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1

**What Would Satan Do?
Rethinking the Devil's Place in Our Ethics**

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He was told: “Bow down!” He said, “[to] no other!” He was asked, “Even if you receive my curse?” He said, “It doesn’t matter. I have no way to an other-than-you. I am an abject lover.”

- Abū al-Mughīth Husayn Mansūr al-Hallāj. *Kitab al Tawasin, The Ta-Sin of Before Endless-Time and Equivocation*, 9.

The Devil has been known by many names across many cultures: *ha-Satan*, *al-Shaitan*,¹ *Satanás*, *Lucifer*, *Beelzebub*, to mention a few. As the so-called “Accuser” or “Adversary” of man, this Scriptural character has most often been cast as the avowed enemy of God, the being whose sole purpose is one of utter opposition. The Devil, as he is commonly understood in the Judeo-Christian context, exists only to contradict, to dissent, to resist. He is, in brief, viewed most frequently as the cosmic byword of antagonism, as a theodicean point of reference, as the *anti-God*. He is Job’s Detractor, the Serpent in the Garden, the Tempter of Christ. He is, as Dmitri somberly observes in *The Brothers Karamazov*, a seasoned veteran in the timeless war for men’s souls.² Empowered by believers of the past, the Devil still enjoys a remarkable grip on our collective consciousness today. But is there an alternative way to approach this figure about whom we presume so much? And what significance would this new understanding of the Devil have for the ways in which we think about ethics?

It may seem clichéd to begin an examination of ethics’ place in modern society with a consideration of the Devil, a being who for many captures the heartache and hardship of humanity in a single word. Admittedly, the Satan of the Judeo-Christian tradition is symptomatic of our instinctual longing to see the world in terms of black and white, to divide human experience into the reassuringly simple categories of Good and Evil. Our ability to think

¹ It is worth noting that both the Hebrew and Arabic variants of the Devil’s name share the same Semitic root – *shin / tet / nun* – a linguistic nucleus that implies a sort of intrinsic hostility or rivalry. The Greek διάβολος, the root of our own word *Devil*, evokes similar connotations.

² F. Dostoevsky, Book III, *The Sensualists*, Chp. 3: *The Confession of a Passionate Heart*, 1984.

ethically has, in a way, been made less problematic by the Devil's role as our philosophical scapegoat.³ The concept of such a being is deeply intertwined with the history of our struggle to account for the presence of Evil in a universe that God saw as fundamentally good upon Creation.⁴

Can we be as certain of the presence of Good as we are of the presence of Evil? Ancient and modern theodicies aside, even a cursory glance across today's headlines obliges us to doubt the candor of the heavenly Creator who was once so quick to applaud His own handiwork. Unending violence, acts of terrorism, illegitimate warfare, genocide and other unspeakable crimes thrust upon us the very cumbersome, ethical duty of asking if Creation truly is— as the divine voice so bluntly put it at the beginning of time— *good*. Rather than wonder if the God of Genesis was wrong, it is has proven easier for us to assume that the Evil we encounter in the world is the work of another, more sinister force.

This timeless struggle with the concept of Satan, the tension presented by the idea of an inherently corruptive power at once part of and opposed to the ongoing work of Creation, has exercised our greatest and most creative minds. Evil, as Gottfried Leibniz so beautifully put it, cries out from the darkest corners of the universe, begging us, its victims, for philosophical justification.⁵ Centuries earlier, King Solomon, the legendary biblical figure renowned for his transcendent wisdom and divine understanding, had offered the archetypal theodicy when he declared that “God created man incorruptible, and to the image of his own likeness he made him.

³ The term *scapegoat* comes to us from the rituals associated with the Day of Atonement as they are described in the Book of Leviticus. The scapegoat was one of two sacrificial animals associated with the ceremony, driven off into the wilderness by the Jewish people bearing “all their iniquities unto a Land not inhabited” (16:22).

⁴ The Hebrew expression for *good* first employed in Genesis 1:3 is טוב or *tobh*, a word that conveys the sense of having a proper disposition, orientation or purpose.

⁵ *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*, 1999, p. 395.

/ But by the envy of the devil, death came into the world.”⁶ These few lines of poetry contain the traditional roles assumed by humanity and the Devil in our collective anthropology. Created blameless, we did not fall from Paradise by our own fault, but by the fault of another. Indeed it is neither us nor our forebears who are to blame, but an *Other*, the “infernal serpent . . . whose guile, / Stirr'd up with envy and revenge, deceived / The mother of mankind.”⁷

Still, we suffer. The sanctuary of Eden, the great moral consolation of our original virtue, has been lost forever. Yet we manage to find some degree of relief from this terrible reality in the exculpation, the barefaced externalization of guilt it implies. We wandered from the true path because we were led astray; we wander still because we cannot help but do so. We lie, we cheat, we kill, we maim, we pervert, we hate, but if the Devil is truly in the details then the burden of responsibility is never ours alone to bear.⁸ We will continue to view ourselves as the victims of cosmic deceit, the heroes of our own primordial tragedy, consigned to our fate from the moment the curtain was raised. No matter our failures or our shortcomings, no matter what crimes we find ourselves capable of committing, we will always mourn the loss of our first innocence with protest on our lips until the very end: “It was not my fault.”

And yet whether one chooses to peruse the Jewish Canon or Twain, the Christian Bible or Milton, the Devil himself cuts an equally tragic figure. Those whose lives have been steeped in these traditions are well acquainted with the story of Lucifer’s rebellion and subsequent fall from grace, a defeat made all the more bitter by the splendor of his original station, a loss that Isaiah

⁶ Book of Wisdom 2:23-4.

⁷ J. Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Book I, l. 34), 1833.

⁸ Genesis 3 famously describes Adam and Eve’s attempts to evade responsibility for disobeying God’s command not to eat of the forbidden fruit. But given that the deity punishes the Serpent as well as Adam and Eve, it appears as though He holds the Devil at least partly accountable for the Fall of mankind.

compared to a star's inglorious collision with earth.⁹ But such a story teaches us nothing that we could not learn from human experience: those who sin, like Lucifer did in his attempt to depose God, must be made to suffer the consequences. Although familiar, this particular image of the Devil offers little insight into the difficulties of our own ethical decision-making.

Perhaps less well known to us but more helpful is the story of Iblis, the Satanic figure of Islamic theology. In the Qur'an we find tales of this Devil not unlike those to which Jews and Christians have become so accustomed. There is of course an account of man's first sin, complete with an Adam, an Eve and a devious Serpent, but the Muslim holy book also offers a unique perspective on the relationship of man, his Creator and his eternal nemesis. In one specific narrative we find God, having sculpted Adam from clay, proudly displaying his creation to His celestial entourage. The deity bids the angels and jinn, two separate strata of sentient creatures, to bow before the earthen man, establishing forevermore the superiority of humankind over all created beings. Only one angel, Iblis, refuses to show deference to Adam, citing his own elemental superiority—being born from smokeless fire rather than from clay—as the reason for his repudiation of the divine command. Angered by such arrogance, God casts Iblis, the sole transgressor, out of Paradise.¹⁰

It is here that the Islamic narrative begins to mirror the inherently antagonistic image of the Devil bequeathed to us by the Judeo-Christian legacy. His heavenly favor lost forever, Iblis vows to subvert the moral sensibilities of the very race whose creation led to his downfall. Despite this self-imposed malevolence, there are those who hesitate to condemn Iblis as the embodiment of great cosmic Evil. Given that the pride he demonstrated is considered diametrically opposed to the ultimate goal of the spiritual life—namely, reunion with God—one

⁹ Isaiah 14:12-7.

¹⁰ Qur'an, Surah 7.

would mark Iblis an unlikely candidate for mystical admiration. Interestingly, however, for some he is just that.

According to the unorthodox tenth century teacher Mansūr al-Hallāj,¹¹ Iblis is to be considered the only true abject lover of God. His refusal to bow¹² before Adam results not from any sense of inner conceit, but rather from his absolute incapability to love and worship any other being but God Himself. Even so, obeying this sincere monotheistic impulse entails disobeying God's immutable command to bow before His creation. In spite of his superior faithfulness Iblis *must be cursed*, but not before he is able to pledge eternal devotion to his Beloved. Hallāj imagines a lyrically poignant exchange following Iblis' refusal to comply, in which the angel describes with calm dignity the impossibility of his predicament, the degree of intimacy he shares with his Beloved as well as his ultimate inability to please Him:

A moment with you would be enough to justify my pride and lording-it-over (tajabbur). So how much more am I justified when I have passed the ages with you? (7:11) 'I am better than him' because of my priority in service. There is not in the two creations anyone more knowing of you than I. I have a will in you and you have a will in me. Your will in me is prior and my will in you is prior. If I bow before an other-than-you or do not bow, I must return to my origin, for (7:11) 'you have created me from fire.' Fire returns to fire.

Iblis is literally the only being that understands the complete transcendence of his Lord. He is the only creature who realizes that in bowing before Adam he would violate such an understanding, but that in also failing to bow he would violate the divine will. Unable to resolve this dilemma, Iblis accepts the cost of his fidelity, abandoning the sweet proximity of his Beloved for the fires of hell.

¹¹ Considered a social revolutionary by some and a rabble-rousing apostate by others, Hallāj and his only extant work, the *Tawasin*, are exceptional in that they continue to spark controversy among Muslims even today.

¹² The word used here for *bow* translates from the Arabic root *s / j / d*, suggestive of the rhythmic movements of formal Islamic prayer, or *salat*. My thanks to Michael A. Sells for this insight as well as others regarding Hallāj's controversial theological concepts (*Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings*, 1996).

This re-imagining of the Devil figure, albeit from just one unorthodox mind from just one religious tradition, contains within it a spark that ignites crucial ethical debate. Iblis' ultimate decision, while the best available, resulted in his own condemnation. With nothing else to give, Iblis chose to give himself. As readers we are left to wonder what we can garner from such a narrative and, furthermore, how we can square this more nuanced portrait of the Devil with our well-worn ideas of Good and Evil.

Reflecting upon the circumstances of Iblis' situation and the impact of a single, dissenting voice ringing out against the backdrop of complacency, one finds oneself seeking out parallels in our own human history, in our own struggles to identify and resolve ethical dilemmas. From among the world's collective triumphs and tragedies emerge countless examples of similar situations, where man is forced to make decisions in the midst of moral ambiguity. In particular, history presents an example of two young women who, when faced with very similar choices, reacted in very dissimilar ways. Sophie Scholl and Traudl Junge never met, but their stories converge at a single point in time. One, like Iblis, chose to give herself over to a larger ideal, while the other, like an unthinking angel, chose to bow without question.

On a cold February evening in 1943, in depths of the Second World War, a young woman by the name of Sophie Scholl, her brother and a mutual acquaintance were found guilty of treason by Nazi officials for their involvement in *die Weiße Rose*, a nonviolent resistance movement founded only a year earlier. Despite her imminent death, Sophie's final statement to the Gestapo interrogating her reflected a noble desire to rouse Germany from its slumber of genocidal complicity: "What does my death matter, if through us thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?"¹³ Shortly after uttering these impassioned words, Sophie and

¹³ Inge Scholl and Dorothee Sölle, *The White Rose: Munich, 1942-1943*, 1983, p. 56.

her fellow revolutionaries were led to the scaffold, where they were summarily guillotined. She was twenty-one years old.

In that very same year Traudl Junge arrived in Berlin. Twenty-one years old and unconcerned with the War raging around her, she gained a prestigious position in the Reich Chancellery as a clerical assistant. In just a few weeks, however, Traudl was appointed Secretary to the Führer, one of the closest administrative positions to the leader of Nazi Germany. Willfully unaware of the carnage and despair Hitler was sowing in Europe, Traudl held the position until May of 1945, when the invading Red Army forced her to flee the Führerbunker. Due to her young age, Traudl was pardoned by the occupying powers but her remorse for her involvement in the regime that murdered millions never left her, not even in the last days of her life. Traudl Junge died in February of 2002, eaten up with guilt, exhausted by the trials of self-confrontation she herself described.¹⁴ She was eighty-one years old.

Sophie, it seems, never came to regret her decision; Traudl forever lived in the shadow of her own. If we could feel justified in extracting one strand of meaning from the intertwined lives of these two women, it would be the tragic distance that yawns between the choices we face. It would be that inhumanity never lurks far behind indifference. It would be the self-disclosure that we – like Iblis – are far more than the sum total of our strengths and our weaknesses, that we *are* our decisions, that we must own the consequences our choices, that we must act deliberately and deal fairly with one another.

It is rare indeed for one to come into contact with a regime so indescribably murderous as the one that gripped Germany from 1933 until 1945. And yet it remains commonplace to come across societies that have turned themselves away from the spectacle of suffering, pockets of

¹⁴ Traudl's life and struggles with depression are chronicled in the largely autobiographical work *Until the Final Hour: Hitler's Last Secretary*, published in 2002.

callousness where irresponsible leaders preside over an unresponsive public. As divisive issues like healthcare reform threaten to fracture American political life, we are reminded of the Evils taking place within our own borders, of our continued failure to reconcile individual interest with social responsibility. Timeless dilemmas are given new light in this latest era of moral uncertainty, yet there can be no easy answers to such questions when reasonable, even necessary sacrifice proves difficult to undertake.

Although Scriptural narratives seldom carry much weight in today's skeptical world, the lessons we have drawn from them across the ages continue to impact how we choose to cope with the growing ambiguities of modern ethics. While it is true that some among us no longer believe in Adam, Eve, or even Satan, the moral paradigm that emerges from our classic understanding of the Devil and the role of Evil in the cosmos can only poison the way we think about our ethical responsibility.

Can the Devil really speak for the crimes of mankind any longer? Should he have to? Toward the end of one of his lesser known works, *The Duchess of Padua*, Oscar Wilde's titular character rejects the notion that Satan must be made to answer for our woes, exclaiming that we "are each our own devil, and we make this world our hell."¹⁵ It is this more candid internalization of the Evil so often attributed to the Devil that proves most useful in redefining his ultimate place in our ethical thinking.

When we are the heirs to a world broken beyond all hope of repair then we are as a consequence divested of all accountability to it. What real meaning could global miseries like mass starvation, human trafficking, forced migration and endemic disease have if they are cheapened, made less sinister and less gratuitous, simply because we choose to view them as the

¹⁵ Act IV, Scene I. Here the Duchess refuses absolution for her sins, defending the agency of her decision to murder her husband over and against the manipulation of supernatural forces.

Devil's work or, if we prefer more neutral terms, *necessary* Evils? Through this cloistered way of viewing the world we can only retreat from it and, in setting aside its troubles, redirect our sympathies inwardly, away from the very real plight of the Other and toward the Self.

In the face of such profound and systemic suffering we cannot sensibly – and, moreover, ethically – rest so assured of our blamelessness. Much in the same way, we cannot so easily disown the world for the sake of emotional security. We cannot, like the Christian monastics and the Jewish Essenes of the past, put Evil from our sight and pour out into the deserts of insensitivity, awaiting the heavenly conqueror promised to bring about the end of the world as we know it, along with Evil itself. As astronomer and humanist Carl Sagan once so eloquently asked, what if help, be it divine or otherwise, is not so forthcoming? What if we, but minor players on the cosmic stage, insignificant beings eking out an existence on “a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam,” are forever left alone with the magnitude of our sins? As broken and as reeling as it is, this is our only world; as brief and as fleeting as it is, this is our only life. And as desperate and as discouraging as it may seem, this is where we must make our stand.¹⁶

We wonder – perhaps understandably – if it is possible to be truly just in a society where we feel as trapped as Iblis was by our noble impulses, where it seems that in order to provide for the many, we must deprive the few. At times like these, when our ethical concerns grow too complex, too inconvenient, we tend to compartmentalize our lives and become, to use Albert Schweitzer's fitting metaphor, like the farmer who could mow down a thousand flowers in his meadow in order to feed his livestock, yet could not bring himself to destroy a single blossom by the roadside.¹⁷ But how else can we navigate this life of ethical ambiguity, where in order to

¹⁶ “You Are Here,” *Pale Blue Dot*, 1997.

¹⁷ *The Teaching of Reverence for Life*, 1965, p. 45.

give to the one we must take from the other? Is such hollow altruism desirable, even realistic in this context? Is there anything we can really do to overcome such pitfalls, anything we can give that is so transformative as to bring about change in a world made indifferent to suffering?

The answer is beautiful in its simplicity: we could give ourselves. A point of view merely makes us spectators, but personal, active engagement with the ethical difficulties of the world affords us the possibility of rising above the limits of the Self, allowing us to intervene, to affect, to be affected, to be, in a sense, open to all worlds and exposed to every possibility. When reactionary politics, unrestrained intellectualism and entrenched prejudices stand in the way of our ability to reason and thereby relate to our fellow human beings, we must act. When poverty, hunger, and disease destabilize populations, claim the lives of millions and expose the inadequacy of our humanitarian efforts, we must act. When religion, fear and misconception are made slaves to those who would distort, who would hate and who would shed innocent blood, we must act. We must act – not recklessly or with abandon – but as Iblis might, with understanding and conviction, even if it means defying convention. In the end we must act because, for all our ethical reservations, to do otherwise would be to give our consent, to allow our moral standards to be dictated by sheer expediency, to add the weight of our complicity to the burden shouldered by mankind.

We must realize that Evil is not some supernatural force with which we must reckon. It is not the Devil's work, but our own. It is an internal disposition, a very human defect buried deeply within ourselves, always threatening to rear its ugly head when the time for action is at hand. When contemplating the Evils wrought by mankind, Edward Ericson found himself confessing that the "cosmos is neither moral nor immoral, only people are. He who would move

the world must first move himself.”¹⁸ If we too deem it appropriate to reject the dichotomy of Good and Evil that has become so engrained in our ethical thinking, we must also come to grips with the reality that it is with us that moral responsibility lay, that it is we who have the power to damn and to save, to destroy and to create.

The Devil can only exist so long as we choose to shelter him in our failure to love, to act and to intervene. The Devil is silence, a still heart, a quiet soul and a will bent inwardly. The Devil is reluctance, disinclination and unwillingness. He will cease to be when we realize that in this world there can be no salvation or damnation, no Good or Evil beyond our own making. He will cease to be when we, like Iblis, come to the realization that all we do in this life has meaning, that even the simplest of acts can reflect our entire being. And when it all seems too much, when the answer seems too hidden, too obscured and we lose confidence in our abilities, we would do well to remember Iblis’ parting declaration to his God: “In love I am triumphant. How not?”¹⁹

¹⁸ Included in his study *Solzhenitsyn: the Moral Vision*, published in 1980. When confronted by the life and works of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Ericson could not help but marvel at the ability of a single man to oppose so fearlessly one of the great historic Evils of the 20th century.

¹⁹ Sells, p. 276.

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