

## RULE 7

# PURSUE WHAT IS MEANINGFUL (NOT WHAT IS EXPEDIENT)

Reproduced under the s41 of the Copyright Act (Cth) 1968  
for the purposes of review and criticism by members of PhiloSophia  
NOT TO BE REDISTRIBUTED OR PUBLISHED OR MADE AVAILABLE GENERALLY

### GET WHILE THE GETTING'S GOOD

Life is suffering. That's clear. There is no more basic, irrefutable truth. It's basically what God tells Adam and Eve, immediately before he kicks them out of Paradise.

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;

Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;

By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” (Genesis 3:16-19. KJV)

What in the world should be done about that?

The simplest, most obvious, and most direct answer? Pursue pleasure. Follow your impulses. Live for the moment. Do what's expedient. Lie, cheat, steal, deceive, manipulate—but don't get caught. In an ultimately meaningless universe, what possible difference could it make? And this is by no means a new idea. The fact of life's tragedy and the suffering that is part of it has been used to justify the pursuit of immediate selfish gratification for a very long time.

Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a man comes to his end, and no one has been known to return from Hades.

Because we were born by mere chance, and hereafter we shall be as though we had never been; because the breath in our nostrils is smoke, and reason is a spark kindled by the beating of our hearts.

When it is extinguished, the body will turn to ashes, and the spirit will dissolve like empty air. Our name will be forgotten in time and no one will remember our works; our life will pass away like the traces of a cloud, and be scattered like mist that is chased by the rays of the sun and overcome by its heat.

For our allotted time is the passing of a shadow, and there is no return from our death, because it is sealed up and no one turns back.

Come, therefore, let us enjoy the good things that exist, and make use of the creation to the full as in youth.

Let us take our fill of costly wine and perfumes, and let no flower of spring pass by us.

Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they wither.

Let none of us fail to share in our revelry, everywhere let us leave signs of enjoyment, because this is our portion, and this our lot.

Let us oppress the righteous poor man; let us not spare the widow nor regard the gray hairs of the aged.

But let our might be our law of right, for what is weak proves itself to be useless. (Wisdom 2:1-11, RSV).

The pleasure of expediency may be fleeting, but it's pleasure, nonetheless, and that's something to stack up against the terror and pain of existence. Every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost, as the old proverb has it. Why not simply take everything you can get, whenever the opportunity arises? Why not determine to live in that manner?

Or is there an alternative, more powerful and more compelling?

Our ancestors worked out very sophisticated answers to such questions, but we still don't understand them very well. This is because they are in large part still implicit—manifest primarily in ritual and myth and, as of yet, incompletely articulated. We act them out and represent them in stories, but we're not yet wise enough to formulate them explicitly. We're still chimps in a troupe, or wolves in a pack. We know how to behave. We know who's who, and why. We've learned that through experience. Our knowledge has been shaped by our interaction with others. We've established predictable routines and patterns of behavior—but we don't really understand them, or know where they originated. They've evolved over great expanses of time. No one was formulating them explicitly (at least not in the dimmest reaches of the past), even though we've been telling each other how to act forever. One day, however, not so long ago, we woke up. We were already doing, but we started *noticing* what we were doing. We started using our bodies as devices to represent their own actions. We started imitating and dramatizing. We invented ritual. We started acting out our own experiences. Then we started to tell stories. We coded our observations of our own drama in these stories. In this manner, the information that was first only embedded in our behaviour became represented in our stories. But we didn't and still don't understand what it all means.

The Biblical narrative of Paradise and the Fall is one such story, fabricated by our collective imagination, working over the centuries. It provides a profound account of the nature of Being, and points the way to a mode of conceptualization and action well-matched to that nature. In the Garden of Eden, prior to the dawn of self-consciousness—so goes the story—human beings were sinless. Our primordial parents, Adam and Eve, walked with God. Then, tempted by the snake, the first couple ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, discovered Death and vulnerability, and turned away from God. Mankind was exiled from Paradise, and began its effortful mortal existence. The idea of sacrifice enters soon afterward, beginning with the account of Cain and Abel, and developing through the Abrahamic adventures and the Exodus: After much contemplation, struggling humanity learns that God's favour could be gained, and his wrath averted, through proper sacrifice—and, also, that bloody murder might be motivated among those unwilling or unable to succeed in this manner.

## **The Delay of Gratification**

When engaging in sacrifice, our forefathers began to act out what would be considered a proposition, if it were stated in words: *that something better might be attained in the future by giving up something of value in the present*. Recall, if you will, that the necessity for work is one of the curses placed by God upon Adam and his descendants in consequence of Original Sin. Adam's waking to the fundamental constraints of his Being—his vulnerability, his eventual death—is equivalent to his discovery of the future. The future: that's where you go to die (hopefully, not too soon). Your demise might be staved off through work; through the sacrifice of the *now* to gain benefit *later*. It is for this reason—among others, no doubt—that the concept of sacrifice is introduced in the Biblical chapter immediately following the drama of the Fall. There is little difference between sacrifice and work. They are also both uniquely human. Sometimes, animals act as if they are working, but they are really only following the dictates of

their nature. Beavers build dams. They do so because they are beavers, and beavers build dams. They don't think, "Yeah, but I'd rather be on a beach in Mexico with my girlfriend," while they're doing it.

Prosaically, such sacrifice—work—is delay of gratification, but that's a very mundane phrase to describe something of such profound significance. The discovery that gratification could be delayed was simultaneously the discovery of time and, with it, causality (at least the causal force of voluntary human action). Long ago, in the dim mists of time, *we began to realize that reality was structured as if it could be bargained with*. We learned that behaving properly now, in the present—regulating our impulses, considering the plight of others—could bring rewards in the future, in a time and place that did not yet exist. We began to inhibit, control and organize our immediate impulses, so that we could stop interfering with other people and our future selves. Doing so was indistinguishable from organizing society: the discovery of the causal relationship between our efforts today and the quality of tomorrow motivated the social contract—the organization that enables today's work to be stored, reliably (mostly in the form of promises from others).

Understanding is often acted out before it can be articulated (just as a child acts out what it means to be "mother" or "father" before being able to give a spoken account of what those roles mean).<sup>116</sup> The act of making a ritual sacrifice to God was an early and sophisticated enactment of the idea of the usefulness of delay. There is a long conceptual journey between merely feasting hungrily and learning to set aside some extra meat, smoked by the fire, for the end of the day, or for someone who isn't present. It takes a long time to learn to keep anything later for yourself, or to share it with someone else (and those are very much the same thing as, in the former case, you are sharing with your future self). It is much easier and far more likely to selfishly and immediately wolf down everything in sight. There are similar long journeys between every leap in sophistication with regard to delay and its conceptualization: short-term sharing, storing away for the future, representation of that storage in the form of records and, later, in the form of currency—and, ultimately, the saving of money in a bank or other social institution. Some conceptualizations had to serve as intermediaries, or the full range of our practices and ideas surrounding sacrifice and work and their representation could have never emerged.

Our ancestors acted out a drama, a fiction: they personified the force that governs fate as a spirit that can be bargained with, traded with, as if it were another human being. And the amazing thing is *that it worked*. This was in part because the future is largely composed of other human beings—often precisely those who have watched and evaluated and appraised the tiniest details of your past behavior. It's not very far from that to God, sitting above on high, tracking your every move and writing it down for further reference in a big book. Here's a productive symbolic idea: *the future is a judgmental father*. That's a good start. But two additional, archetypal, foundational questions arose, because of the discovery of sacrifice, of work. Both have to do with the ultimate extension of the logic of work—which is *sacrifice now, to gain later*.

First question. What must be sacrificed? Small sacrifices may be sufficient to solve small, singular problems. But it is possible that larger, more comprehensive sacrifices might solve an

array of large and complex problems, all at the same time. That's harder, but it might be better. Adapting to the necessary discipline of medical school will, for example, fatally interfere with the licentious lifestyle of a hardcore undergraduate party animal. Giving that up is a sacrifice. But a physician can—to paraphrase George W.—really put food on his family. That's a lot of trouble dispensed with, over a very long period of time. So, sacrifices are necessary, to improve the future, and larger sacrifices can be better.

Second question (set of related questions, really): We've already established the basic principle—*sacrifice will improve the future*. But a principle, once established, has to be fleshed out. Its full extension or significance has to be understood. What is implied by the idea that sacrifice will improve the future, in the most extreme and final of cases? Where does that basic principle find its limits? We must ask, to begin, “What would be the largest, most effective—most pleasing—of all possible sacrifices?” and then “How good might the best possible future be, if the most effective sacrifice could be made?”

The biblical story of Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve's sons, immediately follows the story of the expulsion from Paradise, as mentioned previously. Cain and Abel are really the first humans, since their parents were made directly by God, and not born in the standard manner. Cain and Abel live *in history*, not in Eden. They must work. They must make sacrifices, to please God, and they do so, with altar and proper ritual. But things get complicated. Abel's offerings please God, but Cain's do not. Abel is rewarded, many times over, but Cain is not. It's not precisely clear why (although the text strongly hints that Cain's heart is just not in it). Maybe the quality of what Cain put forward was low. Maybe his spirit was begrudging. Or maybe God was vexed, for some secret reasons of His own. And all of this is realistic, including the text's vagueness of explanation. Not all sacrifices are of equal quality. Furthermore, it often appears that sacrifices of apparently high quality are not rewarded with a better future—and it's not clear why. Why isn't God happy? What would have to change to make Him so? Those are difficult questions—and everyone asks them, all the time, even if they don't notice.

Asking such questions is indistinguishable from thinking.

The realization that pleasure could be usefully forestalled dawned on us with great difficulty. It runs absolutely contrary to our ancient, fundamental animal instincts, which demand immediate satisfaction (particularly under conditions of deprivation, which are both inevitable and commonplace). And, to complicate the matter, such delay only becomes useful when civilization has stabilized itself enough to guarantee the existence of the delayed reward, in the future. If everything you save will be destroyed or, worse, stolen, there is no point in saving. It is for this reason that a wolf will down twenty pounds of raw meat in a single meal. He isn't thinking, “Man, I hate it when I binge. I should save some of this for next week.” So how was it that those two impossible and necessarily simultaneous accomplishments (delay and the stabilization of society into the future) could possibly have manifested themselves?

Here is a developmental progression, from animal to human. It's wrong, no doubt, in the details. But it's sufficiently correct, for our purposes, in theme: First, there is excess food. Large carcasses, mammoths or other massive herbivores, might provide that. (We ate a lot of mammoths. Maybe all of them.) After a kill, with a large animal, there is some left for later. That's accidental, at first—but, eventually, the utility of “for later” starts to be appreciated.

Some provisional notion of sacrifice develops at the same time: “If I leave some, even if I want it now, I won’t have to be hungry later.” That provisional notion develops, to the next level (“If I leave some for later, I won’t have to go hungry, and neither will those I care for”) and then to the next (“I can’t possibly eat all of this mammoth, but I can’t store the rest for too long, either. Maybe I should feed some to other people. Maybe they’ll remember, and feed me some of their mammoth, when they have some and I have none. Then I’ll get some mammoth now, *and* some mammoth later. That’s a good deal. And maybe those I’m sharing with will come to trust me, more generally. Maybe then we could trade forever”). In such a manner, “mammoth” becomes “future mammoth,” and “future mammoth” becomes “personal reputation.” That’s the emergence of the social contract.

To share does not mean to give away something you value, and get nothing back. That is instead only what every child who refuses to share fears it means. To share means, properly, to initiate the process of trade. A child who can’t share—who can’t trade—can’t have any friends, because having friends is a form of trade. Benjamin Franklin once suggested that a newcomer to a neighbourhood ask a new neighbour to do him or her a favour, citing an old maxim: *He that has once done you a kindness will be more ready to do you another than he whom you yourself have obliged.*<sup>117</sup> In Franklin’s opinion, asking someone for something (not too extreme, obviously) was the most useful and immediate invitation to social interaction. Such asking on the part of the newcomer provided the neighbour with an opportunity to show him- or herself as a good person, at first encounter. It also meant that the latter could now ask the former for a favour, in return, because of the debt incurred, increasingly their mutual familiarity and trust. In that manner both parties could overcome their natural hesitancy and mutual fear of the stranger.

It is better to have something than nothing. It’s better yet to share generously the something you have. It’s even better than that, however, to become widely known for generous sharing. That’s something that lasts. That’s something that’s reliable. And, at this point of abstraction, we can observe how the groundwork for the conceptions *reliable*, *honest* and *generous* has been laid. The basis for an articulated morality has been put in place. The productive, truthful sharer is the prototype for the good citizen, and the good man. We can see in this manner how from the simple notion that “leftovers are a good idea” the highest moral principles might emerge.

It’s as if something like the following happened as humanity developed. First were the endless tens or hundreds of thousands of years prior to the emergence of written history and drama. During this time, the twin practices of delay and exchange begin to emerge, slowly and painfully. Then they become represented, in metaphorical abstraction, as rituals and tales of sacrifice, told in a manner such as this: “It’s *as if* there is a powerful Figure in the Sky, who sees all, and is judging you. Giving up something you value seems to make Him happy—and you want to make Him happy, because all Hell breaks loose if you don’t. So, practise sacrificing, and sharing, until you become expert at it, and things will go well for you.”<sup>fn1</sup> No one said any of this, at least not so plainly and directly. But it was implicit in the practice and then in the stories.

*Action* came first (as it had to, as the animals we once were could act but could not think). *Implicit, unrecognized value came first* (as the actions that preceded thought embodied value, but did not make that value explicit). People watched the successful succeed and the

unsuccessful fail for thousands and thousands of years. We thought it over, and drew a conclusion: *The successful among us delay gratification. The successful among us bargain with the future.* A great idea begins to emerge, taking ever-more-clearly-articulated form, in ever more-clearly-articulated stories: What's the difference between the successful and the unsuccessful? *The successful sacrifice.* Things get better, as the successful practise their sacrifices. The questions become increasingly precise and, simultaneously, broader: What is the greatest possible sacrifice? For the greatest possible good? And the answers become increasingly deeper and profound.

The God of Western tradition, like so many gods, requires sacrifice. We have already examined why. But sometimes He goes even further. He demands not only sacrifice, but the sacrifice of precisely what is loved best. This is most starkly portrayed (and most confusingly evident) in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham, beloved of God, long wanted a son—and God promised him exactly that, after many delays, and under the apparently impossible conditions of old age and a long-barren wife. But not so long afterward, when the miraculously-borne Isaac is still a child, God turns around and in unreasonable and apparently barbaric fashion demands that His faithful servant offer his son as a sacrifice. The story ends happily: God sends an angel to stay Abraham's obedient hand and accepts a ram in Isaac's stead. That's a good thing, but it doesn't really address the issue at hand: Why is God's going further necessary? Why does He—why does life—impose such demands?

We'll start our analysis with a truism, stark, self-evident and understated: *Sometimes things do not go well.* That seems to have much to do with the terrible nature of the world, with its plagues and famines and tyrannies and betrayals. But here's the rub: *sometimes, when things are not going well, it's not the world that's the cause. The cause is instead that which is currently most valued, subjectively and personally.* Why? Because the world is revealed, to an indeterminate degree, through the template of your values (much more on this in Rule 10). If the world you are seeing is not the world you want, therefore, it's time to examine your values. It's time to rid yourself of your current presuppositions. It's time to let go. It might even be time to sacrifice what you love best, so that you can become who you might become, instead of staying who you are.

There's an old and possibly apocryphal story about how to catch a monkey that illustrates this set of ideas very well. First, you must find a large, narrow-necked jar, just barely wide enough in diameter at the top for a monkey to put its hand inside. Then you must fill the jar part way with rocks, so it is too heavy for a monkey to carry. Then you must scatter some treats, attractive to monkeys, near the jar, to attract one, and put some more inside the jar. A monkey will come along, reach into the narrow opening, and grab while the grabbing's good. But now he won't be able to extract his fist, now full of treats, from the too-narrow opening of the jar. Not without unclenching his hand. Not without relinquishing what he already has. And that's just what he won't do. The monkey-catcher can just walk over to the jar and pick up the monkey. The animal will not sacrifice the part to preserve the whole.

Something valuable, given up, ensures future prosperity. Something valuable, sacrificed, pleases the Lord. What is most valuable, and best sacrificed?—or, what is at least *emblematic of that?* A choice cut of meat. The best animal in a flock. A most valued possession. What's above

even that? Something intensely personal and painful to give up. That's symbolized, perhaps, in God's insistence on circumcision as part of Abraham's sacrificial routine, where the part is offered, symbolically, to redeem the whole. What's beyond that? What pertains more closely to the whole person, rather than the part? What constitutes the ultimate sacrifice—for the gain of the ultimate prize?

It's a close race between child and self. The sacrifice of the mother, offering her child to the world, is exemplified profoundly by Michelangelo's great sculpture, the *Pietà*, illustrated at the beginning of this chapter. Michelangelo crafted Mary contemplating her Son, crucified and ruined. It's *her fault*. It was through her that He entered the world and its great drama of Being. *Is it right to bring a baby into this terrible world?* Every woman asks herself that question. Some say no, and they have their reasons. Mary answers yes, voluntarily, knowing full well what's to come—as do all mothers, if they allow themselves to see. It's an act of supreme courage, when undertaken voluntarily.

In turn, Mary's son, Christ, offers Himself to God and the world, to betrayal, torture and death—to the very point of despair on the cross, where he cries out those terrible words: *my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* (Matthew 27:46). That is the archetypal story of the man who gives his all for the sake of the better—who offers up his life for the advancement of Being—who allows God's will to become manifest fully within the confines of a single, mortal life. That is the model for the honourable man. In Christ's case, however—as He sacrifices Himself—God, His Father, is simultaneously sacrificing *His* son. It is for this reason that the Christian sacrificial drama of Son and Self is archetypal. It's a story at the limit, where nothing more extreme—nothing greater—can be imagined. That's the very definition of “archetypal.” That's the core of what constitutes “religious.”

Pain and suffering define the world. Of that, there can be no doubt. Sacrifice can hold pain and suffering in abeyance, to a greater or lesser degree—and greater sacrifices can do that more effectively than lesser. Of that, there can be no doubt. Everyone holds this knowledge in their soul. Thus, the person who wishes to alleviate suffering—who wishes to rectify the flaws in Being; who wants to bring about the best of all possible futures; who wants to create Heaven on Earth—will make the greatest of sacrifices, of self and child, of everything that is loved, to live a life aimed at the Good. He will forego expediency. He will pursue the path of ultimate meaning. And he will in that manner bring salvation to the ever-desperate world.

But is such a thing even possible? Is this simply not asking too much of the individual? It's all well and good for Christ, it might be objected—but He was the veritable Son of God. But we do have other examples, some much less mythologized and archetypal. Consider, for example, the case of Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher. After a lifetime of seeking the truth and educating his countrymen, Socrates faced a trial for crimes against the city-state of Athens, his hometown. His accusers provided him with plenty of opportunity to simply leave, and avoid the trouble.<sup>118</sup> But the great sage had already considered and rejected this course of action. His companion Hermogenes observed him at this time discussing “any and every subject”<sup>119</sup> other than his trial, and asked him why he appeared so unconcerned. Socrates first answered that he had been preparing his whole life to defend himself,<sup>120</sup> but then said something more mysterious and significant: When he attempted specifically to consider strategies that would

produce acquittal “by fair means or foul”<sup>121</sup>—or even when merely considering his potential actions at the trial<sup>122</sup>—he found himself interrupted by his divine sign: his internal spirit, voice or *daemon*. Socrates discussed this voice at the trial itself.<sup>123</sup> He said that one of the factors distinguishing him from other men<sup>124</sup> was his absolute willingness to listen to its warnings—to *stop speaking* and *cease acting* when it objected. The Gods themselves had deemed him wise above other men, not least for this reason, according to the Delphic Oracle herself, held to be a reliable judge of such things.”<sup>125</sup>

Because his ever-reliable internal voice objected to fleeing (or even to defending himself) Socrates radically altered his view of the significance of his trial. He began to consider that it might be a blessing, rather than a curse. He told Hermogenes of his realization that the spirit to whom he had always listened might be offering him a way out of life, in a manner “easiest but also the least irksome to one’s friends,”<sup>126</sup> with “sound body and a spirit capable of showing kindness”<sup>127</sup> and absent the “throes of illness” and vexations of extreme old age.<sup>128</sup> Socrates’ decision to accept his fate allowed him to put away mortal terror in the face of death itself, prior to and during the trial, after the sentence was handed down,<sup>129</sup> and even later, during his execution.<sup>130</sup> He saw that his life had been so rich and full that he could let it go, gracefully. He was given the opportunity to put his affairs in order. He saw that he could escape the terrible slow degeneration of the advancing years. He came to understand all that was happening to him as a gift from the gods. He was not therefore required to defend himself against his accusers—at least not with the aim of pronouncing his innocence, and escaping his fate. Instead, he turned the tables, addressing his judges in a manner that makes the reader understand precisely why the town council wanted this man dead. Then he took his poison, like a man.

Socrates rejected expediency, and the necessity for manipulation that accompanied it. He chose instead, under the direst of conditions, to maintain his pursuit of the meaningful and the true. Twenty-five hundred years later, we remember his decision and take comfort from it. What can we learn from this? If you cease to utter falsehoods and live according to the dictates of your conscience, you can maintain your nobility, even when facing the ultimate threat; if you abide, truthfully and courageously, by the highest of ideals, you will be provided with more security and strength than will be offered by any short-sighted concentration on your own safety; if you live properly, fully, you can discover meaning so profound that it protects you even from the fear of death.

Could all that possibly be true?

## **Death, Toil and Evil**

The tragedy of self-conscious Being produces suffering, inevitable suffering. That suffering in turn motivates the desire for selfish, immediate gratification—for expediency. But sacrifice—and work—serves far more effectively than short-term impulsive pleasure at keeping suffering at bay. However, tragedy itself (conceived of as the arbitrary harshness of society and nature, set against the vulnerability of the individual) is not the only—and perhaps not even the primary—source of suffering. There is also the problem of evil to consider. The world is set hard against us, of a certainty, but man’s inhumanity to man is something even worse. Thus, the problem of



sacrifice is compounded in its complexity: it is not only privation and mortal limitation that must be addressed by work—by the willingness to offer, and to give up. It is the problem of evil as well.

Consider, once again, the story of Adam and Eve. Life becomes very hard for their children (that's us) after the fall and awakening of our archetypal parents. First is the terrible fate awaiting us in the post-Paradisal world—in the world of history. Not the least of this is what Goethe called “our creative, endless toil.”<sup>131</sup> Humans work, as we have seen. We work because we have awakened to the truth of our own vulnerability, our subjugation to disease and death, and wish to protect ourselves for as long as possible. Once we can see the future, we must prepare for it, or live in denial and terror. We therefore sacrifice the pleasures of today for the sake of a better tomorrow. But the realization of mortality and the necessity of work is not the only revelation to Adam and Eve when they eat the forbidden Fruit, wake up, and open their eyes. They were also granted (or cursed by) the knowledge of Good and Evil.

It took me decades to understand what that means (to understand even part of what that means). It's this: once you become consciously aware that you, yourself, are vulnerable, you understand the nature of human vulnerability, in general. You understand what it's like to be fearful, and angry, and resentful, and bitter. You understand what pain means. And once you truly understand such feelings in yourself, and how they're produced, *you understand how to produce them in others*. It is in this manner that the self-conscious beings that we are become voluntarily and exquisitely capable of tormenting others (and ourselves, of course—but it's the others we are concerned about right now). We see the consequences of this new knowledge manifest themselves when we meet Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve.

By the time of their appearance, mankind has learned to make sacrifices to God. On altars of stone, designed for that purpose, a communal ritual is performed: the immolation of something valuable, a choice animal or portion thereof, and its transformation through fire to the smoke (to the spirit) that rises to Heaven above. In this manner, the idea of delay is dramatized, so that the future might improve. Abel's sacrifices are accepted by God, and he flourishes. Cain's, however, are rejected. He becomes jealous and bitter—and it's no wonder. If someone fails and is rejected because he refused to make any sacrifices at all—well, that's at least understandable. He may still feel resentful and vengeful, but knows in his heart that he is personally to blame. That knowledge generally places a limit on his outrage. It's much worse, however, if he had actually foregone the pleasures of the moment—if he had strived and toiled and things still didn't work out—if he was rejected, despite his efforts. Then he's lost the present *and* the future. Then his work—his sacrifice—has been pointless. Under such conditions, the world darkens, and the soul rebels.

Cain is outraged by his rejection. He confronts God, accuses Him, and curses His creation. That proves to be a very poor decision. God responds, in no uncertain terms, that the fault is all with Cain—and worse: that Cain has knowingly and creatively dallied with sin,<sup>132</sup> and reaped the consequences. This is not at all what Cain wanted to hear. It's by no means an apology on God's part. Instead, it's insult, added to injury. Cain, embittered to the core by God's response, plots revenge. He defies the creator, audaciously. It's daring. Cain knows how to hurt. He's self-conscious, after all—and has become even more so, in his suffering and shame. So, he murders

Abel in cold blood. He kills his brother, his own ideal (as Abel is everything Cain wishes to be). He commits this most terrible of crimes to spite himself, all of mankind, and God Himself, all at once. He does it to wreak havoc and gain his vengeance. He does it to register his fundamental opposition to existence—to protest the intolerable vagaries of Being itself. And Cain's children—the offspring, as it were of both his body and his decision—are worse. In his existential fury, Cain kills once. Lamech, his descendant, goes much further. “I have slain a man to my wounding,” says Lamech,” and a young man to my hurt. If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold” (Genesis 4:23-24). Tubulcain, an instructor of “every artificer in brass and iron” (Genesis 4:22), is by tradition seven generations from Cain—and the first creator of weapons of war. And next, in the Genesis stories, comes the flood. The juxtaposition is by no means accidental.

*Evil enters the world with self-consciousness.* The toil with which God curses Adam—that's bad enough. The trouble in childbirth with which Eve is burdened and her consequent dependence on her husband are no trivial matters, either. They are indicative of the implicit and oft-agonizing tragedies of insufficiency, privation, brute necessity and subjugation to illness and death that simultaneously define and plague existence. Their mere factual reality is sometimes sufficient to turn even a courageous person against life. It has been my experience, however, that human beings are strong enough to tolerate the implicit tragedies of Being without faltering—without breaking or, worse, breaking bad. I have seen evidence of this repeatedly in my private life, in my work as a professor, and in my role as a clinical practitioner. Earthquakes, floods, poverty, cancer—we're tough enough to take on all of that. But human evil adds a whole new dimension of misery to the world. It is for this reason that the rise of self-consciousness and its attendant realization of mortality and knowledge of Good and Evil is presented in the early chapters of Genesis (and in the vast tradition that surrounds them) as a cataclysm of cosmic magnitude.

Conscious human malevolence can break the spirit even tragedy could not shake. I remember discovering (with her) that one of my clients had been shocked into years of serious post-traumatic stress disorder—daily physical shaking and terror, and chronic nightly insomnia—by the mere expression on her enraged, drunken boyfriend's face. His “fallen countenance” (Genesis 4:5) indicated his clear and conscious desire to do her harm. She was more naïve than she should have been, and that predisposed her to the trauma, but that's not the point: the voluntary evil we do one another can be profoundly and permanently damaging, even to the strong. And what is it, precisely, that motivates such evil?

It doesn't make itself manifest merely in consequence of the hard lot of life. It doesn't even emerge, simply, because of failure itself, or because of the disappointment and bitterness that failure often and understandably engenders. But the hard lot of life, magnified by the consequence of continually rejected sacrifices (however poorly conceptualized; however half-heartedly executed)? That will bend and twist people into the truly monstrous forms who then begin, consciously, to work evil; who then begin to generate for themselves and others little besides pain and suffering (and who do it for the sake of that pain and suffering). In that manner, a truly vicious circle takes hold: begrudging sacrifice, half-heartedly undertaken; rejection of that sacrifice by God or by reality (take your pick); angry resentment, generated by

that rejection; descent into bitterness and the desire for revenge; sacrifice undertaken even more begrudgingly, or refused altogether. And it's Hell itself that serves as the destination place of that downward spiral.

Life is indeed “nasty, brutish and short,” as the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes so memorably remarked. But man's capacity for evil makes it worse. This means that the central problem of life—the dealing with its brute facts—is not merely what and how to sacrifice to diminish suffering, but what and how to sacrifice to diminish suffering *and evil—the conscious and voluntary and vengeful source of the worst suffering*. The story of Cain and Abel is one manifestation of the archetypal tale of the hostile brothers, hero and adversary: the two elements of the individual human psyche, one aimed up, at the Good, and the other, down, at Hell itself. Abel is a hero, true: but a hero who is ultimately defeated by Cain. Abel could please God—a non-trivial and unlikely accomplishment—but he could not overcome human evil. For this reason, Abel is archetypally incomplete. Perhaps he was naive, although a vengeful brother can be inconceivably treacherous and *subtil*, like the snake in Genesis 3:1. But excuses—even reasons—even understandable reasons—don't matter; not in the final analysis. The problem of evil remained unsolved even by the divinely acceptable sacrifices of Abel. It took thousands of additional years for humanity to come up with anything else resembling a solution. The same issue emerges again, in its culminating form, the story of Christ and his temptation by Satan. But this time it's expressed more comprehensively—and the hero wins.

## **Evil, Confronted**

Jesus was led into the wilderness, according to the story, “to be tempted by the Devil” (Matthew 4:1), prior to his crucifixion. This is the story of Cain, restated abstractly. Cain is neither content nor happy, as we have seen. He's working hard, or so he thinks, but God is not pleased. Meanwhile, Abel is, by all appearances, dancing his way through life. His crops flourish. Women love him. Worst of all, he's a genuinely good man. Everyone knows it. He deserves his good fortune. All the more reason to envy and hate him. Things do not progress well for Cain, by contrast, and he broods on his misfortune, like a vulture on an egg. He strives, in his misery, to give birth to something hellish and, in doing so, enters the desert wilderness of his own mind. He obsesses over his ill fortune; his betrayal by God. He nourishes his resentment. He indulges in ever more elaborate fantasies of revenge. And as he does so, his arrogance grows to Luciferian proportions. “I'm ill-used and oppressed,” he thinks. “This is a stupid bloody planet. As far as I'm concerned, it can go to Hell.” And with that, Cain encounters Satan in the wilderness, for all intents and purposes, and falls prey to his temptations. And he does what he can to make things as bad as possible, motivated by (in John Milton's imperishable words):

*So deep a malice, to confound the Race  
Of Mankind in one Root, and Earth with Hell  
to mingle and involve—done all to spite  
the Great Creator ...*[133](#)

Cain turns to Evil to obtain what Good denied him, and he does it voluntarily, self-consciously and with malice aforethought.

Christ takes a different path. His sojourn in the desert is the dark night of the soul—a deeply human and universal human experience. It’s the journey to that place each of us goes when things fall apart, friends and family are distant, hopelessness and despair reign, and black nihilism beckons. And, let us suggest, in testament to the exactitude of the story: forty days and nights starving alone in the wilderness might take you exactly to that place. It is in such a manner that the objective and subjective worlds come crashing, synchronistically, together. Forty days is a deeply symbolic period of time, echoing the forty years the Israelites spent wandering in the desert after escaping the tyranny of Pharaoh and Egypt. Forty days is a long time in the underworld of dark assumptions, confusion and fear—long enough to journey to the very center, which is Hell itself. A journey there to see the sights can be undertaken by anyone—anyone, that is, who is willing to take the evil of self and Man with sufficient seriousness. A bit of familiarity with history can help. A sojourn through the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth century, with its concentration camps, forced labor and murderous ideological pathologies is as good a place as any to start—that, and some consideration of the fact that worst of the concentration camp guards were human, all-too-human, too. That’s all part of making the desert story real again; part of updating it, for the modern mind.

“After Auschwitz,” said Theodor Adorno, student of authoritarianism, “there should be no poetry.” He was wrong. But the poetry should be about Auschwitz. In the grim wake of the last ten decades of the previous millennium, the terrible destructiveness of man has become a problem whose seriousness self-evidently dwarfs even the problem of unredeemed suffering. And neither one of those problems is going to be solved in the absence of a solution to the other. This is where the idea of Christ’s taking on the sins of mankind as if they were His own becomes key, opening the door to deep understanding of the desert encounter with the devil himself. “*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto,*” said the Roman playwright Terence: nothing human is alien to me.

“No tree can grow to Heaven,” adds the ever-terrifying Carl Gustav Jung, psychoanalyst extraordinaire, “unless its roots reach down to Hell.”<sup>134</sup> Such a statement should give everyone who encounters it pause. There was no possibility for movement upward, in that great psychiatrist’s deeply considered opinion, without a corresponding move down. It is for this reason that enlightenment is so rare. Who is willing to do that? Do you really want to meet who’s in charge, at the very bottom of the most wicked thoughts? What did Eric Harris, mass murderer of the Columbine high school, write so incomprehensibly the very day prior to massacring his classmates? *It’s interesting, when I’m in my human form, knowing I’m going to die. Everything has a touch of triviality to it.*<sup>135</sup> Who would dare explain such a missive?—or, worse, explain it away?

In the desert, Christ encounters Satan (see Luke 4:1–13 and Matthew 4:1–11). This story has a clear psychological meaning—a metaphorical meaning—in addition to whatever else material and metaphysical alike it might signify. It means that Christ *is forever He who determines to take personal responsibility for the full depth of human depravity*. It means that Christ is eternally He who is willing to confront and deeply consider and risk the temptations posed by the most malevolent elements of human nature. It means that Christ is always he who is willing to confront evil—consciously, fully and voluntarily—in the form that dwelt simultaneously

within Him and in the world. This is nothing merely abstract (although it is abstract); nothing to be brushed over. It's no merely intellectual matter.

Soldiers who develop post-traumatic stress disorder frequently develop it not because of something they saw, but because of something they did.<sup>136</sup> There are many demons, so to speak, on the battlefield. Involvement in warfare is something that can open a gateway to Hell. Now and then something climbs through and possesses some naive farm-boy from Iowa, and he turns monstrous. He does something terrible. He rapes and kills the women and massacres the infants of My Lai. And he watches himself do it. And some dark part of him enjoys it—and that is the part that is most unforgettable. And, later, he will not know how to reconcile himself with the reality about himself and the world that was then revealed. And no wonder.

In the great and fundamental myths of ancient Egypt, the god Horus—often regarded as a precursor to Christ, historically and conceptually speaking<sup>137</sup>—experienced the same thing, when he confronted his evil uncle Set,<sup>fn2</sup> usurper of the throne of Osiris, Horus's father. Horus, the all-seeing Egyptian falcon god, the Egyptian eye of supreme, eternal attention itself, has the courage to contend with Set's true nature, meeting him in direct combat. In the struggle with his dread uncle, however, his consciousness is damaged. He loses an eye. This is despite his godly stature and his unparalleled capacity for vision. What would a mere man lose, who attempted the same thing? But perhaps he might gain in internal vision and understanding something proportional to what he loses in perception of the outside world.

Satan embodies the refusal of sacrifice; he is arrogance, incarnate; spite, deceit, and cruel, conscious malevolence. He is pure hatred of Man, God and Being. He will not humble himself, even when he knows full well that he should. Furthermore, he knows exactly what he is doing, obsessed with the desire for destruction, and does it deliberately, thoughtfully and completely. It has to be him, therefore—the very archetype of Evil—who confronts and tempts Christ, the archetype of Good. It must be him who offers to the Savior of Mankind, under the most trying of conditions, what all men most ardently desire.

Satan first tempts the starving Christ to quell His hunger by transforming the desert rocks into bread. Then he suggests that He throw Himself off a cliff, calling on God and the angels to break His fall. Christ responds to the first temptation by saying, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” What does this answer mean? It means that even under conditions of extreme privation, there are more important things than food. To put it another way: Bread is of little use to the man who has betrayed his soul, even if he is currently starving.<sup>fn3</sup> Christ could clearly use his near-infinite power, as Satan indicates, to gain bread, now—to break his fast—even, in the broader sense, to gain wealth, in the world (which would theoretically solve the problem of bread, more permanently). But at what cost? And to what gain? Gluttony, in the midst of moral desolation? That's the poorest and most miserable of feasts. Christ aims, therefore, at something higher: at the description of a mode of Being that would finally and forever solve the problem of hunger. If we all chose instead of expedience to dine on the Word of God? That would require each and every person to live, and produce, and sacrifice, and speak, and share in a manner that would permanently render the privation of hunger a thing of the past. And that's how the problem of hunger in the privations of the desert is most truly and finally addressed.

There are other indications of this in the gospels, in dramatic, enacted form. Christ is continually portrayed as the purveyor of endless sustenance. He miraculously multiplies bread and fish. He turns water into wine. What does this mean? It's a call to the pursuit of higher meaning as the mode of living that is simultaneously most practical and of highest quality. It's a call portrayed in dramatic/literary form: live as the archetypal Saviour lives, and you and those around you will hunger no more. The beneficence of the world manifests itself to those who live properly. That's better than bread. That's better than the money that will buy bread. Thus Christ, the symbolically perfect individual, overcomes the first temptation. Two more follow.

"Throw yourself off that cliff," Satan says, offering the next temptation. "If God exists, He will surely save you. If you are in fact his Son, God will surely save you." Why would God not make Himself manifest, to rescue His only begotten Child from hunger and isolation and the presence of great evil? But that establishes no pattern for life. It doesn't even work as literature. The *deus ex machina*—the emergence of a divine force that magically rescues the hero from his predicament—is the cheapest trick in the hack writer's playbook. It makes a mockery of independence, and courage, and destiny, and free will, and responsibility. Furthermore, God is in no wise a safety net for the blind. He's not someone to be commanded to perform magic tricks, or forced into Self-revelation—not even by His own Son.

"Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Matthew 4:7)—this answer, though rather brief, dispenses with the second temptation. Christ does not casually order or even dare ask God to intervene on his behalf. He refuses to dispense with His responsibility for the events of His own life. He refuses to demand that God prove His presence. He refuses, as well, to solve the problems of mortal vulnerability in a merely personal manner)—by compelling God to save Him—because that would not solve the problem for everyone else and for all time. There is also the echo of the rejection of the comforts of insanity in this forgone temptation. Easy but psychotic self-identification as the merely magical Messiah might well have been a genuine temptation under the harsh conditions of Christ's sojourn in the desert. Instead He rejects the idea that salvation—or even survival, in the shorter term—depends on narcissistic displays of superiority and the commanding of God, even by His Son.

Finally comes the third temptation, the most compelling of all. Christ sees the kingdoms of the world laid before Him for the taking. That's the siren call of earthly power: the opportunity to control and order everyone and everything. Christ is offered the pinnacle of the dominance hierarchy, the animalistic desire of every naked ape: the obedience of all, the most wondrous of estates, the power to build and to increase, the possibility of unlimited sensual gratification. That's expedience, writ large. But that's not all. Such expansion of status also provides unlimited opportunity for the inner darkness to reveal itself. The lust for blood, rape and destruction is very much part of power's attraction. It is not only that men desire power so that they will no longer suffer. It is not only that they desire power so that they can overcome subjugation to want, disease and death. Power also means the capacity to take vengeance, ensure submission, and crush enemies. Grant Cain enough power and he will not only kill Abel. He will torture him, first, imaginatively and endlessly. Then and only then will he kill him. Then he will come after everyone else.

There's something above even the pinnacle of the highest of dominance hierarchies, access to which should not be sacrificed for mere proximal success. It's a real place, too, although not to be conceptualized in the standard geographical sense of place we typically use to orient ourselves. I had a vision, once, of an immense landscape, spread for miles out to the horizon before me. I was high in the air, granted a bird's-eye view. Everywhere I could see great stratified multi-storied pyramids of glass, some small, some large, some overlapping, some separate—all akin to modern skyscrapers; all full of people striving to reach each pyramid's very pinnacle. But there was something above that pinnacle, a domain outside each pyramid, in which all were nested. That was the privileged position of the eye that could or perhaps chose to soar freely above the fray; that chose not to dominate any specific group or cause but instead to somehow simultaneously transcend all. That was attention, itself, pure and untrammelled: detached, alert, watchful attention, waiting to act when the time was right and the place had been established. As the Tao te Ching has it:

*He who contrives, defeats his purpose;  
and he who is grasping, loses.  
The sage does not contrive to win,  
and therefore is not defeated;  
he is not grasping, so does not lose.*<sup>138</sup>

There is a powerful call to proper Being in the story of the third temptation. To obtain the greatest possible prize—the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth, the resurrection of Paradise—the individual must conduct his or her life in a manner that requires the rejection of immediate gratification, of natural and perverse desires alike, no matter how powerfully and convincingly and realistically those are offered, and dispense, as well with the temptations of evil. Evil amplifies the catastrophe of life, increasing dramatically the motivation for expediency already there because of the essential tragedy of Being. Sacrifice of the more prosaic sort can keep that tragedy at bay, more or less successfully, but it takes a special kind of sacrifice to defeat evil. It is the description of that special sacrifice that has preoccupied the Christian (and more than Christian) imagination for centuries. Why has it not had the desired effect? Why do we remain unconvinced that there is no better plan than lifting our heads skyward, aiming at the Good, and sacrificing everything to that ambition? Have we merely failed to understand, or have we fallen, wilfully or otherwise, off the path?

## **Christianity and its Problems**

Carl Jung hypothesized that the European mind found itself motivated to develop the cognitive technologies of science—to investigate the material world—after implicitly concluding that Christianity, with its laser-like emphasis on spiritual salvation, had failed to sufficiently address the problem of suffering in the here-and-now. This realization became unbearably acute in the three or four centuries before the Renaissance. In consequence, a strange, profound, compensatory fantasy began to emerge, deep in the collective Western psyche, manifesting itself first in the strange musings of alchemy, and developing only after many centuries into the fully articulated form of science.<sup>139</sup> It was the alchemists who first seriously began to examine the transformations of matter, hoping to discover the secrets of health, wealth and longevity. These

great dreamers (Newton foremost among them<sup>140</sup>) intuited and then imagined that the material world, damned by the Church, held secrets the revelation of which could free humanity from its earthly pain and limitations. It was that vision, driven by doubt, that provided the tremendous collective and individual motivational power necessary for the development of science, with its extreme demands on individual thinkers for concentration and delay of gratification.

This is not to say that Christianity, even in its incompletely realized form, was a failure. Quite the contrary: Christianity achieved the well-nigh impossible. The Christian doctrine elevated the individual soul, placing slave and master and commoner and nobleman alike on the same metaphysical footing, rendering them equal before God and the law. Christianity insisted that even the king was only one among many. For something so contrary to all apparent evidence to find its footing, the idea that that worldly power and prominence were indicators of God's particular favor had to be radically de-emphasized. This was partly accomplished through the strange Christian insistence that salvation could not be obtained through effort or worth—through “works.”<sup>141</sup> Whatever its limitations, the development of such doctrine prevented king, aristocrat and wealthy merchant alike from lording it morally over the commoner. In consequence, the metaphysical conception of the implicit transcendent worth of each and every soul established itself against impossible odds as the fundamental presupposition of Western law and society. That was not the case in the world of the past, and is not the case yet in most places in the world of the present. It is in fact nothing short of a miracle (and we should keep this fact firmly before our eyes) that the hierarchical slave-based societies of our ancestors reorganized themselves, under the sway of an ethical/religious revelation, such that the ownership and absolute domination of another person came to be viewed as wrong.

It would do us well to remember, as well, that the immediate utility of slavery is obvious, and that the argument that the strong should dominate the weak is compelling, convenient and eminently practical (at least for the strong). This means that a revolutionary critique of everything slave-owning societies valued was necessary before the practice could be even questioned, let alone halted (including the idea that wielding power and authority made the slave-owner noble; including the even more fundamental idea that the power wielded by the slave-owner was valid and even virtuous). Christianity made explicit the surprising claim that even the lowliest person had rights, genuine rights—and that sovereign and state were morally charged, at a fundamental level, to recognize those rights. Christianity put forward, explicitly, the even more incomprehensible idea that the act of human ownership degraded the slaver (previously viewed as admiring nobility) much or even more than the slave. We fail to understand how difficult such an idea is to grasp. We forget that the opposite was self-evident throughout most of human history. We think that it is the desire to enslave and dominate that requires explanation. We have it backwards, yet again.

This is not to say that Christianity was without its problems. But it is more appropriate to note that they were the sort of problems that emerge only after an entirely different set of more serious problems has been solved. The society produced by Christianity was far less barbaric than the pagan—even the Roman—ones it replaced. Christian society at least recognized that feeding slaves to ravenous lions for the entertainment of the populace was wrong, even if many barbaric practices still existed. It objected to infanticide, to prostitution, and to the principle that



might means right. It insisted that women were as valuable as men (even though we are still working out how to manifest that insistence politically). It demanded that even a society's enemies be regarded as human. Finally, it separated church from state, so that all-too-human emperors could no longer claim the veneration due to gods. All of this was asking the impossible: but it happened.

As the Christian revolution progressed, however, the impossible problems it had solved disappeared from view. That's what happens to problems that are solved. And after the solution was implemented, *even the fact that such problems had ever existed disappeared from view*. Then and only then could the problems that remained, less amenable to quick solution by Christian doctrine, come to occupy a central place in the consciousness of the West—come to motivate, for example, the development of science, aimed at resolving the corporeal, material suffering that was still all-too-painfully extant within successfully Christianized societies. The fact that automobiles pollute only becomes a problem of sufficient magnitude to attract public attention when the far worse problems that the internal combustion engine solves has vanished from view. People stricken with poverty don't care about carbon dioxide. It's not precisely that CO2 levels are irrelevant. It's that they're irrelevant when you're working yourself to death, starving, scraping a bare living from the stony, unyielding, thorn-and-thistle-infested ground. It's that they're irrelevant until after the tractor is invented and hundreds of millions stop starving. In any case, by the time Nietzsche entered the picture, in the late nineteenth century, the problems Christianity had left unsolved had become paramount.

Nietzsche described himself, with no serious overstatement, as philosophizing with a hammer.<sup>142</sup> His devastating critique of Christianity—already weakened by its conflict with the very science to which it had given rise—involved two main lines of attack. Nietzsche claimed, first, that it was precisely the sense of truth developed in the highest sense by Christianity itself that ultimately came to question and then to undermine the fundamental presuppositions of the faith. That was partly because the difference between moral or narrative truth and objective truth had not yet been fully comprehended (and so an opposition was presumed where none necessarily exists)—but that does not bely the point. Even when the modern atheists opposed to Christianity belittle fundamentalists for insisting, for example, that the creation account in Genesis is objectively true, they are using their sense of truth, highly developed over the centuries of Christian culture, to engage in such argumentation. Carl Jung continued to develop Nietzsche's arguments decades later, pointing out that Europe awoke, during the Enlightenment, as if from a Christian dream, noticing that everything it had heretofore taken for granted could and should be questioned. "God is dead," said Nietzsche. "God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us?"<sup>143</sup>

The central dogmas of the Western faith were no longer credible, according to Nietzsche, given what the Western mind now considered truth. But it was his second attack—on the removal of the true moral burden of Christianity during the development of the Church—that was most devastating. The hammer-wielding philosopher mounted an assault on an early-established and then highly influential line of Christian thinking: *that Christianity meant*

accepting the proposition that Christ's sacrifice, and only that sacrifice, had redeemed humanity. This did not mean, absolutely, that a Christian who believed that Christ died on the cross for the salvation of mankind was thereby freed from any and all personal moral obligation. But it did strongly imply that the primary responsibility for redemption had already been borne by the Saviour, and that nothing too important to do remained for all-too-fallen human individuals.

Nietzsche believed that Paul, and later the Protestants following Luther, had removed moral responsibility from Christ's followers. They had watered down the idea of *the imitation of Christ*. This imitation was the sacred duty of the believer not to adhere (or merely to mouth) a set of statements about abstract belief but instead to actually manifest the spirit of the Saviour in the particular, specific conditions of his or her life—to realize or incarnate the archetype, as Jung had it; to clothe the eternal pattern in flesh. Nietzsche writes, "The Christians have never practiced the actions Jesus prescribed them; and the impudent garrulous talk about the 'justification by faith' and its supreme and sole significance is only the consequence of the Church's lack of courage and will to profess the works Jesus demanded."<sup>144</sup> Nietzsche was, indeed, a critic without parallel.

Dogmatic belief in the central axioms of Christianity (that Christ's crucifixion redeemed the world; that salvation was reserved for the hereafter; that salvation could not be achieved through works) had three mutually reinforcing consequences: First, *devaluation of the significance of earthly life, as only the hereafter mattered*. This also meant that it had become acceptable to overlook and shirk responsibility for the suffering that existed in the here-and-now; Second, *passive acceptance of the status quo, because salvation could not be earned in any case through effort in this life* (a consequence that Marx also derided, with his proposition that religion was the opiate of the masses); and, finally, third, *the right of the believer to reject any real moral burden* (outside of the stated belief in salvation through Christ), *because the Son of God had already done all the important work*. It was for such reasons that Dostoevsky, who was a great influence on Nietzsche, also criticized institutional Christianity (although he arguably managed it in a more ambiguous but also more sophisticated manner). In his masterwork, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky has his atheist superman, Ivan, tell a little story, "The Grand Inquisitor."<sup>145</sup> A brief review is in order.

Ivan speaks to his brother Alyosha—whose pursuits as a monastic novitiate he holds in contempt—of Christ returning to Earth at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. The returning Savior makes quite a ruckus, as would be expected. He heals the sick. He raises the dead. His antics soon attract attention from the Grand Inquisitor himself, who promptly has Christ arrested and thrown into a prison cell. Later, the Inquisitor pays Him a visit. He informs Christ that he is no longer needed. His return is simply too great a threat to the Church. The Inquisitor tells Christ that the burden He laid on mankind—the burden of existence in faith and truth—was simply too great for mere mortals to bear. The Inquisitor claims that the Church, in its mercy, diluted that message, lifting the demand for perfect Being from the shoulders of its followers, providing them instead with the simple and merciful escapes of faith and the afterlife. That work took centuries, says the Inquisitor, and the last thing the Church needs after all that effort is the return of the Man who insisted that people bear all the weight in the first place. Christ

listens in silence. Then, as the Inquisitor turns to leave, Christ embraces him, and kisses him on the lips. The Inquisitor turns white, in shock. Then he goes out, leaving the cell door open.

The profundity of this story and the greatness of spirit necessary to produce it can hardly be exaggerated. Dostoevsky, one of the great literary geniuses of all time, confronted the most serious existential problems in all his great writings, and he did so courageously, headlong, and heedless of the consequences. Clearly Christian, he nonetheless adamantly refuses to make a straw man of his rationalist and atheistic opponents. Quite the contrary: In *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, Dostoevsky's atheist, Ivan, argues against the presuppositions of Christianity with unsurpassable clarity and passion. Alyosha, aligned with the Church by temperament and decision, cannot undermine a single one of his brother's arguments (although his faith remains unshakeable). Dostoevsky knew and admitted that Christianity had been defeated by the rational faculty—by the intellect, even—but (and this is of primary importance) *he did not hide from that fact*. He didn't attempt through denial or deceit or even satire to weaken the position that opposed what he believed to be most true and valuable. He instead placed action above words, and addressed the problem successfully. By the novel's end, Dostoevsky has the great embodied moral goodness of Alyosha—the novice's courageous imitation of Christ—attain victory over the spectacular but ultimately nihilistic critical intelligence of Ivan.

The Christian church described by the Grand Inquisitor is the same church pilloried by Nietzsche. Childish, sanctimonious, patriarchal, servant of the state, that church is everything rotten still objected to by modern critics of Christianity. Nietzsche, for all his brilliance, allows himself anger, but does not perhaps sufficiently temper it with judgement. This is where Dostoevsky truly transcends Nietzsche, in my estimation—where Dostoevsky's great literature transcends Nietzsche's mere philosophy. The Russian writer's Inquisitor is the genuine article, in every sense. He is an opportunistic, cynical, manipulative and cruel interrogator, willing to persecute heretics—even to torture and kill them. He is the purveyor of a dogma he knows to be false. But Dostoevsky has Christ, the archetypal perfect man, kiss him anyway. Equally importantly, in the aftermath of the kiss, the Grand Inquisitor leaves the door ajar so Christ can escape his pending execution. Dostoevsky saw that the great, corrupt edifice of Christianity still managed to make room for the spirit of its Founder. That's the gratitude of a wise and profound soul for the enduring wisdom of the West, despite its faults.

It's not as if Nietzsche was unwilling to give the faith—and, more particularly, Catholicism—its due. Nietzsche believed that the long tradition of “unfreedom” characterizing dogmatic Christianity—its insistence that everything be explained within the confines of a single, coherent metaphysical theory—was a necessary precondition for the emergence of the disciplined but free modern mind. As he stated in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

The long bondage of the spirit ... the persistent spiritual will to interpret everything that happened according to a Christian scheme, and in every occurrence to rediscover and justify the Christian God in every accident:—all this violence, arbitrariness, severity, dreadfulness, and unreasonableness, has proved itself the disciplinary means whereby the European spirit has attained its strength, its remorseless curiosity and subtle mobility; granted also that much irrecoverable strength and spirit had to be stifled, suffocated and spoiled in the process. [146](#)

For Nietzsche and Dostoevsky alike, freedom—even the ability to act—requires constraint. For this reason, they both recognized the vital necessity of the dogma of the Church. The individual must be constrained, moulded—even brought close to destruction—by a restrictive, coherent disciplinary structure, before he or she can act freely and competently. Dostoevsky, with his great generosity of spirit, granted to the church, corrupt as it might be, a certain element of mercy, a certain pragmatism. He admitted that the spirit of Christ, the world-engendering Logos, had historically and might still find its resting place—even its sovereignty—within that dogmatic structure.

If a father disciplines his son properly, he obviously interferes with his freedom, particularly in the here-and-now. He put limits on the voluntary expression of his son's Being, forcing him to take his place as a socialized member of the world. Such a father requires that all that childish potential be funneled down a singly pathway. In placing such limitations on his son, he might be considered a destructive force, acting as he does to replace the miraculous plurality of childhood with a single narrow actuality. But if the father does not take such action, he merely lets his son remain Peter Pan, the eternal Boy, King of the Lost Boys, Ruler of the non-existent Neverland. That is not a morally acceptable alternative.

The dogma of the Church was undermined by the spirit of truth strongly developed by the Church itself. That undermining culminated in the death of God. But the dogmatic structure of the Church was a necessary disciplinary structure. A long period of unfreedom—adherence to a singular interpretive structure—is necessary for the development of a free mind. Christian dogma provided that unfreedom. But the dogma is dead, at least to the modern Western mind. It perished along with God. What has emerged from behind its corpse, however—and this is an issue of central importance—is something even more dead; something that was never alive, even in the past: *nihilism, as well as an equally dangerous susceptibility to new, totalizing, utopian ideas*. It was in the aftermath of God's death that the great collective horrors of Communism and Fascism sprang forth (as both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche predicted they would). Nietzsche, for his part, posited that individual human beings would have to invent their own values in the aftermath of God's death. But this is the element of his thinking that appears weakest, psychologically: *we cannot invent our own values, because we cannot merely impose what we believe on our souls*. This was Carl Jung's great discovery—made in no little part because of his intense study of the problems posed by Nietzsche.

We rebel against our own totalitarianism, as much as that of others. I cannot merely order myself to action, and neither can you. "I will stop procrastinating," I say, but I don't. "I will eat properly," I say, but I don't. "I will end my drunken misbehavior," I say, but I don't. I cannot merely make myself over in the image constructed by my intellect (particularly if that intellect is possessed by an ideology). I have a nature, and so do you, and so do we all. We must discover that nature, and contend with it, before making peace with ourselves. What is it, that we most truly are? What is it that we could most truly become, knowing who we most truly are? We must get to the very bottom of things before such questions can be truly answered.

## **Doubt, Past Mere Nihilism**

Three hundred years before Nietzsche, the great French philosopher René Descartes set out on an intellectual mission to take his doubt seriously, to break things apart, to get to what was essential—to see if he could establish, or discover, a single proposition impervious to his skepticism. He was searching for the foundation stone on which proper Being could be established. Descartes found it, as far as he was concerned, in the “I” who thinks—the “I” who was aware—as expressed in his famous dictum, *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). But that “I” had been conceptualized long before. Thousands of years ago, the aware “I” was the all-seeing eye of Horus, the great Egyptian son-and-sun-god, who renewed the state by attending to and then confronting its inevitable corruption. Before that, it was the creator-God Marduk of the Mesopotamians, whose eyes encircled his head and who spoke forth words of world-engendering magic. During the Christian epoch, the “I” transformed into the Logos, the Word that speaks order into Being at the beginning of time. It might be said that Descartes merely secularized the Logos, turning it, more explicitly, into “that which is aware and thinks.” That’s the modern self, simply put. But what exactly is that self?

We can understand, to some degree, its horrors, if we wish to, but its goodness remains more difficult to define. The self is the great actor of evil who strode about the stage of Being as Nazi and Stalinist alike; who produced Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, and the multiplicity of the Soviet gulags. And all of that must be considered with dread seriousness. But what is its opposite? What is the good that is the necessary counterpart of that evil; that is made more corporeal and comprehensible by the very existence of that evil? And here we can state with conviction and clarity that even the rational intellect—that faculty so beloved of those who hold traditional wisdom in contempt—is at minimum something closely and necessarily akin to the archetypal dying and eternally resurrected god, the eternal savior of humanity, the Logos itself. The philosopher of science Karl Popper, certainly no mystic, regarded thinking itself as a logical extension of the Darwinian process. A creature that cannot think must solely embody its Being. It can merely act out its nature, concretely, in the here-and-now. If it cannot manifest in its behavior what the environment demands while doing so, it will simply die. But that is not true of human beings. We can produce abstracted representations of potential modes of Being. We can produce an idea in the theatre of the imagination. We can test it out against our other ideas, the ideas of others, or the world itself. If it falls short, we can let it go. We can, in Popper’s formulation, let our ideas die in our stead.<sup>147</sup> Then the essential part, the creator of those ideas, can continue onward, now untrammelled, by comparison, with error. *Faith in the part of us that continues across those deaths is a prerequisite to thinking itself.*

Now, an idea is not the same thing as a fact. A fact is something that is dead, in and of itself. It has no consciousness, no will to power, no motivation, no action. There are billions of dead facts. The internet is a graveyard of dead facts. But an idea that grips a person is alive. It wants to express itself, to live in the world. It is for this reason that the depth psychologists—Freud and Jung paramount among them—insisted that the human psyche was a battleground for ideas. *An idea has an aim. It wants something. It posits a value structure.* An idea believes that what it is aiming for is better than what it has now. It reduces the world to those things that aid or impede its realization, and it reduces everything else to irrelevance. An idea defines figure against ground. *An idea is a personality, not a fact.* When it manifests itself within a person, it

has a strong proclivity to make of that person its avatar: to impel that person to act it out. Sometimes, that impulsion (possession is another word) can be so strong that the person will die, rather than allowing the idea to perish. This is, generally speaking, a bad decision, given that it is often the case that only the idea need die, and that the person with the idea can stop being its avatar, change his or her ways, and continue.

To use the dramatic conceptualization of our ancestors: It is the most fundamental convictions that must die—must be sacrificed—when the relationship with God has been disrupted (when the presence of undue and often intolerable suffering, for example, indicates that something has to change). This is to say nothing other than that the future can be made better if the proper sacrifices take place in the present. No other animal has ever figured this out, and it took us untold hundreds of thousands of years to do it. It took further eons of observation and hero-worship, and then millennia of study, to distill that idea into a story. It then took additional vast stretches of time to assess that story, to incorporate it, so that we now can simply say, “If you are disciplined and privilege the future over the present you can change the structure of reality in your favour.”

But how best to do that?

In 1984, I started down the same road as Descartes. I did not know it was the same road at the time, and I am not claiming kinship with Descartes, who is rightly regarded as one of the greatest philosophers of all time. But I was truly plagued with doubt. I had outgrown the shallow Christianity of my youth by the time I could understand the fundamentals of Darwinian theory. After that, I could not distinguish the basic elements of Christian belief from wishful thinking. The socialism that soon afterward became so attractive to me as an alternative proved equally insubstantial; with time, I came to understand, through the great George Orwell, that much of such thinking found its motivation in hatred of the rich and successful, instead of true regard for the poor. Besides, the socialists were more intrinsically capitalist than the capitalists. They believed just as strongly in money. They just thought that if different people had the money, the problems plaguing humanity would vanish. This is simply untrue. There are many problems that money does not solve, and others that it makes worse. Rich people still divorce each other, and alienate themselves from their children, and suffer from existential angst, and develop cancer and dementia, and die alone and unloved. Recovering addicts cursed with money blow it all in a frenzy of snorting and drunkenness. And boredom weighs heavily on people who have nothing to do.

I was simultaneously tormented by the fact of the Cold War. It obsessed me. It gave me nightmares. It drove me into the desert, into the long night of the human soul. I could not understand how it had come to pass that the world’s two great factions aimed mutual assured destruction at each other. Was one system just as arbitrary and corrupt as the other? Was it a mere matter of opinion? Were all value structures merely the clothing of power?

Was everyone crazy?

Just exactly what happened in the twentieth century, anyway? How was it that so many tens of millions had to die, sacrificed to the new dogmas and ideologies? How was it that we discovered something worse, much worse, than the aristocracy and corrupt religious beliefs that communism and fascism sought so rationally to supplant? No one had answered those

questions, as far as I could tell. Like Descartes, I was plagued with doubt. I searched for one thing—anything—I could regard as indisputable. I wanted a rock upon which to build my house. It was doubt that led me to it.

I once read of a particularly insidious practice at Auschwitz. A guard would force an inmate to carry a hundred-pound sack of wet salt from one side of the large compound to the other—and then to carry it back. *Arbeit macht frei*, said the sign over the camp entrance—“Work will set you free”—and the freedom was death. Carrying the salt was an act of pointless torment. It was a piece of malevolent art. It allowed me to realize with certainty that some actions are wrong.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote, definitively and profoundly, about the horrors of the twentieth century, the tens of millions who were stripped of employment, family, identity and life. In his *Gulag Archipelago*, in the second part of the second volume, he discussed the Nuremberg trials, which he considered the most significant event of the twentieth century. The conclusion of those trials? *There are some actions that are so intrinsically terrible that they run counter to the proper nature of human Being.* This is true essentially, cross-culturally—across time and place. *These are evil actions. No excuses are available for engaging in them.* To dehumanize a fellow being, to reduce him or her to the status of a parasite, to torture and to slaughter with no consideration of individual innocence or guilt, to make an art form of pain—that is wrong.

What can I not doubt? The reality of suffering. It brooks no arguments. Nihilists cannot undermine it with skepticism. Totalitarians cannot banish it. Cynics cannot escape from its reality. Suffering is real, and the artful infliction of suffering on another, for its own sake, is wrong. That became the cornerstone of my belief. Searching through the lowest reaches of human thought and action, understanding my own capacity to act like a Nazi prison guard or a gulag archipelago trustee or a torturer of children in a dungeon, I grasped what it meant to “take the sins of the world onto oneself.” Each human being has an immense capacity for evil. Each human being understands, *a priori*, perhaps not what is good, but certainly what is not. And if there is something that *is not good*, then there is something that *is good*. If the worst sin is the torment of others, merely for the sake of the suffering produced—then the good is whatever is diametrically opposed to that. The good is whatever stops such things from happening.

## **Meaning as the Higher Good**

It was from this that I drew my fundamental moral conclusions. Aim up. Pay attention. Fix what you can fix. Don't be arrogant in your knowledge. Strive for humility, because totalitarian pride manifests itself in intolerance, oppression, torture and death. Become aware of your own insufficiency—your cowardice, malevolence, resentment and hatred. Consider the murderousness of your own spirit before you dare accuse others, and before you attempt to repair the fabric of the world. Maybe it's not the world that's at fault. Maybe it's you. You've failed to make the mark. You've missed the target. You've fallen short of the glory of God. You've sinned. And all of that is your contribution to the insufficiency and evil of the world. And, above all, don't lie. Don't lie about anything, ever. Lying leads to Hell. It was the great

and the small lies of the Nazi and Communist states that produced the deaths of millions of people.

Consider then that the alleviation of unnecessary pain and suffering is a good. Make that an axiom: to the best of my ability I will act in a manner that leads to the alleviation of unnecessary pain and suffering. You have now placed at the pinnacle of your moral hierarchy a set of presuppositions and actions aimed at the betterment of Being. Why? Because we know the alternative. The alternative was the twentieth century. The alternative was so close to Hell that the difference is not worth discussing. And the opposite of Hell is Heaven. To place the alleviation of unnecessary pain and suffering at the pinnacle of your hierarchy of value is to work to bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth. That's a state, and a state of mind, at the same time.

Jung observed that the construction of such a moral hierarchy was inevitable—although it could remain poorly arranged and internally self-contradictory. For Jung, whatever was at the top of an individual's moral hierarchy was, for all intents and purposes, that person's ultimate value, that person's god. It was what the person acted out. It was what the person believed most deeply. Something enacted is not a fact, or even a set of facts. Instead, it's a personality—or, more precisely, a choice between two opposing personalities. It's Sherlock Holmes or Moriarty. It's Batman or the Joker. It's Superman or Lex Luthor, Charles Francis Xavier or Magneto, and Thor or Loki. It's Abel or Cain—and it's Christ or Satan. If it's working for the ennobling of Being, for the establishment of Paradise, then it's Christ. If it's working for the destruction of Being, for the generation and propagation of unnecessary suffering and pain, then it's Satan. That's the inescapable, archetypal reality.

Expedience is the following of blind impulse. It's short-term gain. It's narrow, and selfish. It lies to get its way. It takes nothing into account. It's immature and irresponsible. Meaning is its mature replacement. Meaning emerges when impulses are regulated, organized and unified. Meaning emerges from the interplay between the possibilities of the world and the value structure operating within that world. If the value structure is aimed at the betterment of Being, the meaning revealed will be life-sustaining. It will provide the antidote for chaos and suffering. It will make everything matter. It will make everything better.

If you act properly, your actions allow you to be psychologically integrated now, and tomorrow, and into the future, while you benefit yourself, your family, and the broader world around you. Everything will stack up and align along a single axis. Everything will come together. This produces maximal meaning. This stacking up is a place in space and time whose existence we can detect with our ability to experience more than is simply revealed here and now by our senses, which are obviously limited to their information-gathering and representational capacity. Meaning trumps expedience. Meaning gratifies all impulses, now and forever. That's why we can detect it.

If you decide that you are not justified in your resentment of Being, despite its inequity and pain, you may come to notice things you could fix to reduce even by a bit some unnecessary pain and suffering. You may come to ask yourself, "What should I do today?" in a manner that means "How could I use my time to make things better, instead of worse?" Such tasks may announce themselves as the pile of undone paperwork that you could attend to, the room that



you could make a bit more welcoming, or the meal that could be a bit more delicious and more gratefully delivered to your family.

You may find that if you attend to these moral obligations, once you have placed “make the world better” at the top of your value hierarchy, you experience ever-deepening meaning. It’s not bliss. It’s not happiness. It is something more like atonement for the criminal fact of your fractured and damaged Being. It’s payment of the debt you owe for the insane and horrible miracle of your existence. It’s how you remember the Holocaust. It’s how you make amends for the pathology of history. It’s adoption of the responsibility for being a potential denizen of Hell. It is willingness to serve as an angel of Paradise.

Expedience—that’s hiding all the skeletons in the closet. That’s covering the blood you just spilled with a carpet. That’s avoiding responsibility. It’s cowardly, and shallow, and wrong. It’s wrong because mere expedience, multiplied by many repetitions, produces the character of a demon. It’s wrong because expedience merely transfers the curse on your head to someone else, or to your future self, in a manner that will make your future, and the future generally, worse instead of better.

There is no faith and no courage and no sacrifice in doing what is expedient. There is no careful observation that actions and presuppositions matter, or that the world is made of what matters. To have meaning in your life is better than to have what you want, because you may neither know what you want, nor what you truly need. Meaning is something that comes upon you, of its own accord. You can set up the preconditions, you can follow meaning, when it manifests itself, but you cannot simply produce it, as an act of will. Meaning signifies that you are in the right place, at the right time, properly balanced between order and chaos, where everything lines up as best it can at that moment.

What is expedient works only for the moment. It’s immediate, impulsive and limited. What is meaningful, by contrast, is the organization of what would otherwise merely be expedient into a symphony of Being. Meaning is what is put forth more powerfully than mere words can express by Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy,” a triumphant bringing forth from the void of pattern after pattern upon beautiful pattern, every instrument playing its part, disciplined voices layered on top of that, spanning the entire breadth of human emotion from despair to exhilaration.

Meaning is what manifests itself when the many levels of Being arrange themselves into a perfectly functioning harmony, from atomic microcosm to cell to organ to individual to society to nature to cosmos, so that action at each level beautifully and perfectly facilitates action at all, such that past, present and future are all at once redeemed and reconciled. Meaning is what emerges beautifully and profoundly like a newly formed rosebud opening itself out of nothingness into the light of sun and God. Meaning is the lotus striving upward through the dark lake depths through the ever-clearing water, blooming forth on the very surface, revealing within itself the Golden Buddha, himself perfectly integrated, such that the revelation of the Divine Will can make itself manifest in his every word and gesture.

Meaning is when everything there is comes together in an ecstatic dance of single purpose—the glorification of a reality so that no matter how good it has suddenly become, it can get better and better and better more and more deeply forever into the future. Meaning happens when that dance has become so intense that all the horrors of the past, all the terrible struggle engaged in

by all of life and all of humanity to that moment becomes a necessary and worthwhile part of the increasingly successful attempt to build something truly Mighty and Good.

Meaning is the ultimate balance between, on the one hand, the chaos of transformation and possibility and on the other, the discipline of pristine order, whose purpose is to produce out of the attendant chaos a new order that will be even more immaculate, and capable of bringing forth a still more balanced and productive chaos and order. Meaning is the Way, the path of life more abundant, the place you live when you are guided by Love and speaking Truth and when nothing you want or could possibly want takes any precedence over precisely that.

Do what is meaningful, not what is expedient.

Reproduced under the s41 of the Copyright Act (Cth) 1968  
for the purposes of review and criticism by members of PhiloSophia  
NOT TO BE REDISTRIBUTED OR PUBLISHED OR MADE AVAILABLE GENERALLY