

Evil and European Humanism

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One of the great puzzles of the West is to understand how culture has been tied to practices of evil. One view is that evil arises from the failure of culture – as if the civilizing forces have not been quite strong enough to overcome the brutish state of nature. Evil is embedded in our nature and the answer to nature is culture. The opposite view is that nature is innocent and that evil is the product of culture itself. Eichman tells us that he was a follower of Kant; Hitler enjoyed Wagner. Which narrative we tell – that of progress or that of fall – depends, I suspect, on when and where we are telling it.

In the United States during the 1990s, we told the progressive story, describing the triumph of American political and cultural ideals around the world. We had defeated “the evil empire.” Ten years later, many people are inclined to tell the counternarrative of fall, describing that same culture as a dangerous and destructive force. The same double perspective appeared earlier in the self-understanding of Western colonialism, which went from a project of bringing culture to the uncivilized to an expression of imperialist exploitation. This is not just a problem for the descendants of the colonizers, but also for those of the colonized who have adopted European ideas of the sacred: did Western culture save their souls or destroy their identities? Like us, they do not know what they think; they do not know whether to praise or to blame.

We may be more reluctant than our predecessors to speak of the spread of “civilization,” but this does not mean that we are committed to cultural relativism. The real problem, however, is not the difficulty of comparative judgments across cultures, but the deep ambiguity in our attitude toward our own identities. About ourselves, we are equally committed to the narrative

and to the counternarrative. We are sinners and saints, not just sometimes one and sometimes the other, but often in the very same act.

The evils of the West have been the product not of mistakes nor of a narrow cultural perspective that fails to recognize the humanity of others. The victims have not been only the unrecognizable alien. The killing of the Jews, of course, demands an account, but then so do the 20 million deaths of the First World War and that of some 72 million persons in the Second. These were not the alien other at the edge of empire. Practices of violence that had become ordinary at the geographic periphery had, by the 20th century, come back to the center. Is it just that brutality is contagious? Or is it that violence produces political meanings in similar ways across domains? We live still today under the threat of a nuclear holocaust – a threat that collapses periphery and center. How is it that a social imaginary shaped by the long political and cultural history of the West was, and remains, capable of contemplating such acts? That is the real question.

We can start from the observation that the process of political democratization was inseparable from the process of democratization of the battlefield. Citizen participation in the violent revolutions of both France and the United States was critical to the self-understanding of each movement as a radical break with the past. The democratization of combat was formalized in the mass mobilizations and conscription laws of the 19th century. The American Civil War illustrated the brutal fact that whatever else democratic governance may be, it is certainly no obstacle to a politics of killing and being killed. By the 20th century, we find a continuous state of warfare and the threat of war in the West. Two generations now have lived their entire lives under the threat of mutual assured destruction. In these conflicts of arms, we confront again the

same ambiguity of narrative and counternarrative: are these wars the locus of the selfless virtues of courage, idealism, and sacrifice or are they expressions of grotesque evil? Should we celebrate or mourn at Gettysburg?

Democratic political culture has been intimately connected to an ethos of sacrifice. To make everyone a political actor meant more than extending the promise of law to attend to the well-being of each citizen. It meant that each could be asked to die – or to kill – as a member of the popular sovereign. This sacrifice-sovereignty matrix of meaning ends in the development of weapons of mass destruction, for they express in material form the universal sacrificial demand of the popular sovereign. What, however, can we say about a political form that develops and deploys weapons of mass destruction? Were they to be used with world-destroying effect, could we say anything other than that this form of politics was the greatest evil?

The puzzle, then, is to understand the nature of a political imagination that takes as its first principle the proposition that the continued existence of the state is a literal condition of the continued existence of any human world at all. This is just what a policy of nuclear deterrence announces: If not us, then nothing. Here we might turn to Auden:

For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.

“Not universal love / But to be loved alone” was also the fundamental ground of the sovereign politics of the democratic nation-state. To the citizen, the existence of the popular sovereign was of transcendent value. It was not one end among others, but the condition within which every other end could be imagined. This structure of belief remains vigorous in the United States.

One response to these observations is to argue that Western politics must be distinguished from Western culture, and especially European humanism. While our political culture might demonstrate the pathologies of power, our humanist tradition defines itself in substantial part by its opposition to power and particularly by its opposition to political violence. Culture is what we do in place of politics; humanism is what we pursue to overcome a politics of friends and enemies. The humanist tradition is universal; politics is particular. This is yet another version of the narrative of progress, where politics steps into the place of nature and humanism claims for itself the place of civilization. In truth, of course, the humanists have been supporters of the politics of killing and being killed as much as anyone else. We remember poets and philosophers in the trenches, not in exile. For one thing, they have nowhere to go. We do not know a non-political space of humanity that they could inhabit apart from the state.

The dream of Europe – the beautiful vision of the Nexus ideal – is of a politics that embraces humanism, a politics of arts rather than armaments, of spiritual well-being rather than bodily pain. Is it a real politics or is it an anti-politics? Auden, I think, saw it as an anti-politics when he wrote, “There is no such thing as the State ... We must love one another or die.” He also knew that the poet is no more than another citizen: “composed like them / of Eros and of dust, / Beleaguered by the same / Negation and Despair.” We should not expect too much from the poet’s “affirming flame.”

We should be suspicious when humanism portrays itself along the familiar lines of the Church. Christianity, too, was founded on ideas of universal equality and dignity; it, too, understood itself as embracing a universal community that transcended the friend-enemy distinction. It, too, promised spiritual well-being in place of the pains of the finite body. It

resolutely turned away from violence and chose to suffer rather than to do injustice. But that oppositional voice was not heard when the state called forth the sacrifice of its members. Just the opposite: priest and poet sang hymns to sacrifice. There was, at that point, no place for “universal love.”

If in place of the Church we insist on the secular character of the humanist vision, then we might look to Socrates, the first European humanist. He well understood that we are composed of “eros and dust.” He was, we might think, the victim of an act of political violence and surely it would be wrong to blame him for the evil of Athens. This flight from responsibility, however, is too quick, for does not Socrates tell us at his trial that he himself killed for the state when called upon to defend Athens? Where was the Socratic inquiry into justice when he killed the morally innocent Persian conscript? Was that act an expression of love or of evil? Humanism, like philosophy and faith before it, is no defense against evil, because evil comes in the shadow of love.

Injustice and the Circumstances of Love

We take the first step toward evil when we draw a border. The humanistic vision of both Socrates and Christ insisted that there are no borders. Without borders, there are no enemies. Once the Church recognized borders, it became deeply involved in the same ambiguities of love and evil that have characterized Western political organizations. The Church may have continued to speak of itself as a universal community of love – the narrative – but it lived the counternarrative of killing and being killed in the name of a bordered community. Should we suspect the same of European humanism? It is not the humanist but the European who imagines borders. Europe may have relaxed some borders, but the political and cultural debate in Europe right now is over the defense of new borders. Can we give up the qualifier “European” without returning to the 19th century project of civilization? And if so, have we given up the qualifier at all? Carl Schmitt did not think so, writing that European humanitarianism itself would become a political project in the name of which nations would go to war. About that, he seems to have been right.

The very expression “European humanism” expresses the double character of our existence as simultaneously finite – i.e. bordered – and infinite – i.e., always standing beyond those borders. At the intersection of the finite and the infinite – of eros and dust – we find the origin of evil. This should not be surprising if we think about that other community to which we are all deeply bound: the family. There, too, we find love and evil intertwined. Seeking love, all too often we find ourselves performing evil.

There is no easy separation of the spheres of our experience. The shape of the imagination extends across domains, organizing our experience in familiar ways. We live and

die by analogy and metaphor. Family, church, and state – all are sites of love and evil. What is true about the organization of experience in one domain tends to be true in the others. The inquiry into evil in any one of these domains can, therefore, illuminate the nature of evil in the others. We can reverse the Platonic move of trying to understand justice in the soul by looking first to that larger image of justice in the city, and turn instead to the family to gain some sense of political evil.

We are in particular need of such a supplemental inquiry because political theory has proved quite inadequate to the problem of evil. Reason tells us that the political order emerges out of a social contract into which each individual enters in order to secure the benefits of collective action and to escape the short, nasty, and brutish life of the state of nature. History tells us, however, that it is often politics that makes life nasty, brutish, and short. Theory is unable to understand the nature of our political life because that life moves to the measure not of reason but of love. Theory does no better a job in understanding family, but here we are less inclined to look to reason. We are more willing to acknowledge the shape of our experience, without measuring it against a theoretical model. We are far more comfortable speaking of love of family than love of nation. To understand evil – familial or political – we need some grounding in the phenomenology of love.

Family, at its best, is a locus of a self-transcending love. The love we experience for spouse and children is not a calculable benefit to be measured against other interests. For the sake of this love, we are willing to sacrifice our interests in other domains of life. Familial love is not a product of reason. I cannot reason myself to love. Rather, I find myself experiencing a claim. This is the sense in which love is objective, not subjective. Love's object is not an

internal state, but the well-being of another. We cannot be in love and care more for the self than the beloved.

If we insist that love, like everything else, must be subordinate to the measure of reason, we will be forced to acknowledge that love is a model of injustice. As a father, I am unresponsive to a claim that other children may make a more just demand upon my resources. I remain unresponsive even as I acknowledge that those resources are the product of social and legal constructions that are themselves unfair. I don't deny the claim of injustice: there *is* something terribly unjust about the way I prefer my family over all those suffering both near and abroad. If my child is sick, I am prepared to spend all my resources on her cure. I don't deny that this money would be more justly spent if distributed to advance the health of many. It does not matter if I incline toward utilitarian or deontological accounts of justice. To give my all to the object of my love cannot be just. An institution that spent a disproportionate amount to save just one person would be acting unjustly. But I literally do not care when that critique is leveled at the actions I take for love.

This injustice is of a piece with the very largest claim that familial love can make upon me: I want to think that I would sacrifice myself for those I love. Again, this has nothing to do with justice. Indeed, I will not sacrifice myself for others I recognize to be suffering injustice greater than that which befalls the object of my love. I do not first make a list of gross injustices and then measure my willingness to sacrifice myself for their amelioration. There is no beginning of sacrifice without love, and no end to sacrifice once there is love.

There is, in short, a radical asymmetry between love and justice. Some have thought that the answer to this asymmetry is to reconstruct the family on the basis of justice. Plato first

proposed this project in the *Republic* with his idea of communal families. It has been a theme of utopian proposals ever since. But the claims of justice have always proved to be weaker than the claims of love. On a much larger scale, the same has been true of states, which can neither deny the injustice of the distribution of resources among them, nor deny the priority of obligations of care within their own borders.

Family teaches that the center of meaning in our lives is an experience that is recalcitrant to the norms of reason. There is, for example, no love behind the Rawlsian veil of ignorance – a domain of pure, practical reason. But those who are in love will most certainly decline the invitation to retreat behind the veil. They already know what they must do, and it is not to act justly. It is to realize the object of their love. Only one form of love can compete with another. When Americans proclaim that they support the troops even as they disagree with the justice of the government policy that put the troops in harms way, they are acting on love. But when American mothers descend on army recruiters and prevent them from talking to their children, familial love opposes love of nation. A good measure of democratic war-making is that the mothers must willingly sacrifice their children for the state. This is a coincidence of the communities of love. Of course, this hardly guarantees that democratic wars will be just. The whole point is that love is no protection against injustice.

If we left matters here, we might think that the problem of evil is that love is incommensurate with justice. Many acts and relationships that we cannot justify will be the outcome of love. No just redistribution is possible because of the circumstances of love. Only if we could love everyone equally could we imagine the realization of perfect justice. If we were all saints, the distinction between love and justice might collapse. We would be back to the

Church as a universal community. But while we might aspire to a universal love, the love we actually know is characterized by boundaries: my family, my church, and my nation. These boundaries describe the circumstances of love and inevitably establish a space of injustice.

From Injustice to Evil

Reason will always offer injustice as the meaning of evil. But if justice and love are incommensurable, attempting to measure love by justice is a category mistake. That care for the object of my love keeps me from acting as I should toward others is unjust, but it is not evil. Politically, we see this with the problem of the illegal immigrant: Americans act unjustly toward the Mexican who seeks entry, but that exclusion is not evil. If love and justice belong to different normative orders; so, too, do evil and injustice. To understand evil, we have to understand the pathologies of love, not the limits of justice. The problem of evil arises most acutely not in the injustices done to those outside of the boundaries of love, but rather in the terrible things that are done in the name of love itself.

To describe love as “self-transcendence,” as I do above, points us in the right direction.

At stake in love are the limits of the finite self. The subject always stands both within and without those limits. We find ourselves living at a particular moment and place, but the whole of space and time appears within our consciousness. In the Western religious tradition, the cosmos is understood as the product of God’s mind – the willing of the logos into being. The human mind is an image of the divine mind, for it, too, contains the whole of the cosmos – now as representation rather than will. This capacity of mind to transcend every limit explains why we recoil with a kind of existential anxiety when we are presented with the idea that time and space may themselves have limits. Immediately, we want to know what is on the other side of those

limits. When we are told that the question cannot be asked, we literally feel an offense to the human condition. Contemplating the end of time or the limits of space, our instinct is to rebel in just the same way that we refuse to accept the limits of the finite self. Finitude expanded to the limits of space and time is still finitude.

To a mind that encompasses the whole of the cosmos, the limits of the body represent a kind of metaphysical scandal. Plato already saw that every idea takes us beyond finitude. His myth of a pre-birth experience of the Ideas is the philosophical equivalent of the Genesis myth of the naming of God's creation. Both affirm the limitless quality of ideas. We want, however, not just to know, but to be, beyond limits. In terms of the myths, we want to recover life before birth; we want to recover Eden. Both the Socratic and biblical traditions respond that we cannot overcome finitude by reason alone. Love is our only answer to the scandal of death.

Finding ourselves in love, we find that the limits of the finite body are not the boundaries of the self. In love, I know exactly who I am, but I know it by being more than myself. Love, accordingly, is not just an interest in the other, but rather a finding of the self in the other. Love is always felt as an expansion and a relief, even when it is mired in tragedy, for in love being and meaning coincide. That coincidence is the disappearance of the boundary; it is the presence of the infinite in the finite, which is the very definition of the sacred. The self-transcendence of love is the truth of the self for which we will literally die.

The forms of love are diverse and culturally varied, but the action of love is always the same. To love is to sacrifice. Not to claim, but to give the self. Sacrifice is the outward form, the objective appearance, of the self-transcendence that is the end and means of love. We could not make sense of someone who claimed that he loved but was unwilling to sacrifice himself for

the sake of his love. We would say that he confused desire with love, self-interest with self-transcendence. To sacrifice is to make sacred; it is to find an ultimate meaning – the infinite – in the finite.

Love is the condition of being that is commensurate with our awareness that we exceed every border, that we are and must be more than the finite self. Love promises to turn death to sacrifice, the meaningless of nonbeing into the fullness of being. Every tradition of love tells us the same thing: we find the truth of a limitless self only when we are willing to sacrifice the finite self. Through death is life: this is the very bedrock of faith in the West. If it is not so, we literally could not live with ourselves, for death is unacceptable to a mind that knows no limits. To have knowledge but not love is an image of Satan; it is an existential failure beyond injustice.

Evil arises out of the pathologies of love, which are the failures of sacrifice. Sacrifice can fail in two ways, corresponding to the fundamental ambiguity of the term: do I sacrifice another or do I sacrifice myself? The pathology corresponding to the first is the passage from sacrifice to murder; corresponding to the second is the passage from martyr to victim. In both cases, the self-transcendence of love fails and we are left with only the destruction of the finite body.

Sacrifice will always appear as murder to the victim who does not share the faith. To be sacrificed to an alien god is indistinguishable from being the victim of murder. That act can be just another form of the injustice arising out of the circumstances of love: we will defend our own, even when it means injuring the other. We move beyond injustice to evil when the object of love is murdered. The general shape of this phenomenon is jealousy. When the object of my love rejects that love, the reaction can be a murderous rage. This is not just a psychological

reaction. King Lear is not in need of therapy when he turns on his daughter. He is raging at the limits of life – his own death – which he has been forced to acknowledge by his daughter’s silence.

At stake in the relationship to the beloved is the overcoming of the limits of the self. Exactly because these limits are at stake, love is fraught with the possibility that it is death, not its transcendence, that one will discover. In the loved child or spouse one cannot help but see one’s own death. I literally stand in their place and see myself through their eyes. When I cannot stand that vision of the dying body, which is the self, the reaction can be a murderous rage. Refusing to see those limits, I will insist that I not be seen at all. Lear says to Cordelia, “avoid my sight!” but what he cannot bear is that she will look upon him. This is an entirely familiar phenomenon in families and states.

The parent or spouse who insists that he will see only himself in the other, that he is always subject and never object, is engaging in a kind of spiritual murder of the beloved. The child can just as easily return the favor of looking upon the parent as an object, for it is as objects that we die. To be looked upon can be the source of an experience of humiliation that is the opposite of love. The failure of love is always experienced as humiliating, because it is exactly the return to the bounded, dying self. To avoid the possibility of humiliation, we will abuse the object of our love. The political form of this abuse has a rich history in the sovereign who can look at others but cannot be the object of any other’s gaze. He looks out upon the state and sees only himself. With respect to both parent and sovereign, the transcendence of the finite self is perilously close to the act of murder. So close that we often cannot disentangle love from evil

within the intimacy of the family or the state. Is it love or humiliation that binds subject to sovereign and child to parent?

In love, one becomes a part of all that is; evil displaces love when one insists that everything is a part of the self. There can be a very thin line between these two ways of being. The move from love to evil can be as quick as the rise of jealousy. Metaphorically, the evil subject claims that he alone will live, while everyone else must die. His is the power of life and death, not because he finds life through death, but because he projects death on to the other. Freud's myth of the patriarch shows us a similarly murderous response. The rage that powers war is, I suspect, often a variation on this form of evil. The enemy always denies the self-transcending truth of the nation: if their god exists, then ours is a mere idol. One proves the truth of one's faith by the murder of the other.

Murder is one form of failure of love, victimhood is the second. When we look at the record of a defunct faith – religious or political – we see the killing and the being killed, we do not see those deaths as a making present of the sacred. Once faith has died, there is no memory of the gods to be recovered. What is true of the consideration of the past can become equally true of ourselves. We can lose the faith that informs sacrifice. When faith fails, what had been seen as an act of self-sacrifice will seem no more than a senseless act of self-destruction. Fleeing death, I find I welcomed it. When love of state fails, the acts of sacrifice that had been grounded in the self-transcendence of love appears as nothing but a killing and being killed for no good reason at all. No longer martyrs, we are victims of evil. Sacrifice for the state is haunted by the fear that the act will be revealed as nothing more than a waste of life.

Are Americans today engaging in the “ultimate sacrifice” in Iraq or are they only victims? If they no longer have faith, they can no longer think of themselves as making present the transcendent meaning of the sovereign. If they are not offering themselves in sacrifice, the state becomes an engine of self-destruction. Americans knew this phenomenon in Vietnam: the combatant could not understand himself as making a sacrifice. But if not engaged in sacrifice, then he was simultaneously murderer and victim. Or consider the threat of nuclear weapons today. These weapons are possible politically because of an imagination informed by love: loving the nation, one is willing to sacrifice everything for its sake. But as soon as that love falters – and it inevitably will – we see only the threat of mass murder of ourselves and others. We can no longer understand how we brought ourselves here.

We can never detach sacrifice from victimhood because there is no final answer to the problem of finitude. There is no self-transcendence without doubt, and at the moment of doubt love is indistinguishable from evil. Even Abraham must have wondered whether his sacrifice of Isaac was an act of love or of evil. And was Isaac’s faith strong enough to see his own sacrifice as an act of love and not victimhood? Is this not exactly the position of the young men we send out to fight the state’s wars today?

The miracle is the faith that can sustain love in the self-transcending act of sacrifice. Isaac lives through faith, but family, state, and nation have sacrificed countless Issacs and one must wonder if their faith held. A culture that finds its highest meaning in sacrifice will never be able to separate love from evil. Through death is life: we must believe this, but we find that we cannot. When we cannot, we are left only with death. That is an impossible position, so we are thrown back into the endless cycle of love and evil.

We cannot understand our politics without understanding it as a product of the imagination. Western political theory imagines contract and individual well-being as the origin and end of the state. But practice has not matched theory. The origin and maintenance of the nation-state have been based on the phenomenon of sacrifice. The state has been a matter of love, before it was a matter of justice. Politics, no less than religion, has occupied the space of transcendent meaning. For a very long time there was nothing hidden about this at all: Western politics was organized under a sacral monarch, who imitated Christ as the point of the infinite in the finite: the monarch was the mystical corpus of the state. There were not just relationships of analogy among family, church, and state. They all intersected in the being of the sacral monarch. Modern political theory mistakenly confused the democratization of our politics with the descralization of the state. It was nothing of the kind. The intersection of sovereign, family, and faith remained what it had been, but it was now generalized across the entire citizenry. The popular sovereign was the modern locus of the transcendent meaning of the state. Citizen participation in that sovereign remained a matter of love and sacrifice, not consent and justice.

Until we confront the claim of the state to the sacred, we will never comprehend the evil done its name. We will think that the cure for evil is justice and the source of justice is more and better law – human rights law. But we have been engaged in that project of law creation for well over 100 years now, and we have made little progress on the problem of evil. There is no progress to made in this direction for the only answer to evil is love. But evil is so deeply connected to love that we are never able to disentangle one from the other.

Evil and European Humanism

Evil and injustice are inseparable from the power of love. The different ways in which they relate to love reflect the double character of the sources of European humanism. One branch of European humanism reaches back to classical antiquity. This branch begins with the rediscovery of the Greek and Roman classics in the early Renaissance, reintroducing the study of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic – as well as the natural sciences – into the European curriculum. This provides one source of our sense that humanism is an oppositional practice – that is, opposition to the Church's claim to control the content and boundaries of European culture. Out of this reaching back came a new belief in the powers of reason, including a belief that reason could be the foundation of a secular community founded on justice. The practical goal and the ideal measure of our political and social arrangements was to be justice.

This first strand of European humanism identifies evil with injustice. It is not equipped to respond to the sources of evil when they are not the failure of reason, but the power of love. The theory of justice will always be overwhelmed by family, church, and state, all of which begin with love and end in injustice. This strand of the humanist tradition has nevertheless dominated theory in the West, which is why we have political theories that never reach the phenomenon of the political and no theory at all of the sacrificial source of political meaning.

The second strand of European humanism, however, finds its source within the Christian imagination. At its center is the paradigmatic act of sacrifice for love. Not secular justice but the realization of the infinite in the finite is the theme running through much of the Western tradition of art, architecture, and literature. The mistake of the humanist is to think that this idea of the sacred, which is the source as well of our idea of the romantic, stands opposed to the

political order. Our politics of sacrifice and sovereignty – a politics that precedes law and justice – emerges out of precisely this formation of the imagination.

Just as European humanism has drawn on reason and love, Western politics has been about both justice and sacrifice. Like so much else in the Western inheritance, political experience stands at the intersection of both strands – that of Athens and that of Jerusalem. Unless, we keep both of these sources in view, we will confuse evil with injustice. When we do so, we not only fail theoretically, we will fail practically as well. This hardly means that we can formulate a practical program of reform with the ambition of overcoming evil. Love is not like that. Evil is beyond our power to cure. So, too, is finitude, and it is out of the flight from death that evil arises. European humanism is not to blame for our history of evil. Rather, it draws upon exactly the same sources as that history, the eros and dust of Auden's great poem.