The Duty of Cock-Eyed Angels

Paul Klee (1879-1940), *Angelus Novus*, 1920, watercolor

There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm.

–Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Thesis IX, "On the Concept of History"

Three and a half years ago, in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, an expressionist, earth-toned watercolor of an astigmatic birdman called out to me. It was Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, acquired by the German Jewish critic Walter Benjamin in 1921, a year after its composition, and a focal point of his philosophy of history. After his tragic suicide on the Spanish-French border in 1940, Benjamin left the painting to his beloved friend Gershom Scholem, the historian of the Kaballah. Upon his own death in 1983, Scholem bequeathed the piece to his neighborhood museum, where I came upon it 22 years later. At the time, I was unaware of the painting's history, its birth in Weimar Germany, its survival from European catastrophe, its flight to Jerusalem. But the strange figure in the painting has stayed with me ever since. I have come to see it as the very symbol of our deepest challenges, as well as a guide to an ethical way.

If Klee's painting depicts – as Benjamin tells us – "the angel of history," a meek divine messenger blown by an aboriginal storm, back twisted toward the future, it is particularly significant that the creature is cock-eyed.[1] Indeed, this ocular asymmetry marks his essential nature. For the cock-eyed angel does not gaze nostalgically toward yesteryear, but rather trains just one eye on the past, with the other fixed on the present. Surely if the angel can observe anything at all, he does so precisely because he sees both the past and the present at once, always regarding one in relief against the other. The angel's desire to "awaken the dead" and "make whole what has been smashed" represents an expression of deep anxiety governing the now, constantly moved by the "one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet."

[1] My thanks to Nauman Naqvi for his insights regarding this aspect of the painting.

Though the angel's wings are paralyzed, trapped in the storm "we call progress," the discrepancy in vision between the two eyes permits him to bear witness to this very problem. By acclimating himself to the disorientation, he gains knowledge of himself and his world. He has the power, in philosophical terms, to hold simultaneously a vision both of what is and what ought to be. Torn between the real and the ideal, despair and hope, struggle and submission, he does not resemble other angels – neither shining, faithful Gabriel, nor cunning, evil Satan. Rather what Klee calls the *new* angel, what Benjamin identifies as the angel of history, we recognize as the shape of the human. Angel-wise, he is deficient, even aside from his ophthalmological aberration. That is, his feet stand apart,[2] he bears a pronounced philtral dimple,[3] and he lacks his heavenly peers' supernatural power. His situation is ours. For we are angels of history, caught between an "always already" and a "not yet." We embody all that is in both the divine image (*tzelem*) and the divine shadow (*tzilum*).[4]

I have come to believe that we have a twofold responsibility as *angeli novi*, hitherto divided into two distinct responsibilities, set at odds with each other in a debilitating rhetoric of *either/or* that would force us to choose between being and becoming. In this essay, I aim to identify how we are responsible *both* for being who we are *and* becoming who we ought to be. Our challenge takes many forms: to recognize that each of us is the being for whom the whole

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[2] According to tradition, each angel possesses but one leg, a sign of unity and total balance. During the *Amidah,* the "standing" prayer at the core of Jewish worship, custom dictates that one pray with feet together in imitation of the angels.

[3] According to *midrashic* legend, the finger of an angel touches each baby coming through the birth canal on the spot above the center of his or her upper lip. The physical impact of the touch is there for all to see on one another's faces; the purpose of the touch is to erase the truth held by the pure soul in the womb just prior to entry into the world.

[4] In Hebrew, the word for image, *tzelem*, and the word for shadow, *tzilum*, share the same root. In ancient Greek, the word for image – *eidolon* – also signifies phantom. While Gen. 1:27, "And God created man in his image (*b'tzalmo*)," celebrates our likeness to God, it also reminds us that we are only semblances of God.

world was created, *and* simultaneously to see that we are nothing but dust of the earth;[5] to look up in wonder at the heavens, *and* at the same time to look down at our feet; to philosophize, question, and critique, *and* to act, answer, and take a stand; to be compassionate and submissive before the infinite call of the Other, *and* to be aware of all the others whose calls are just as infinite; to be tolerant, pluralistic, open and humble, *and* to judge, create moral boundaries, be firm, and exhibit bravery; to be happy, optimistic and hopeful, *and* to be sensitive that there are others who are unfortunate, unhappy, pessimistic, without hope; to delight in art, poetry, and nature, *and* to remember the netherside of the world, still awaiting improvement.

But how can we do all this? How can we ensure that we behold and thereby inhabit two realities at once? Furthermore, what are we to do when concrete, immediate action is required? After all, even as we adopt a mindset of the double responsibility, in our daily existence we face ethical choices often requiring sacrifices. Abraham had to choose between love of family and fealty to God.[6] Antigone had to choose between commitment to the gods and loyalty to the state.[7] Neither had the philosopher's luxury to synthesize and embrace two opposing obligations. Americans cherish three ideals of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," but make countless decisions in which they privilege one over another.[8] In this moment of decision,

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[5] According to Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, the "Kotzker Rebbe" (1787-1859), a person should carry a piece of paper in each of his two pockets. One scrap should read, "I am but dust of the earth." The other should say, "The world was created for me alone."

[6] In Søren Kierkegaard's existentialist interpretation of the "binding of Isaac," Abraham chooses the teleological over the ethical.

[7] Antigone's choice is complicated by the fact that her duty to bury her brother, whose status as an enemy of the state forbids his burial, is not simply a matter of familial, but religious obligation. The gods demand that she bury her brother. Additionally, Creon, the tyrant forbidding her to bury her brother, is also her uncle.

[8] The word *decide* derives from the French *de-cider,* literally meaning "to cut-off," and often meaning "to kill." Deciding, by its very nature, means eliminating all other options, closing doors, *killing* the alternate possibilities.

the detached syntax of "one can" or "one might" retreats, overtaken by the definitive declaration "I will" or "I must." The matter is no longer a question of one's belief in the right to life or the right to choose, for example, but of "what will I do in the moment?" Will I abort the fetus, raise the child, give the baby up for adoption? Will I march on the state capitol, write a check to a charity, vote for a candidate, mount the soapbox? In this realm, where all "I"s are deracinated from the safe, universal home of "one," tremendous violence begins. In enlightened dialogue, "one" embraces the view of another; at the threshold of action, "I" can no longer stand by, and neither can "you."

The ancient rabbis grappled with this very problem, as it is told in a well known passage of the Talmud:

> **For three years there was a dispute between Beit Hillel [the "house" or followers of Rabbi Hillel] and Beit Shammai [the "house" or followers of Rabbi Shammai], the former asserting, "The law is in agreement with our views," and the latter contending, "The law is in agreement with our views." Then came a *bat kol* (heavenly voice), which announced: *"Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim Chayim.* (These and these are the words of the living God.) But the law is in agreement with Hillel."**
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> **Since, however, both "are the words of the living God," what was it that entitled Beit Hillel to have the law fixed according to their rulings? Because [its rabbis] were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and [the rulings] of Shammai, and [they] were even so humble as to mention the teachings of Shammai before their own.[9]**

The passage illuminates the virtues of humility and openness, but what do we do in a situation or world without a "heavenly voice" to resolve our predicament? We begin by accepting the *potential* of any moral position – be it dominant or minority, whole or partial, preliminary or fully developed – to make an equally valid claim. When we go forth with a willingness to examine the claims of others with modesty, we speak to our fellow citizens with a "heavenly voice," and we challenge them to do the same. Our greatest task is not merely to

[9] Babylonian Talmud, *Eruvin,* 13b.

weigh differing viewpoints *in order* to choose the best course, but to weigh them even *after* we have chosen.

Grounded in well-worn values and placed into the world far along certain specific roads, do we really have the capacity to imagine as true the very things which we have rejected, ignored, or missed? Can I serve on a jury and vote to sentence a serial killing rapist to death, while still believing that the death sentence is inhumane? Can I enthusiastically scribble romantic poetry, while remaining aware of the poverty beneath my apartment window? Can I do my utmost to stop the genocide in southern Sudan while providing for the children in my home? There is a saying amongst pragmatic religionists that one should pray as if the world depends on God and act as if it depends on oneself. But is there any way that we can make our action itself a prayer, and our prayer itself an action?

These questions seem to provoke an unsatisfactory answer. For they seem to lead us into professing that we must choose between seeing the world with an open and impractically contradictory mind on the one hand, and acting in it with a resolute and narrow mind on the other, as if we cannot be creators and dreamers at once. I wish I could proffer a unified field theory of ethical behavior, a universal imperative, a perfect compass. To be ever conflicted in pursuit of the good is taxing, depressing, potentially paralyzing. Kafka expresses our difficulty in the following existential terms:

> **[Man] is a free and secure citizen of the world, for he is fettered to a chain which is long enough to give him the freedom of all earthly space, and only so long that nothing can drag him past the frontiers of the world. But simultaneously he is a free and secure citizen of Heaven as well, for he is also fettered by a similarly designed heavenly chain. So that if he heads, say, for the earth, his heavenly collar throttles him, and if he heads for Heaven, his earthly one does the same…[10]**

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[10] *Parables and Paradoxes* (Schocken: 1975), 31.

In failing to provide a definitive solution, I do not mean that we can't resolve our conflict. I simply argue that a solution exists only where and insofar as we seek it. Instead of an answer, let me propose a way to an answer. That way is the ceaseless striving for justice, even after securing some measure of it. The Biblical injunction, *"Justice, justice shall you pursue…"* suggests the importance of pursuit, perhaps, over and above attainment; and by repeating the word *justice*, emphasizes its twofold nature.[11] For *justice* is repeated, according to various commentaries, so as to make clear that one must pursue justice in one's means as well as in one's ends. Our answer, then, can be found precisely in the tension between means and ends, in the disparity between our cocked eyes, in the war that is a source of world pain, but also of growth, in the grey-zones, whose undetermined statuses teach us most about who we are, and in the sacrifices that we make.

The simple answer as to how one can be what one ought to be, the cock-eyed angel, participating and reflecting at once, is to strive. It is true that according to Benjamin, the angel is unable "to awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed." Yet this does not keep the angel from desiring and laboring. And who knows, perhaps if the angel didn't will, with all his being, to overturn the destructive storm blowing from Paradise, it would be even more catastrophic. But how can we cultivate the energy to strive? How, if the wreckage continues to pile up, can we prevent ourselves from capitulating and joining the growing heap of destruction? Where does the will to wrestle with the angel that is ourselves come from, the will to be and become, rejoice and despair, tolerate and forbid, forgive and judge, believe and doubt?

The answer is love. We *fall* into love, without choice, seized by external forces, but we also stand firmly upon love, with commitment and freedom, driven by an inner voice. Here is the ultimate expression of striving, for to love is to say: "I am *not* the master of the world. I am

[11] Deuteronomy, 16:20.

incomplete, in need of another." Yet, to speak the simple words "I love you" is also to own one's incompleteness.

There exists no better exemplar of cock-eyed love than Moses. The greatest leader of the ancient Israelite tribe was also its humblest servant. He delivered words of wisdom, but they issued forth from his mouth slowly and with great difficulty.[12] Arguably his shining moment comes when, atop Mount Sinai, receiving the divine message, he learns that his people down below are bowing to the golden calf:

> **The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation." But Moses implored the LORD, his God, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people…. " And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people. Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain…[But] as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, and scattered it, and made them consume it.[13]**

Here Moses calms God's anger, while using his own to propel himself toward action. Moses pleads on behalf of the Israelites, instructing God in the virtues of restraint, while moving urgently himself to stop their idol-worship. Moses rejects God's offer to reboot the nation, knowing that such would instigate a vicious cycle of divine promise, mortal failure, divine wrath, communal unhinging, and divine promise-breaking. Understanding human flaws, but still valuing free will as the engine of true partnership, Moses assuages God's ire and yet immediately holds the Israelites accountable for their actions. God's first tablets were kept in the Ark of the Covenant along with the second set at least in part as a striking testament to Moses' leadership.

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[12] Exodus, 4:10.

[13] Exodus, 32:7-20.

Moses' dialogic encounter with God uncovers the meaning of the first commandment, especially when we look at it through our cocked-eyes. The first commandment, which is not a clear commandment – "I am the Lord *your* God, who brought *you* out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" – teaches us that God is only God insofar as he is *our* God.[14] Moses makes God *his* God through spirited, two-way engagement.

While the tradition teaches that "Torah was given to Moses at Mount Sinai,"[15] *Exodus* describes God giving *two* Torahs – one which Moses first *rejects* and then one which he *receives.* By divine hand, God himself literally engraves the first set of commandments, which Moses – in turn – smashes; the second time, God dictates and Moses wields the chisel. Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner – a leading Torah scholar who audited philosophy classes at the University of Berlin in the early 1930s and fled to New York just prior to the Shoah – offered a profound interpretation of Moses' role as an active partner in this encounter. Hutner pointed out that, according to the Talmud, God *congratulates* Moses for his act of tablet–shattering![16]

Hutner then tunneled through a series of additional Talmudic passages to excavate the meaning of the divine gesture. If Moses' breaking and refashioning the Torah opened *aporia* in scripture and if textual ambiguity led rabbis to battle over the truth and meaning of the law, and if this divisiveness at the heart of the community ultimately culminated in the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people for two millennia, then *why* did God applaud Moses' deed? Hutner argued that for the very reason that Moses destabilizes the truth and obfuscates our sight of the master of the universe does God commend him. For only in disagreement, ambiguity, and exile are people free, and only in freedom can they truly strive, love, and struggle

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[14] Exodus, 20:1.

[15] Mishnah, *Avot* 1:1.

[16] Babylonian Talmud, *Menachot,* 99a.

for redemption. Our earlier Talmudic passage – "These and these are the words of the living God" – translates for Hutner as "These and these are the words *which keep alive* the living God." In other words, only through dialogue, argument, and multiplicity can the heavenly voice makes itself heard.[17]

According to the *Zohar*, God gave 600,000 different Torahs at Mount Sinai because each person there heard according to his capacity. In this mystical conception, Torah is not a single, definitive narrative and legal code, but a symphonic convergence of a world of many voices. Can we tune in to the frequency of revelation in each voice we hear and spy it in each face we encounter? This is no small task. But if we bear in mind that to receive is not simply to submit, but also to struggle, then perhaps we can treat every street corner as if it were pregnant with revelation.

Each year on *Pesach*, the holiday commemorating the exodus from Egypt, when called upon to open the door for Elijah the Prophet, herald of the messiah, I stand at the portal to our home and imagine my ancient forebears smearing lamb's blood over their lintels so that the angel of death might "pass over" them. I think also of the Egyptian soldiers who drowned so that we could have our miracle. And I wonder: does redemption always come at a price? If so, is it really redemption? Can we really celebrate? A Hasidic rabbi conjured in Martin Buber's dialogue, *For the Sake of Heaven,* admits that he would wade up to his neck through blood to bring about the end of days. Trotsky once said that if one can be guaranteed of redemption, all things to bring it about are justifiable. For me, the Passover *Haggadah* provides a powerful response to what can only be called overweening radicalism. Prior to blessing the second cup of wine at the *seder*, the *Haggadah* instructs us to dip a finger into our cup and remove a drop for each of the ten

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[17] Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (1906-1980), *Pachad Yitzchak (The Fear of Isaac),* volume on Chanukkah (section 3), from a posthumously published lecture.

plagues, as we recall that while they catalyzed our liberation, the same plagues also caused Egyptian suffering. We also read from a *midrash,* according to which, when the angels began to praise God for his miracles, God silenced them and began to weep, saying "the Egyptians are my children, too."[18]

That the holy one cries at the very moment in which God's powerful hand is most manifest in the world's affairs testifies that even the creator of the world does not enjoy perfect peace and is not exempt from the ethical dilemma. Indeed, like the *angelus novus* in Klee's painting and Benjamin's commentary, God must be cock-eyed.

We must work to build a better world, all while knowing that our constructive and inspired labor is not without its destructiveness, too. The ancient Greeks used the same word – pharmakon – for both medicine and poison. When Gandhi and his followers fasted and boycotted for an independent India, as Reinhold Niebuhr highlights in *Moral Man and Immoral Society,* their actions caused factories in Birmingham and Manchester to lay-off thousands. Can we ever be certain about our beliefs and actions? As Hannah Arendt wrote during the Eichmann trial, one who cannot judge is lost. We need to summon some degree of certainty to judge. But, at the same time, whenever we take a stand for something or someone, we are also taking a stand *against* something or someone, and therefore always causing hurt by our actions. What then, are we to do?

Recognizing our limitations without accepting our imperfections, which is what Moses does, we must love. Only by loving do we summon the courage to act, to enter into worlds with others, to seek harmony amid pandemonium, and to find humanity amid what Arendt calls "the holes of oblivion." Only by loving did Abraham bargain with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, extracting the pledge that they should be saved for ten righteous souls. When it

[18] *Midrash Exodus Rabbah,* 23:7

comes to particular questions – whether we should bail out irresponsible companies, whose bankruptcy would cause thousands of employees to lose their jobs; or whether we should strike at terrorists in their homes; or whether we should spend scarce resources to stop the spread of AIDS in Uganda or to serve soup and provide shelter to homeless children in the Bronx – in the end, we must respond. Yet when we admit that the choice is difficult, when we consider the moral input of others, and when we turn our hearts toward each possibility, we are acting ethically. If with humility we heed our duty as cock-eyed angels, then we shall take flight, not away from the world, but irresistibly into the future.