurt by evil actions.

Christians must teach people to love what is good and hate the initiation of evil. Christians must teach people about the nature of evil, human nature, and how those initiating evil take advantage of it.

Christians must be mature. The traits of maturity are necessary in dealing with evil because confronting it puts people in situations they do not normally face, requiring accurate foresight of opposing actions, and wise decisions on when and how to act.

Unlike the bully, psychopath or evil empire, Christian actions must be accompanied by continual questioning. Motives must avoid selfishness, and methods must be examined to ensure they are appropriate to the evil being fought.

Christians are not to act against evil out of an emotional desire for revenge. Emotions are not an acceptable basis for action because they are ephemeral and uncontrollable. As such, they are wholly unsuited as a basis for any important decision or action.

Christians must stop acting against a particular evil when it has been stopped.

While acting in accord with these principles, it is important to realize that, just because evil is not acting now, does not mean it is not poised and willing to do so. A person, institution, or nation that has shown a clear pattern of initiating evil still must be fought even though it is not acting against you or those you are responsible for at a particular instant.

There must be an element of practicality in analyzing the various options for acting against evil. For example, fighting an ongoing evil with a slow, secretive strategy may be more effective in one circumstance, while stopping an act of evil with a single culminating event may be best in another. Other factors to consider include the amount of evil prevented or delayed, personal capabilities, possibilities of collateral damage, and whether to employ open or secret operation. There is no simple calculus one can apply to determine the best strategy. Yet Christians are permitted to carefully consider how to attack evil because those initiating evil try to perform this analysis also. This is an advantage those initiating evil do not deserve.

If we are in a generally good environment and the evil being opposed is above a certain threshold, Christians should go to the authorities for redress of wrongs. Christians have a duty to do this, because stopping the source of evil will likely protect other potential victims.

If a Christian realizes that he or she is employed by, serving under, or otherwise associated with a person or organization that initiates evil, such that continued loyalty means furthering that evil, the next step the Christian must take is to withdraw allegiance. This may take the form of leaving an employer, institution, or nation. If circumstances do not allow going to the authorities (perhaps because the authorities are part of the problem), then the Christian may need to remain. In this case, it may be possible to work against the evil from within the organization or nation for a time.

In circumstances where there is still sufficient liberty, speaking out against evil should be the next active step. If the audience is comprised

primarily of non-Christians, then there are secular arguments against forms of evil that may be more effective depending on the circumstances (i.e., audience, time, place, people, etc.). For example, consider the consumption of alcohol. It is known to be potentially addicting and alcoholism is a genuine risk for some, resulting in abuse of family members, employment difficulties, etc. Large amounts of alcohol are also harmful to the brain and liver. However, those who enjoy alcohol argue that it is not harmful in small quantities, that it is not addicting to everyone, and that the harm is more often confined to the one consuming it. The latter group will not be open to arguments against the consumption of alcohol. In such situations, the most practical approach is to educate those who are willing to listen regarding the potential harm. Battling some forms of evil therefore requires offering protective wisdom to potential victims rather than accusing those participating in the harm.

Speaking where there may be opposition requires a bold personality. This is not something everyone has at their disposal, and Christians who are not naturally bold must support someone who is or find other means of opposing evil.

If one can write well, he or she should do so. Writing openly (i.e., not anonymously) will invite the same type of opposition that speaking does, but the opposition may be less intense. Those who oppose a Christian writer will still attempt to intimidate them into backing down. Refusal to face the opposition will result in being called a coward. Christians must continue to argue in writing, and either ignore such accusations, or plainly explain them to the audience.

Prior to the twenty-first century, it was feasible to write anonymously via pamphleteering, for example. The most well-known example of this was The White Rose resistance group inside Nazi Germany. Writing anonymously today may seem easier because of the internet, but modern technology provides governments the means to readily identify nearly any author.

Depending on the circumstances, it may be practical to gather allies in

the fight against a particular evil, but the opposition may try to infiltrate any group or organization perceived as a sufficient threat.

Fleeing is another means of opposing evil. Previous generations have fled evil nations to escape oppression, but anonymous flight in the modern world is virtually impossible because there are no more open frontiers and the ability to trace people in civilized nations is almost unlimited. On a smaller scale, fleeing includes switching to a different job or moving to another city or neighborhood to escape a toxic workplace, bully, or other evil circumstance. The advantages of fleeing from evil include the protection of wealth, labor, and intelligence from evil, but a Christian's departure also removes a presumed good influence. As boiling the water from a caustic solution concentrates it, so the departure of the good has a short-term negative impact on the employer, neighborhood, city, or nation that they departed: the evil that remains will have less resistance to its spread. There is no easy way to decide whether staying or leaving does more good. But if fleeing is the best option for opposing evil, then Christians must also speak out about their reasons for leaving. The wise will perceive that it was not possible to stand up to a more powerful force of evil.

Defensive acts are another method for opposing evil. Defensive acts are actions that protect but are not outwardly directed against the source of an evil. On a personal level, defensive acts include the utilization of stronger doors on homes to lessen the vulnerability to evil. But because burglars (for instance) will target the least protected homes in a neighborhood, one person strengthening their defenses leaves those around them relatively less defended, and hence more vulnerable to opportunistic evil. Therefore, as Christians employ defensive acts to oppose evil, they must also help others to increase their defenses. The primary drawback of a defensive act is that, once in place, those seeking to do harm can usually see the defense and attempt to overcome it.

Active defenses are those that can be used to strike an attacker. A firearm is a common example of active defense. If those attempting to

initiate evil know that certain people own means of actively defending themselves, the defenders can gain back some advantage. Because people have God-given primary rights to life, liberty, and property among other things, people automatically have the secondary right to own reasonable means of defending the primary rights. To make this connection clear, consider for sake of argument that people did not possess the right to own any means of self-protection. If that were the case, then they would be severely limited in acting to defend their lives, property, etc.; they would have to instead rely on others to assure them. But that would concede that they did not personally possess the primary rights either.

Christians must be prepared for repercussions when they take a defensive posture towards evil. The response of those initiating evil will depend on their degree of control and whether they think they can afford to ignore resistance. A well-organized system such as a totalitarian nation cannot tolerate resistance because it is evidence of internal weakness. Therefore, when faced with it, the usual response is to simply eliminate those pursuing that approach. Defensive and uncooperative acts are thus limited in what they can accomplish in extreme environments.

Open, non-violent means of direct opposition to evil include confrontation, blockades, boycotts, or civil disobedience. No harm is done to those attempting to initiate evil, but a particular act or policy is impeded.

Sabotage is also a less violent method of opposing evil. Sabotage can consist of intentional and direct damage to things. But it can also include outwardly innocuous actions, such as working more slowly, randomly damaging things, surreptitiously behaving in a foolish manner, causing equipment to wear out more quickly than otherwise, leaving incorrect information behind for others to find, and demoralizing those initiating evil. If possible, arrange for the blame to fall onto one of those initiating evil, to cause even more collateral damage. These are tactics of war, which are permitted in situations that are effectively war.

Ultimately, offensive actions to oppose evil must be taken to thwart extreme evil acts at their source. This involves doing direct harm to those who initiate evil. For example, it may be necessary to end the life of someone dedicated to evil, someone as evil as Hitler for instance, who presided over the genocide of millions. All those involved in that magnitude of evil—from the dictator to the lowest-ranking torturer must know they are targeted for destruction. They must know that their lives are in constant danger because of the evil they inflict on others. Because death can sneak in through any person, their fear must never cease. It might be their doctor, the guard outside the door, their barber, or a plumber. It only takes people with adequate determination, skill, and willingness to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of the relatively innocent.

Feelings of guilt in matters such as these must be tempered and controlled by the knowledge that illegitimate authorities or those trying to evade them have no legitimate authority under which to hold Christians accountable. Therefore, there is no reason why, after having acted against evil, Christians need to turn themselves in to such authorities. If they could not go to them for redress before, they owe them nothing after.

Chapter XI – Conclusion

Those who love good and hate the initiation of evil have two options. The first is to separate themselves from the world and ignore what happens as a result, thereby allowing evil to prosper. However, the consequences of letting evil flourish are predictable and ugly. Arendt describes it as the state where “the worst have lost their fear and the best have lost their hope.”⁷⁸

The second option is to fight for a world partly set right again, where an ample number of people care enough about others to protect them by actively fighting evil. Although success will be limited and ultimately must await God’s closing of earthly history, this is the more noble path. The knowledge and means in this book plus many other strategies and tactics yet to be discovered will need to be employed. Even partial success at opposing evil is only possible if evil is met on its ground because of its very nature. It admits no other method of control.

The first option leads to a world that spirals away from God’s intentions, but the latter to a world slowly brought back towards God’s intentions—to His credit and glory. May God help us to choose the better way.

⁷⁸Arendt, p. 446.

Appendix A – Interpretation and the Bible

Interpretation is a difficult thing under the best of circumstances, but with an ancient text such as the Bible, one originally written in another language, or one surrounded by any controversy, the problems are greater still. Postmodern ideas on interpretation have only made this more problematic.

Beyond difficulties with the text itself is the interpreter. We bring to a text all our past experiences, learned nuances in the meanings of words, our emotional state, and our core beliefs. If we are not conscious of these, we may misinterpret unawares. Furthermore, someone who wishes to disagree with a text is not always in a frame of mind to approach interpretation in a principled manner. A dishonest interpreter can even hijack an authoritative text to mislead others.

Books that contain instruction on how to live, of which the Bible is the chief example, are even more difficult to interpret because of the abstractness and overlap in the topics presented. Ideas such as goodness, holiness, justice, purity, and faithfulness—particularly when they exist in infinite quantities in God—are difficult to reason about with certainty. This is particularly problematic when a moral question could involve more than one such quality. Despite these problems, the attempt to interpret must still be made.

Interpretation begins with the fundamental fact that one or more writers desired to communicate something to their audience. In non-fiction writing, there is nearly always one particular meaning intended, conveyed with some level of accuracy and precision. It is thus the writer's goal that every reader obtain the intended meaning. Readers will do this with varying degrees of success, but it is still the original intent.

Therefore, the goal of sincere interpretation of any non-fiction work

(where there is no evidence of deceptive intent on the author's part) should be to interpret the writing in the manner most likely to retrieve what the original author intended. We should interpret as if he were monitoring our every thought and correcting our understanding anytime we deviate from his intent. Thus, the meaning of his words at their intended accuracy and precision would have the best chance to be conveyed. If we could, we would also inquire of the author whether there were exceptions to his statements and ask for any other form of clarification needed. We need no other justification for the correctness of this approach than that we would want our own words to be treated in this manner; this is the Golden Rule of interpretation. It is not unreasonable to disagree with what a text is saying, but no honorable use of another person's words can bypass the step of sincerely attempting to understand the original intent.⁷⁹

As there are more ways to alter information than there are to preserve it, there are far more ways to misinterpret a text than to interpret it correctly. Therefore, proper ways to interpret should involve restraint rather than creativity or license. Consider two ways of misinterpreting a text. The first is by omitting information present in a text. In this manner, hard-to-explain or merely unwanted parts of a text can be avoided. The second is by changing a text's emphasis. By stressing parts out of proportion to the author's emphasis, the meaning of a text can be shifted in any chosen direction.

Even for a sincere interpreter, it is nearly impossible to avoid altering the emphasis of a text by a slight amount. The mere act of rephrasing another person's words risks altering the meaning, emphasis, or accuracy the original author intended. Ironically, the longer the explication, the greater the risk, as more words provide more opportunities to deviate from the intended meaning. It might seem then that the best option is to merely quote the original author's words

⁷⁹With the Bible, there is controversy regarding its inspiration: Is God the only author? Is it some combination of God and man? Fortunately, these questions do not alter the principle being put forth here. We must still seek the original intent of its author(s).

and then stop, but that leaves the possibility that someone in the interpreter's audience will leave with an uncorrected misunderstanding. Many words might have the effect of correctly clarifying the text for that person if the interpreter did their job correctly.

When used intentionally, the above modes of misinterpretation are disingenuous because there are no objective, verifiable reasons to think that the original author would approve. They thereby violate the Golden Rule. Other disingenuous modes of interpretation (commonly applied to religious texts) include the following:

Esoteric interpretation or claiming to have a secret insight into a text. This allows the injection of any desired information.

Arbitrarily choosing the literary device to interpret through (e.g., using allegorical interpretation when the text is clearly not allegorical). This voids a text of any original meaning.

Various "criticism" methods. Methods such as form criticism and other postmodern techniques of analyzing a text inject the *zeitgeist* of the surrounding culture at the time of interpreting. Because the resulting misinterpretations seem wrapped in a heavy mantle of scholarship, they claim more weight than they deserve.

It is assumed here that God kept the Bible's authors from significant error, thereby allowing the words to achieve God's purposes. This makes the Bible unique beyond other non-fiction writings.^{80 81}

Even with a sincere interpreter, there are still ways to extract an

⁸⁰This is not necessarily full inerrancy, but full inerrancy—while it may be the case, is not needed for making the arguments in this book.

⁸¹A full defense of the Bible's historicity and authority are beyond the scope of this book. For an introduction to the topic, see Norman Geisler and Ron Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask: A Handbook on Christian Evidences* (Wheaton, IL: SP Publications, 1990). For an in-depth look at its historicity, see F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*.

incorrect meaning from a text. These modes must be discussed in more detail, because although they can be intentionally abused (by cult leaders or skeptics of Christianity, for instance), they are also found where there is genuine sincerity. The varying interpretations that can result are one cause of unnecessary division in the Church. Because of their subtlety, they can be difficult to recognize. These modes include:

Arbitrarily setting the precision of the text. This mode is commonly employed by skeptics of the Bible and usually involves increasing the precision of a text and then finding discrepancies where there need not be any. Atheists are well-known for pressing Bible passages just hard enough to generate contradictions or discrepancies. For example, in the OT are the following passages: “Joab reported the number of the fighting men to the king: In Israel there were eight hundred thousand able-bodied men who could handle a sword, and in Judah five hundred thousand.” (2 Samuel 24:9), followed by “Joab reported the number of the fighting men to David: In all Israel there were one million one hundred thousand men who could handle a sword, including four hundred and seventy thousand in Judah.” (1 Chronicles 21:5).

An interpretation that requires each of these numbers to have been collected at the same time, for the same purpose, and to be perfectly accurate and precise would imply that at least one number was in error. However, a census in OT times should not be expected to be as precise as a modern-day census. If we leave latitude for things such as different roundings of the numbers making up the sums, or exclusion of certain classes of people such as support personnel from one count, then no discrepancy need be present.

Drawing too heavily from historical context. In the case of Matthew 5:41, “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles,” Wink⁸² makes the claim that Roman law allowed a soldier to compel a subject to carry his pack one mile, but never beyond that, on pain of

⁸²Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1992), 371, note 17.

penalty to the Roman soldier. Jesus is therefore, according to Wink, urging his followers to passively get Roman soldiers into trouble. Thus, Wink uses a historical contextual claim to turn the meaning of the passage from exemplifying passivity in a specific situation (which concords with how the passage begins—namely with the words “But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil...”), to exemplifying defiance of evil. Pairing up Bible verses with handpicked historical facts without the permission of the author adds information that may not have been intended.

Assuming a list must be exhaustive when the text does not explicitly indicate this. This is seen in the common interpretation of the list of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. But nowhere does the text indicate that this list is to be taken as exhaustive; this is an assumption laid upon the text by the interpreter. With the messages to the seven churches in Revelation, many see a history of the Church in chronological order. Others see an exhaustive description of the seven states a church can be in, where every church must be in one of those states. But neither of these interpretations is indicated explicitly in the text.

This interpretive approach has been creatively applied to Romans 12:2, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Some see here a list of the aspects or types of the threefold will of God. They expound at length on the difference between his “perfect” will (that which God would ideally see happen), his “pleasing” will (that which he will allow to happen), and his “good” will. But nowhere in the passage is it indicated that this is a list of God’s three kinds of wills. It may only be three adjectives describing aspects of God’s single will.

Drawing too much information from the context, or overextending the context. It is obvious that controlling the context controls the interpretation. As an example, consider the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11ff. Some interpreters reach back to Luke 15:2 and interpret the parable in light of the ongoing tension between Jesus and

the Pharisees. This leads to interpreting the prodigal son as representing the Gentiles to whom the gospel will be offered, and the faithful son as figuring Israel and the Pharisees who represent it. But the interpretation of the second part is unwarranted and even contravened by the fact that the father says to the faithful son, “[Y]ou are always with me, and everything I have is yours,”—something Jesus would not have said to those who were rejecting him. A simpler interpretation that does not reach as far outside the passage itself is to let the faithful son represent a believer who, at that moment, suffers from an improper attitude.

Explicitly interpreting in light of other chosen verses, or “verse chaining”. (Sire⁸³ refers to this as “collapsing contexts.”) This is a pick-and-choose method of overextending a context. It injects information into a text by sequencing verses such that the first one(s) control the interpretation of later ones. (Worse still are circular verse-chaining interpretations where a first set of verses modifies the interpretation of a second set, and then the second set is used to rejustify the interpretation of the first set.) Consider the doctrine of Christian universalism. This doctrine, that nobody goes permanently to hell, is generated by starting from verses such as the following (note the underlined occurrences of the word “all” and “everyone”):

Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. (Romans 5:18)

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. (John 12:32)

This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:3-4)

⁸³James W. Sire, *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1980), 156.

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

By choosing to start with these verses, the doctrine of universalism is ostensibly grounded. Consistency then requires that verses speaking of a place of eternal punishment be explained away. This can be done by claiming that the Greek word “*aionios*” (eternal, eternity) refers to an age or finite period of time rather than infinity. Therefore, the verses to be conformed are interpreted to speak of temporary punishment instead.

To obtain the other major doctrine on salvation, the relevant verses can be taken in the opposite order: start with the verses that speak of eternal damnation (such as Revelation 20:7-15) and interpret them plainly. Then interpret the verses that speak of “all” as meaning “all of the elect,” “all those willing to be saved,” or some other subset of humanity. Verses that speak of God wanting something can then refer to His desires rather than His sovereign will, which allows His creatures to reject Him if they so choose.

Clearly the meaning extracted from a verse-chained interpretation is almost entirely dependent on the order in which the verses are taken. But when the verses come from different authors, books, or contexts, this choice is being made by the interpreter, not by the biblical text itself: Nowhere does the Bible say which of several far-flung verses take priority. Much creativity and rhetoric can be invested in making and justifying such interpretive choices, but the determination is not from the text itself.⁸⁴

Herein lies the subtlety of this mode: people advocating each interpretation above will assert, “But my conclusion comes straight

⁸⁴There is one exception where verse prioritizing is permitted, namely in putting the NT over the OT; Jesus himself condones that.

from Scripture!” Yet because they contradict, at least one of them must not be the case. When two opposing meanings are pulled from the same set of verses, it is clear that one or both interpretations have injected new information into the interpretive process. This new information can only have originated with the interpreters’ choice of which verse(s) to put first.

To address this problem, we must further constrain the interpretive process by extending the Golden Rule to require that (if it were possible) we bring all the relevant authors together and have them reconcile their statements. This is what we would want if we were one author in a canon and our words seemed to disagree with those of another author in the same canon. We would not want our words subordinated without our consent. (From the viewpoint that God is the only author of the entire Bible, this falls back to requiring that we not give any verse(s) precedence over others without sound reasons for thinking God intends that prioritization.)

With the Bible, the original human authors are not available, and we must adapt the Golden Rule by giving the benefit of the doubt when we interpret multiple passages together (whether by the same or different authors). If we cannot sincerely conclude that the original author(s) would approve of our co-interpretation of their texts, then we should not interpret in that manner or with that outcome. We should instead restrict ourselves to an interpretation that leaves maximum room for the relevant passages to co-exist as equally true and consonant statements. If this means that we draw no conclusions on a passage or subject at all, then so be it.⁸⁵ This differs from all other methods of interpretation, in that the others seek to extract some meaning from every passage. It might be argued that all passages in the Bible exist for our benefit (2 Timothy 3:16-17); otherwise, they would simply not be there. But if verse(s) are consistently problematic to interpret, we are better off leaving them alone rather than risking introducing error.

⁸⁵This approach is inspired by the Maximum Entropy Principle from statistics.

Pressing Scripture for more answers because we figure the answers to all reasonable theological questions *must* be in the Bible somewhere is almost a natural thing for a committed Christian. In doing so, we sincerely think that we are believing the Bible harder and more thoroughly. But the Bible does not indicate how hard its passages should be pressed, nor should this be expected. Few texts (short of those in the sciences or perhaps the legal realm) include their intended precision in the text itself. And because the Bible is a finite book, it can only answer a finite number of questions.

All of the above modes of misinterpretation involve consciously or unconsciously injecting outside information into the text. Even in cases where misinterpretation arose by omitting information, the choice of what to omit still originated with the misinterpreter. The Golden Rule at its broadest would restrict us from injecting, modifying, or omitting information by any means when interpreting. The more creative we get, the less likely it is that the original author would approve.

In the case of the Bible, some may argue, perhaps from John 16:13 (“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.”), that the Holy Spirit will always prevent error. But if that principle applied to every sincere believer beyond the eleven disciples, then Christianity would not have branched into many sects due to varying interpretations. The original audience for John 16 was the Eleven, so perhaps it only applied to them. While the Holy Spirit can prevent error, we must conclude that He does not in every possible case: Paul disagreed with Peter, as mentioned in Galatians 2:11-14—and that was after Pentecost!

Another limitation on our ability to properly interpret Scripture comes from our intellectual finiteness: Being finite and working with a finite vocabulary, there may be things that human language cannot capture or convey, no matter how many words are used. This implies that our best source of information about God (the Bible) must express things

for us—not as God sees them, for that would require a language beyond us—but rather using human language with all its limitations. There will necessarily be imprecision and incompleteness—not because of God, but because of us.

What should interpretation look like in light of the above principles and in avoidance of the pitfalls? It must be done in a more complicated and principled manner than customarily undertaken. Before interpretation can begin, one must gather all the verses relevant to a particular subject. Every verse on the subject must be included, otherwise the interpreter is favoring some over others and not letting all the authors' words have an equal voice. Next, meaning must be pulled from the collection of verses such that contradictions are not induced, and no verses are over- or under-emphasized. If contradictions threaten, then accept uncertainty and render no interpretation at all. If immediate context indicates that something is an exceptional case or is said under unusual circumstances, then take that into consideration; it may carve out an exception to a more general case elsewhere. If clarity cannot be obtained in this manner, leave the subject or doctrine completely alone, and conclude that we cannot know for sure the full or exact meaning.

One implication of this approach to interpretation is that individual verses cannot legitimately be used to prove doctrinal points. In other words, the idea of the “proof text” is completely invalid. Individual verses can be used to illustrate or summarize a doctrinal point, but never to establish one. It requires all the verses that can possibly bear on a subject to establish and ground a piece of doctrine.

Appendix B – The Bible and Moral Absolutes

Those genuinely concerned about what is good want to see good clearly delineated. Moral absolutes would seem ideal for accomplishing this with a minimum of subjectivity. For Christians in particular, the Bible is often taken to be the source of moral absolutes. But there are issues surrounding the idea of moral absolutes that must be examined.

By definition, a moral absolute is one that holds no matter the person, circumstance, culture, etc. There are no exceptions to a true absolute. These shall be referred to as *strict absolutes* to keep the meaning clear. At the other end of the spectrum is moral relativism. If morals can flex based on culture or personal desires, then they are relative. Moral relativism allows for complete subjectivity, and for that reason, is not given further consideration here.

Also not given consideration here are the various ethical theories that attempt to define how we should live based exclusively on rules and actions (deontological theories, divine command theory), virtues (virtue ethics), or outcomes (consequentialism, utilitarianism). Their particulars are not relevant here, as Christianity fuses all of them into a single system: In Christ, we are commanded to do certain things and not others. But we are also commanded to possess certain virtues and attitudes, and possessing them implies that our actions will be of a certain nature. If they have their intended nature, then we will care about consequences.

Moral systems in general and systems of strict absolutes in particular suffer from the problem of moral dilemmas. Consider a classic moral dilemma: the situation of a German citizen in Nazi Germany who is sympathetic to the plight of the Jews. He is in fact hiding a Jew from the Nazis when a knock comes at the door. What should the citizen do

when questioned about having hidden someone? He knows it is wrong to lie, and if telling the truth is a strict absolute, he must turn over the Jew (and implicate himself in a crime against the state). But if turning an innocent person over to be killed is also strictly immoral, he is caught in a dilemma. (We assume here, and quite reasonably so, that simply refusing to answer is not a viable option.)

Why do moral systems suffer from conflicts between two or more moral statements? There are several reasons:

Moral statements and systems share two interacting characteristics: First, to be useful, they must cover a near infinite number of possible circumstances. Second, for most people to be able to understand and follow them, they must be relatively simple and finite in length and quantity. To meet these criteria, moral statements must be *general*, in the sense that one or more must cover many specific situations. But their generality automatically allows for overlap in the situations they might cover. Where there is overlap, a dilemma can occur, as in the German citizen's situation above.

Because moral statements must be general and can overlap, people differ in deciding which one(s) to apply, and there can be subjectivity in applying them.

Someone intent on evil can engineer a situation using their knowledge of how people typically rank moral principles, thereby intentionally incorporating a dilemma. For instance, a robber who takes a hostage to exchange for escaping the authorities is trying to create a dilemma for the authorities with an intended outcome.

Once we are aware of any set of rules, we immediately begin thinking outside that set, questioning the rules, and looking for loopholes. (One of the many things that sets humans apart from the other creatures is our ability to intellectually jump between levels, from x to meta- x thinking.) While this process helps us in numerous ways, it also causes us to question and complicate everything we do.

Granted, it is not a daily occurrence to find ourselves in a life-altering moral dilemma, but for any system of morals to be complete, consistent, and unproblematic, there must be a way to resolve one when it arises. How might the problem of conflicting moral statements be circumvented? Several approaches are available, none of them wholly satisfactory:

First, one can have a moral system consisting of only one moral statement. If there is only one moral statement in a system, then it cannot immediately lead to a dilemma. (Of course, this is not the case with the Bible, as it contains more than one.) But this would leave us with the problem of agreeing on what that one statement should be. Furthermore, if there is only one, it must be extremely general, and then we would face the problem of figuring out how it should be applied in every possible situation. No moral statement of finite length can include details on how to apply it in every possible situation.

Second, if there are multiple moral statements, they can be assigned priorities. Consider the OT scenario in Exodus 12:14ff where God instructs all the Israelites to observe the first Passover and instructs them to celebrate it annually as a memorial. In Numbers 5:2, God then says, “Command the Israelites to send away from the camp anyone who has a defiling skin disease or a discharge of any kind, or who is ceremonially unclean because of a dead body.” The fact of having touched a dead body implied one was unclean for a time. Subsequently, in Numbers 9:6-7, some of the Israelites who were unclean by this reason realized that they were also required to celebrate the Passover, as no exceptions had been explicitly given. In verse 8, they wisely approach Moses with the dilemma, and he takes it before God. God resolves the dilemma in favor of celebrating the Passover, even if one had touched a dead body.

This illustrates that moral statements can be ranked or graded. According to Geisler⁸⁶, moral statements are ranked irrespective of

⁸⁶Norman L. Geisler, “Any Absolutes? Absolutely!”,
<http://www.equip.org/article/any-absolutes-absolutely/> (accessed March

their consequences. Ideally any ranking would itself be absolute, or we have only moved the problem up a level.

For this to be a practical solution in the case of the Bible or any other moral system, every combination that could possibly come into conflict would have to be ranked. This is highly impractical, as the number of combinations would be too great for us to manage. This is not the general approach of the Bible, as Scripture records only a few instances where even a single pair of commands are explicitly ranked. (See Hosea 6:6 and Matthew 12:1-8. But even these passages are very general and would allow wide latitude in application.)

Despite the above, this is the *de facto* approach we take when using a specific moral statement to carve out an exception to a more general one. For example, regarding the OT commandment against murder, we point first to the OT exception for self-defense. Then we refer to the NT verses that make exceptions when governments must enforce the law, (which must allow for occasionally killing a lawbreaker, and perhaps for capital punishment). We then point to the necessity of killing in time of war. But none of these exceptions are present in the OT commandment as given, nor does the Bible explicitly link the relevant passages together in any place. In other words, the guidelines for carving out exceptions are not generally specified in the moral system itself.

If some form of ranking (i.e., carving out exceptions) is the solution to moral dilemmas, then this directly implies that some moral statements do indeed have exceptions, and hence they cannot all be strict absolutes. In this case, one presumably avoids guilt by carving out the correct exception.

Third are more complex means of ranking absolutes. Some philosophers bring multiple considerations into the picture, such as obligation, responsibility, character, and virtue. Such systems suffer from shortcomings like those above, but in greater quantity: Which

consequences, actions, outcomes, virtues, etc., are to be preferred in each possible situation? How do we decide those things objectively? Given that we do not always know the outcome of a contemplated act, how do we decide the right thing to do?

The fourth remaining possibility is conflicting absolutism. Under this view, absolutes do sometimes conflict, and in that case to obey one is indeed to break another. Unlike the above approaches to resolving dilemmas, this approach admits that when faced with a dilemma, we may incur guilt no matter which alternative we take. Since dilemmas only exist because evil exists, it may not matter, as we are sinners in any case.

Thus, problems with moral systems lead directly to meta-ethical questions, which themselves do not have clear-cut answers. (Of course, atheists use this difficulty to argue that the Bible is useless as a moral foundation. But the same argument can demonstrate that any proposed moral system is similarly flawed.)

Having arrived at the conclusion that all moral systems suffer systemic problems and that systems of strict absolutes are no exception, the conclusion need not be that the Bible is merely a book of advice, or that our obedience is somehow optional or subjective. It is still quite possible (and I think it is the case) that the Bible truly does set forth God's intentions for His creatures. But because God made us finite beings, we come with severe limitations, including having finite minds that can only handle finite moral systems. And we are sinners. For these reasons, we cannot always do the right thing. This would be the case no matter what form God's moral standards took or how they were communicated to us.

Therefore, in this book we proceed on the basis that the moral statements in the Bible are not all strict absolutes. Moral statements that deal exclusively with God, such as the commandment to have no other gods before the one true God, are likely to be strict absolutes, because there is nothing that can come into conflict with God. But in cases where man is involved in the moral statement, we should not be

surprised if there exist reasonable exceptions. We admit that in our finiteness and sinfulness, we may not always carve them out correctly, no matter how sincere our attempt.⁸⁷

⁸⁷However, strict absolutes are still useful when initially teaching children virtuous ways to behave. The young cannot yet handle nuances of morality, nor are they ready to handle subtle cases where rules may conflict. They need to start life with clear distinctions. This is not to advocate teaching children things that will later be problematic; rather we must teach them at the level they can grasp when they are young. The same principle applies to people who are new to the Christian faith.

Appendix C – Objections

With a thesis so controversial, it is inevitable that there will be objections to the conclusions reached in this work. Here I attempt to address what are anticipated to be the most common.

“You are teaching people to sin.” I am not teaching people to initiate evil. We are only to respond to it, and then only under carefully delineated circumstances. Furthermore, I am teaching people to avoid the sin of allowing evil to flourish via our silence and inaction. Once evil enters the world, it touches everyone no matter what we do. We cannot avoid some guilt.

“Someone who responds to evil as you suggest is no better than the person initiating the evil act(s).” Good people who respond to evil are delineated from those who habitually initiate evil by the fact that the former stop doing harm as soon as the greater evil is stopped. This can seem a subtle distinction at first but is clear upon closer examination.

“You are guilty of calling evil ‘good’ and good ‘evil’.” I have delineated good from evil at length herein: Initiating harm is the greater evil. Defending against evil or putting a stop to it is distinct from initiating it, as I have also described at length.

“You advocate vigilantism.” Assassinating Hitler could have also been called vigilantism by those in power at the time, but it would have hindered much evil. Law enforcement is simply not capable of stopping all evil, particularly in cases where evil has become adept at dodging the law, or when it is the law. There are clearly cases in history where entire governments have turned completely evil. We incur greater guilt if we do not fight back in such cases.

“The first duty of someone in regard to evil is to not take part.” I am not advocating taking part, as in joining the initiator of evil in their

plans. I only advocate putting a stop to the greater evil and then ceasing to act. It is far more incumbent upon those initiating evil to relent of their deeds than for good people to relent from fighting evil.

“We are supposed to forgive those who do evil.” It is correct that we are to forgive those who do evil unto us. We are not to hold an emotional grudge against them or target them for vengeance. We are to do these things regardless of whether they have repented of their evil to us. Furthermore, if the evil is done as persecution for Christ, we are to bear up under it as nobly and maturely as we can. However, there are different circumstances where we can and should respond to evil, which I explain at length.

Furthermore, we must beware those who ask for or expect forgiveness when they have no intention of repenting of what they did. We are not called upon to forget a wrong done to us, merely to not hold it against them.

I have heard the following question from someone who has not repented: “Do you forgive me?” This is a crude attempt to receive absolution without having to repent of anything. The one asking for forgiveness is attempting to abuse Christian generosity and take advantage of a superficial understanding of the nature of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The correct response to such a person is to explain the actual process to them and inquire if they are sincerely following it.

“We are not to seek revenge.” I agree that we are not to personally punish those who wrong us. This is indeed condemned. The conditions I lay out are for different circumstances entirely, as described in this book.

“You are advocating a form of utilitarianism, namely maximizing good even if it means doing evil to accomplish it.” Utilitarianism is the greatest good for the greatest number. My focus is on minimizing personal guilt by acting against evil when our guilt would be greater if we did not act. This is also not consequentialism, unless you count

avoiding moral guilt as one of the consequences of acting against evil.

“Blessed are the persecuted...’ says Scripture. Therefore, it is a blessing to suffer evil for Christ’s name, and we should not interfere with that.” This covers the case where a Christian is being persecuted specifically for the cause of Christ, and I agree that in such a situation the Christian is not to resist. But there are many other cases not included in that where we must respond to evil.

“Two wrongs do not make a right,’ is a principle many live by, and yet you advocate answering a wrong with another wrong.” This is another form of the argument that we should do no evil ourselves, that we should not seek revenge, or that we should not dirty our hands by harming anyone. But I have already elucidated the finer distinction that we need to make between those who initiate evil and those who put a stop to it. Therefore, I do not advocate answering a wrong with another equal wrong. Rather, I point out that we ourselves incur guilt if we do not act to protect the innocent (and ourselves) from a persistent evil. Also, this is not strictly speaking *answering* a wrong. It is not intended to right the wrong nor to compensate for it in any way. It is to prevent the source of the evil from continuing to harm others in an established pattern.

“Live by the sword, die by the sword.” This was spoken by Christ in the garden of Gethsemane when Peter drew his sword to attempt to thwart Christ’s arrest. That was not a time for armed resistance. Christ did not want nor need Peter’s protection in that situation. This is a proverb, not an absolute statement: many war veterans have killed others but then died at home of non-violent causes.

“If Christians do as you say, it will fuel the charge that Christians do evil just like everyone else.” In that case it will be incumbent upon Christians to explain what they are doing and why they stopped as soon as the evil itself was stopped: to protect (relatively) innocent people from harm. If those doing the accusing are simply not aware of the principles laid out in this book, then their accusations will be unfounded. We cannot let the reasonings of the unaware change how

we act.

Furthermore, if we refuse to respond to evil, we will fuel the charges that Christians are cowards, that religion is indeed an “opiate of the people,” and that Christians are impotent to protect anyone in the face of the worst behavior of which human beings are capable.

“If the principle of doing harm to avoid greater guilt is so obvious, why doesn't the Bible explain it?” The Bible is finite in length and cannot speak of every possible moral situation we may find ourselves in. We cannot even obey one of its commands perfectly. But the ideas that we incur guilt through inaction, have responsibilities to those around us, and so on, are biblical ideas. Conclusions directly and accurately inferred from them will also be correct.

“We are not to reason so profligately with the Bible. We are only supposed to take it at face value and not to apply logic to it to conclude things not explicitly contained therein. You have extrapolated too far.” This objection often originates with those unaccustomed to the use of reason and who therefore fear that reason can be used against them to sow doubt and create cognitive dissonance that could lead to unbelief. Such individuals (and even whole churches) may outwardly eschew doubt in all forms and insist that one must never question their faith. But they are on shaky ground, relying on isolation from competing ideas to ensure the stability of their beliefs. Far more satisfying and solid is the kind of certainty that comes from embracing reason and examining all beliefs more closely because one is then satisfied that the arguments of non-Christians fail.

We must think beyond what is in the Bible: To repeat, the Bible is finite in length and therefore cannot contain instructions on what we must do in every possible moral situation. No finite book could. Furthermore, people can and do engineer moral dilemmas to confound or control us in evil ways. It is always possible to take a finite set of moral statements and construct dilemmas that pit one or more against each other. The Pharisees attempted to do this with Jesus in Luke 20:27-39. His response was to move the conversation to a higher level

above the individual doctrines that were being put into conflict and reason with His audience from there. We must become willing and able to do the same.

Only human beings are able to reason about moral matters. Our Creator gave us this ability and exemplified it through the teachings of Jesus. Because that is recorded for us, we can know that God expects us to also reason about moral matters. Reason is not easy to use, and some try to fool those who are less knowledgeable by misusing it. But we must not shy away from it because of that but rather try to grasp it better.

“You are advocating that we judge people’s motives and then execute judgment upon them when we harm them to prevent them from doing more evil. We cannot know people’s motives, and we are not to judge.” I am not advocating doing those things. Rather, I am arguing that we have a moral obligation to act against those who show a clear pattern of initiating harm. This is judging a pattern of overt action, not motives nor spiritual state.

“You are saying that it is sometimes incumbent upon us to do evil to prevent a greater evil or to avoid greater guilt ourselves. Therefore, you are saying that we must become evil to battle evil. This makes no sense.” This misunderstands what evil is. Evil is not something we become, just as good is not something we become. Our actions can be good or evil, and we can be known for doing good or evil, but we do not become entirely good or entirely evil. The personification of evil is hyperbolic language, commonly employed in fiction to clarify the extremes for our entertainment.

Sometimes evil arranges things so that the only way to stop a great harm is by doing harm. The one doing harm to prevent harm must cease harming when the threat has passed. He therefore does not *become* evil, nor does he even characteristically act in evil ways from that point forward.

“A person or nation doing on-going evil might repent tomorrow. You

do not know that they won't, so you should do them no harm." This argument says that we should let them continue doing evil until God makes the next move. But some evils are sufficiently great and ongoing (e.g., Nazi Germany and the Holocaust) that it would take an OT-scale miracle to stop them. The only way the Holocaust and WWII were ended was via non-miraculous human weaponry. Therefore, although a miracle could stop a great ongoing evil, such occurrences are not sufficiently common in recent human history that we can or should rely on them happening. We must act instead.