

## THE RIDDLE OF HUMAN EVIL: TOWARD A NATURAL THEODICY

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### PRECIS:

Evil is surely one of history's ongoing conundrums: "The web of our life," wrote Shakespeare, "is a mingled yarn, good and ill together." How to tell one from the other? The 20th century, whose advent was hailed as the dawn of civilization's greatest promise, has been horribly pockmarked by violence and genocidal crimes: there is a veritable conspiracy against the sacredness of life. insists Saul Bellow's Mr. Sammler. This paper attempts to come to terms with human evil by means of a natural theodicy. A humanist anthropology enabling us to explain credibly what Immanuel Kant once called "the foul taint in our race" is long overdue. But a mere academic concept of evil would be too cognitive, a mere narrative too lacking in theoretical persuasiveness, a mere psychology too arbitrary, a mere metaphysics too esoteric. The challenge before us is further complicated by the fact that as moral discernment has suffered in our time, an appropriate and convincing vocabulary - neither religious nor scientific nor ethical - is readily available to us. And yet the issue must be freshly and forcefully joined; for evil is real and can't be ignored. If Western theology has often resorted to postulating an aboriginal sinfulness personified in the figure of Satan, liberalism in general has been content to settle for environmental factors, as explicative of the emergence of human evil. Evil, however, does not simply erupt, it is committed by human beings. It begins as a choice, it develops as an act, it ends as a lethal transaction between two or more people. As such it is subject to judgment and analysis. Therefore a humanist anthropology would suggest we look to the breakdown of human responsibility in order to find the ingredients for a modern taxonomy of evil.

"If a natural theology can be argued from the putative universal human experience of the good, then a natural diabolology can be argued from the putative universal experience of evil."

- Forrester Church, *The Devil and Dr. Church*<sup>1</sup>

"The problem posed by the Newtonian (cosmology) was...*the problem of a new theodicy*. If the new nature was so regular and beautiful, then why (did evil persist) in the human world? ... Something entirely different had to be done to explain evil a theodicy without Divine intervention. The new theodicy had to be a natural one, a 'secular' one ...Furthermore, as God was gradually eliminated from science as an explanatory principle, the need for a complete theodicy also vanished ... Consequently, (one) had to settle for a new *limited* explanation

...which would cover only *those evils that allow for human remedy...*"

- Earnest Becker, *The Structure of Evil* 2

the propensity to evil ...is universal, ...woven into human nature ... (it) can inhere only in the moral capacity of the will. But nothing is morally evil but that which is our own act... (...brought upon us by ourselves)... Yet at the same time it must be possible to *overcome* (such a corrupt propensity), since it is found in ... a being whose actions are free ... genuine evil (occurs when one) does not *will* to withstand those inclinations (that) tempt (one) to transgress - so it is really this disposition that is the true enemy.....

- Immanuel Kant, *On the Radical Evil in Human Nature* 3

## THE THEME

If humanism stands pre-eminently for anything, it is, as Protagoras declared long ago, that human beings, whatever the nature of their claims, owe it to themselves to be the ultimate measure of all things. We may take leave of our senses, we still can't escape from ourselves. One of the things in human life which we cannot evade is the existence of evil. Freud taught that we cannot achieve real inner strength until we admit to the existence of the darker, if not sometimes downright malevolent impulses in our own natures, such admission being the prelude to learning how to cope with, if not otherwise transform, these negative energies into positive, or at least, less hurtful expression. Theologian Sam Keen, who likes to bring the mystical and psychoanalytic traditions to bear upon one another, suggests: "The way to get to the light is by dealing with the darkness."<sup>4</sup> Writing in 1930, Freud summed up the dilemma thusly: "The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction."<sup>3</sup>

## FATAL ATTRACTIONS

Toward the end of 1987 the movie, *Fatal Attraction*, had racked up impressive revenues and audience ratings. The film is a Rohrshach for every viewer - hence its widespread appeal. One might even argue that it was an unintended early epitaph for a decade given to extravagance on every level. Though cast in the mold of a typical lurid thriller, *Fatal Attraction* not only tapped into the 1980s "mood of sexual malaise" between men and women<sup>6</sup> it is adumbrated a taxonomy of human evil in the form of a conventional morality tale. It pits Dan and Beth Gallagher, an upscale New York yuppie couple, against Alex Forrest, a literary editor who easily seduces Dan into a torrid weekend affair while his wife and children are out of town. Sexuality and rage mingle to generate the film's mounting tension.

The movie's original ending had Alex slitting her throat with a knife covered with Dan's fingerprints, thus implicating him as the murderer. Test audiences found this denouement unsatisfying, their emotions had clearly been aroused against Alex. Marketing strategy called for Alex to be killed by Dan's long-suffering wife, Beth, who thereby becomes the righteous avenger of a picture-perfect American family's break-up. When Beth shoots Alex through the heart, she of course also ends the life of the baby in Alex's womb -- the child of evil whom Dan had fathered and Alex refused to abort. Good, having struggled mightily with evil, once more triumphs in the end, the conventional moral universe is restored, the demands of Christian eschatology have been satisfied.

For our purposes here, what's particularly striking is the evolution of Alex into an incarnation of unrelenting evil. Evil is not an absolute given, it is a spatio-temporal phenomenon that emerges and grows in specific contexts. There is a passing suggestion in *Fatal Attraction* that Alex was probably abused by her father and as an adult has been rejected or used by the men she has cared for. She has freely and lovingly given of herself to yet another man, Dan Gallagher, who tries to distance himself from any responsibility for her reactions to him. This causes Alex finally to snap, whereupon she declares virtual war against Dan and his family. Alex is going to avenge herself for all the hurts she has presumably experienced in her relationships thus far. Having envisioned herself repeatedly as a victim of other people's hardness of heart, she rebels against her accumulated powerlessness and devises an entire repertoire of vengeful acts for getting even. Quickly descending into the terminal chaos of psychosis, she now methodically turns her roiling inner energies outward. Only death will stop her, and, as we have seen, it does.

#### **THE ENEMY WITHIN**

A humanist theory concerning the origins of good and evil would suggest that there are processes within our psyches that are actuated by our own will: we make choices, consciously and/or unconsciously, to come to terms with whatever developments and events take place in our lives. Kant the philosopher was characteristically uninterested in what human life actually is in all its ambivalence, he was interested only in what it should be. The psychology of confused motivations was of little consequence to the Konigsberg professor. What he held to was a deontological ethics: evil bursts forth from us when we choose not to exercise sufficient willpower to withstand the impulse to hurt others. In short, the enemy, as Pogo would say, is us - and, as Kant would add, is within.

Since, as Kant observes, the propensity to evil is universal, ineluctably a part of human nature and abundantly actualized in human history, it logically follows that evil, like good, is brought into being by an act of will. In this scheme of things the notion of an exterior evil force that allegedly sucks us into its vortex is dismissed out of hand as a cop-out. Kant had little patience, for example, with St. Paul's confession in *Romans:7* that he, Paul, doesn't do what he'd really like to do because sin has entered him, c~using him to do that which he hates. If we can actuate evil, says Kant,

- 17) Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, p. 133.
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- 19) "Psycholgists report anyone can be trained to inflict torture," A.P., *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Jan. I, 1987, p. 13a.
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- 23) Harbison, *Deliberate Regres.-ion*, p. 205.
- 24) Friedrich, Otto, "Mengele: Non Requiescat in Pace," *Time Magazine*, June 24, 1985, p. 90.
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- 27) Breytenbach, *Confessions*, p. 458.
- 28) See, for example, "Children Who Kill," *Newsweek*, November 24, 1986, pp. 93-94.
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- 32) Quoted in Bugliosi, *Helter Skelter*, p. 655.
- 33) Quoted in Robinson. David, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1985, p. 140.
- 34) Quoted in Marler, "Facing the Enemy Within....."

## THE ANATOMY OF EVIL: A HUMANIST ANALYSIS

Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton has recently completed some compelling research about the Nazi doctors, several of whom he has interviewed. How was it possible to be a professional custodian of life yet inflict death? Generally speaking, Lifton concludes that evil is neither inherent in any self nor alien to it but that under certain kinds of moral and psychological conditions it can emerge. Lifton proposes a theory of "doubling" in which the self dissociates from itself, breaking off and creating a complete other self. The result is two unrelated functioning wholes each of which acts as an entire self, thus achieving an illusion of wholeness. This, cautions Lifton, is not to be confused with classical schizophrenia. To understand such psychological duplicity, Nazi ideology has next to be taken into account. To be a Nazi doctor was to fulfill a patriotic duty by engaging in acts of biological purification: one helped restore the Nordic race to its purity by removing various cancers from its body - Jews, Communists, gays, gypsies, the handicapped. Thus the killing carried out by one self could be justified by the healing activity of the other self: one healed the race by removing defective people. Inflicting death with this end in view would supposedly lead to immortal life for the Aryan race. National Socialism was therefore applied biology.

Literary harbingers of "doubling" include Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the figure of Faust, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. What's especially sobering about Stevenson's cautionary tale is that Jekyll dies *as* Hyde: in effect evil has overwhelmed good. With the Nazi doctors the rational self, having suppressed all moral proclivities, thus gave birth to a full hideous self, as Jekyll is Hyde's creator. Similarly in Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*, a modern myth about the origins of evil, Dr. Frankenstein in his unrelenting, morally neutral quest for knowledge, creates an eight-foot bionic fiend for whose existence he subsequently denies responsibility. Significantly, Frankenstein is the scientist's name - his monstrous creation, who in effect becomes his mirror image - his double - has none.

Lifton's analysis may help illuminate what St. Paul was getting at, what Ted Bundy is saying about himself: that is, some aspect of a person, usually held in check, for whatever reasons suddenly takes over one's normal, civilized self and temporarily transforms it into a full other self. Sociologist Georg Simmel once observed: "There exist evil hearts whose very thought and longing runs the whole gamut of a cruel and selfish mind, without actually crystallizing into evil deeds."<sup>12</sup> With a doubling of personality the crystallization of evil intent into an evil deed is completed.

The potential for doing evil, for succumbing in whole or in part to our less positive emotions, exists in all of us - as individuals and as nations. What keeps most of us from committing barbaric acts in particular, as opposed to the daily mean things we may do, is moral restraint instinctive or conscious, our fear of legal retribution and, not least, our dreams and fantasies. However, once we plan to enact in real life a murderous dream, fantasy or impulse, we have crossed over into the realm of evil. The basic

with Emerson, as many religious liberals did well into this century, that there is a moral law inherent in the very nature of the cosmos which guarantees ultimate justice, thereby rendering evil metaphysically self-correcting in the long run and consequently requiring relatively little assistance from us for its removal. Nor can we comfortably accept another classic liberal position, epitomized by the 1917 Universalist Declaration of Social Principles, that evil is basically "the result of unjust social and economic conditions," implying that the amelioration of those conditions will necessarily preclude evil thereafter.<sup>33</sup> The latter, though a more worldly view than the former, by tracing the origins of evil to material circumstances nonetheless neglects the reality of willed human choice.

If evil is seen as metaphysical, grounded eternally in the universe either as a principle, as in Manicheanism, or personified in a figure like Satan, as in Christian doctrine, then its origins are conveniently removed from history, allowing one to claim that some force outside one's control is responsible for the harm one does to others. Metaphysical explanations thus tend to exempt individuals from responsibility for their own behavior. The fact is that humans often knowingly do evil to one another.

What the Dracula tradition teaches is that evil spreads as it is passed from one victim to another in the form of suffering: once bitten by a vampire, one becomes a vampire. This chain of malice can only be broken when one who has been touched by it is morally and spiritually sufficiently self-possessed to absorb and transcend the evil and not pass it on further. If the world is in part demented, we must learn to share its emotional chaos while striving to preserve our own humanity, just as a sane visitor to a mental hospital can share a patient's disjointed feelings while maintaining in one's own mind the standard of mental health.

We owe it to ourselves, then, to be faithfully active in the struggle against evil whether we find it in ourselves or in others. We need to watch for it in our own lives in the little, often imperceptible ways it begins. If we merely like what's good and are disgusted by what's bad and don't stand up to it when we should, we help increase the amount of harm in the world through indifference or lack of courage. "If you want to become a loving person," Sam Keen suggests, .., "Discover all the ways in which you are hateful, in which you make yourself superior to other people, or undercut them. By looking at that, there's a strange kind of transformation process that happens."<sup>34</sup> If we hate evil with a greater passion than we love what's good, then we'll add to the world's hatred by becoming self-righteous avengers. To denigrate others is to denigrate oneself, something that official torturers never understand. Breytenbach wisely admonishes us that if we wish to remain whole - not fragmented by the world's evils - then we must recognize the humanity of our enemies, which is a more sensibly proportional response than forcing ourselves to love them. A vivid awareness of this truth gives us life; to act on that awareness reduces the incidence of harm in the world. Humanity is capable of self-correction - how else shall we redeem ourselves? Human nature is supple and we should aim to keep it so. "I know of no more encouraging fact," said Thoreau, "than the unquestionable ability of people to elevate their lives by a conscious endeavor...."

If Mary Shelley's myth about the origins of evil was cast in the form of a 19th-century Gothic horror tale, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is a 20th-century moral fable about what can happen when civilized restraints dissolve altogether in the absence of an ethical legacy transmitted by the adults of a society. Chaos erupts when a group of English boys marooned on a desert island gradually degenerate in their responsibility toward one another and end up trying to kill each other. Golding describes the theme of his own novel as follows: "... an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature... the shape of a society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on any political system however apparently logical and respectable."<sup>13</sup> In other words, evil is an obdurate, palpable force which not even a good society can eliminate, at best it can only resist or attenuate it. The novel's central symbol is the "lord of the flies," an ancient classical designation for the Devil, signifying devotion to deception, decay and destruction. It's the old Greek struggle between Apollo and Dionysus here translated as the struggle between Ralph, the rationalist representative of civilization, and Jack, the representative of wildness and anarchy, who rushes into the resultant social vacuum in order to assert naked power with unabashed ruthlessness.<sup>16</sup> The climax of the conflict between the children of light and the children of darkness is the brutal killing of the sow: the pig's head is then cut off and impaled on a stick stuck in the ground. There follows an amazing scene: Simon's hallucinatory "interview" with the head in whom he espies "that ancient, inescapable recognition", namely - the recognition of the human capacity for evil and the frailty of moral systems and institutional safeguards to obviate its actualization. " 'Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill' said the head... You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close!"<sup>17</sup> At the conclusion of this fantastic vision Simon imagines he is looking into a vast black mouth into which he is sucked. The mouth of the Beast/ Lord of the Flies symbolizes evil, a wholly inimical, irrational, insatiable force. Comparison with Conrad's Kurtz who opens his mouth wide as he lies dying - as if he were about to take the world and everything in it with him - is apt.

Sometimes called the Solzhenitsyn of South Africa, Breyten Breytenbach, writing in 1983, puts it tersely in his powerful testament, *The True Confessions of An Albino Terrorist*: "Humans are fragile. It is not difficult to bring out the worst in them."<sup>18</sup> Contrary to popular illusion, numerous case studies reveal that almost any normal, well-adjusted human being can be turned into a professional torturer or killer, a *controlled* monster. Surprisingly enough, sadists and perverts cannot be reliably trained.<sup>19</sup> Breytenbach, an uncompromising opponent of apartheid who was tortured in one of the world's most brutal prison systems, quotes *Tai-ji Quan* by Jean Gortais on the flyleaf of his book: "If I were to know my nature well," writes Gortais, "I should be knowing universal nature." It's precisely because most of us don't know ourselves very well and don't care to admit to unpleasant truths about ourselves that we find it difficult to understand why other people can do unimaginably bad things to one another. If we have never witnessed physical brutality, or if we have been exposed to an antiseptic niceness in human relationships, we will find it

hard to believe that evil takes place in the world despite daily newspaper stories to that effect. De Stogumber, the old rector in G.B. Shaw's *St. Joan*, allows as how it wasn't until he saw Joan burned at the stake that he really understood the nature of human villainy. This suggests why eager proponents of capital punishment owe it to themselves to attend in person the execution of criminals by the state.

#### A THEODICY WITHOUT DIVINE INTERVENTION

In the Middle Ages evil was popularly held to have been caused by Adam's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. God, however, would see to it that good ultimately triumphed over evil; traditional theodicy would justify God's holiness and power in establishing a world in which evil nonetheless continued. Although the earth was regarded as a decaying, ugly, hostile place presided over by Satan, chief of the fallen angels, heavenly bliss in the next life would be compensation enough. Starting in the 17th century, however, the whole Western worldview gradually got turned around: nature was back in humanity's good graces, reevaluated as beautiful as in the days of the Greeks: no longer the sphere of sin where the concupiscence of the flesh had its way but of natural laws which revealed God's mathematical mind. Human reason coupled with an innate moral sense was now perceived as the God within, enabling mere mortals to decipher God's ways and purposes. The world, suddenly perceived as good again, became the domain of science rather than a way station to otherworldly satisfactions. But eventually, a terrible problem was posed: if nature was so grand and orderly and humanity no longer innately depraved, why did evil still persist in the human world? Why were people still doing bad things to one another?<sup>20</sup>

Moral laws hitherto had been sanctified by religion. When the Enlightenment exposed the frailties of Christianity, it also weakened its moral credibility. In its place a scientific determinism was substituted - Newtonianism - which so bound the human will in the ethical realm that people were held no more responsible for their conduct than they had been under a theologically-sanctioned determinism.<sup>21</sup>

Sin was thus precluded. But this denial of sin reopened the whole question of evil. Are we in control of our lives and responsible for the actions we undertake, or are we not?

A naturalistic, secular explanation for evil without benefit of God or Satan was called for, but few thinkers cared to answer the call. Actually, what happened was that the Western world, increasingly bemused with its own secularization, gradually lost interest in the question of evil as a general religious category. This left people wide open to new modern evils that were not to be widely recognized as such - the evil of endless "low-intensity" warfare, of the misuse of science, of an industrialism that devalued human beings in favor of wealth and profit as ends in themselves. "By the time of Hiroshima," writes Becker, "it is fair to say, not only was the medieval theodicy long since dead, but the burning problem of good and evil was remote from most people's lives. At best, overcoming evil was 'a job to be done'..."<sup>22</sup>

Almost a half century after the Holocaust, however, interest in enigmatically radical evil – and in the hatred which feeds it – seems finally to be surfacing, as Elie Wiesel, winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, has recently pointed out. The issue arose internationally in 1985 when President Reagan planned to visit the Bitburg cemetery in West Germany; it arose again with the Klaus Barbie trial in France in 1987; it continues to fester in regard to the questionable Nazi activities of Austrian President Kurt Waldheim. It's no surprise that the unique savagery of Nazi Germany is the modern touchstone of this rising interest: after all, no political state before in history had devoted itself so explicitly to the wanton destruction of whole peoples: the Nazis simply gloried in valueless conflict. So far as Adolf Hitler was concerned, if Germany could not dominate the world, it had no reason to exist. In that event Hitler didn't want even his own people to survive, hence his insane insistence that they pledge allegiance to him personally! For the Nazis, the willingness to die for the Führer was the ultimate justification of a strong society. "Here," says Robert Harbison, "all meanings are reversed – reward is pain and opposites meet when *Gotterdammerung* is hailed as the new dawn."<sup>23</sup> The Nazis, having turned Germany into a nation of robots, had clearly reached the limits of spiritual oblivion; no harmony was left in their souls, Shakespeare might have said of them, so they were fit only for strategems and spoils.

In mid-1985 the remains of Josef Mengele were allegedly found in Brazil. There was little in the background of Dr. Mengele, Auschwitz's notorious 'Angel of Death'; to indicate the likely evolution of a human monster. Mengele was associated with the systematic slaughter of three million Jews, "probably the most concentrated expression of human evil in all of history," according to one assessment,<sup>24</sup> Here was a man who had acquired two doctorates and had studied the greatest moral philosopher of all time – Immanuel Kant, but what bulwark against acquiescence in the commission of brutality had his elegant education prepared him for? Even though traditional German education has hardly stressed the questioning of authority, an openly rational approach seems inadequate, too. Hence, as one critic puts it of the achievement of the late Lawrence Kohlberg: "...the reasonableness of Kohlberg's rationalistic (developmental) theory ... never fully came to grips with the problem of evil," probably because of the melioristic conviction that as human beings enter into more advanced stages of moral maturity, they will create conditions in which good progressively crowds out evil.<sup>25</sup> Mengele is a symbolic case study demonstrating the argument that evil is not hatched full blown but evolves as the result of a long string of decisions and choices. Various circumstances must have come together to elicit Mengele's potential for evil: his medical eagerness to experiment and his vaulting ambition were undoubtedly encouraged by Nazism's racist ideology, its anti-Semitic fury and fascist histrionics.

The opportunity to play god – whatever the playpen – is often too heady a wine for imperfect mortals to refuse to imbibe. When absolute power – or the appearance of it – is made available, the temptation to grab it can be overwhelming for balanced and unbalanced individuals alike. The familiar Genesis myth of Adam and Eve, which is richly illustrative of different inferences, suggests for our purposes that in longing for the knowledge of

the Tree of Good and Evil, Adam lusted for the ultimate source of Yahweh's power. For failing to subordinate himself, he was unceremoniously booted out of his heavenly abode. One of Amnesty International's circular letters in 1987 recounted the story of how police in a Third World prison, as they plied their obscene trade of torturing innocent citizens in their hermetically sealed chambers, bellowed, "We are God *in here*" (italics mine). When he was finally booked by the police, Charles Manson gave his name as "a.k.a. Jesus Christ, God."<sup>26</sup> Commenting on his prison experience, Breytenbach observes: "The interrogator's power is absolute and having the detainee know it is his most efficacious weapon, but ultimately it rots him utterly."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, both prisoner and torturer are spiritually degraded because they're locked in an embrace of mutual obscenity.

"Power *tends* to corrupt," said Lord Acton, but "absolute power corrupts absolutely" (italics mine). In *The Mosquito Coast* by Paul Theroux, Allie Fox, disgusted with the deterioration of American society and its values, carts off his family to a tropical Latin American country in order to start a fresh, presumably incorruptible life. Once more we witness what the heat of the jungle can do to the mind of one not used to it: in an environment in which he can also be an unencumbered boss, Allie goes from being an eccentric genius to a madman. He becomes megomaniacal: a technological rationalist par excellence, Allie gets locked into a terminal struggle with another absolutist, a Christian fundamentalist. Each believes he's absolutely right - in the end they both die. Absolute power, based as it is on total intolerance, not only corrupts, it annihilates completely. Divorced from the pursuit of justice, that is, unrestrained by limits, power becomes an end in itself and intoxicates those whom it touches. At that point individuals holding such power and criminals differ only in their situation, not their ethics. Absolute power is by definition evil: no finite being should be allowed to possess it.

To sum up: as the concentration camp brought together all the elements that made for an absolute universe, so did the jungle serve as the locus for the absolutization by power by Western imperialism in its most dynamic late-19th century phase. How, then, asked Conrad, does a human being descend into total savagery in such extreme circumstances? His answer is that the finite human mind, owing to its infinite possibilities, is capable of anything, including evil in every form. Neither God nor Devil are necessary to explain its emergence. Evil is constitutive of actual human experience because it is potentially constitutive of human nature. Evil is neither an aberration nor a misperception but a reality evoked by human choice. As Kant would say, it is evidence of free will's activity.

#### IS A TAXONOMY OF EVIL POSSIBLE?

Attempting scientifically to classify even admittedly evil acts in terms of their degree and kind is a nearly impossible task, if not a pointless one. Acts can be committed by fundamentally "good" or "sane" people as well as by fundamentally "bad" or "insane" people, and such acts can be premeditated or seemingly spontaneous. Scholars try over and again to

must be morally and spiritually imaginative in attempting to come to grips with this subject which is as elusive as it is real. The Holocaust, like the thumbscrew, represents unmitigated evil, yet it can hardly be adequately comprehended, as some have suggested, as a result of the emergence of "mass man." Even Hannah Arendt's celebrated phrase, "the banality of evil," in regard to Eichmann's bureaucratic mentality, can be invoked to the the point where it tells us nothing. Bruce Birchard, coordinator for the National Disarmament Program of the American Friends Service Committee, says he didn't get a true grasp on the dimensions of the Holocaust until he visited Auschwitz: "And then I understood. This was not the product of deranged and demented minds. This facility could only have been built by highly skilled and trained engineers and architects. Such an industry could only have been run by educated and well-trained bureaucrats and administrators. The real creators and operators of the Holocaust could not have been monsters. They had to be reasonably sane and competent people, and many must have seemed quite decent. They were involved in institutions and bureaucratic structures which somehow diffused responsibility for the monstrous evil being perpetrated, but, as the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal decided, this did not relieve them of responsibility..."<sup>30</sup>

Exactly so! It's in the area of personal responsibility where ingredients for a humanist taxonomy of evil are ultimately to be found, if at all. Hardly a day goes by when we are not either morally growing or in decline. Morality is a function of human relations, evil subverts that function, it is an act committed against individuals by individuals. As 1986 ended, the nation was shocked by news of the beating of three blacks in Queens, New York by white teenagers who resented the presence of unwelcome strangers on their turf. It's a small step from saying one doesn't belong in one's neighborhood to deciding someone has no right to exist. Any number of factors can combine to actuate that fateful step, but logically computing their sum does not guarantee when or if that step might actually be taken. Yet it's fair to say that the 1968 My-Lai group massacre of Vietnamese non-combatants by American soldiers could not have occurred absent the prior psychological degradation of Vietnamese to the symbolic impersonal level of "gookS."<sup>31</sup> The Jews of Germany were psychologically and legally assaulted long before they were rounded up for extermination. Thus evil grows gradually by what it feeds on, and this includes the non-response of moral neutrality as well as negative factors such as racism. The reiteration of harmful words and attitudes may, *if unchecked*, lead therefore to an overpowering act of baseness. As Charles Manson once remarked in court: "You can convince anybody of anything if you just push it at them all the time. They may not believe 100 percent, but they will still draw opinions from it, especially if they have no other information to draw their opinions from."<sup>32</sup>

RETHINKING HUMAN EVIL:  
AN UNSCIENTIFIC PRESCRIPTIVE POSTSCRIPT

The preceding survey of and commentary on human infamy yields some moral insights worth considering and acting upon. No longer can we hold

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- II) Lifton, Robert Jay, " 'Doubling' in Nazi Doctors - Patterns of Totalism and Genocide," Lecture Notes, International Conference on Tolerance for Diversity of Religion or Belief, Spring Hill Conference Center, Orono, MN, October 20, 1986.
- 12) Quoted in Introduction to *The Sacred in a Secular Age*, Edited by Phillip E. Hammond, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1985, p.3.
- 13) See Means, Richard L., *The Ethical Imperative*, Doubleday Anchor Books, Garden City, New York, 1970.
- 14) See Porch, Douglas, *The Conquest of the Sahara*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1984.
- IS) Golding, William, quoted by A. L. Epstein, "Notes on Lord of the Flies," *Lord of the Flies*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, Capricorn Press Edition, 1959, p. 189.
- 16) See Freud. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Freud's whole psychoanalytic assumption is that an eternal antagonism exists between the demands of instinct and the strictures of civilization.

establish, say, a taxonomy of young killers, denoting such traits as the senselessness or wantonness of the crime, but success in this enterprise is thus far elusive.<sup>28</sup> The rubric "serial killer" tells us little except that someone deliberately, methodically and at unpredictable intervals, dispatches a large number of human beings who mayor may not be known to the killer. That serial murders have astronomically increased in recent years is a dismally demonstrable statistic, but what does the statistic prove - that America is a nation where private violence ranks high compared with the other Western nations? That's not news anymore. Profiles of those who commit serial killings can be compiled, common denominators among their personalities and histories sought and researched, yet predictive clues concerning their behavior remain elusive because human beings, considered individually, are often an ultimate mystery. The year 1986 was notable for particularly grisly personal murders, and as I pondered many of them, I found that bafflement and horror at what had been done were the almost invariable responses of innocent bystanders, police and experts alike.

As human beings with a rational and moral streak running through us somewhere, we shake our heads at the apparent inexplicable irrationality behind the violence committed by a Charles Starkweather, a Ted Bundy, a James Oliver Huberty, a Charles Whitman, a Henry Lucas, a Gene Simmons - the names don't really matter, *what they did matters*, morally speaking, to those who believe there is something sacred about life. Ted Bundy, for example, once rhetorically commented that in view of the world's overpopulation, why should the death of a single individual bother anybody? What's the big deal about the loss of another life or two, be it by murder or due to the natural causes? The answer to such outrageous nonsense is that if the life of a single human being is unimportant, then the life of a whole people is equally lacking in significance. But why stop there? Why not say, to hell with the human race in general? This is the effect the central query raised in the hours-long documentary film, *Shoah* (which means "annihilation") by Claude Lanzmann. The Nazis deemed that those whom they killed were not even to be described as corpses or victims, only as "shit." That designation was, of course, a projection of the Nazis' own bottomless self-hatred spun out of their spiritual nihilism. Near the end of his life, Martin Luther King, Jr., who never ceased to be tormented by the world's multiple evils, confessed in a sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church - King could be restlessly self-critical- that "there is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us," there being a "strange mixture in human nature." We are at heart, divided creatures, he went on, so the great burden and challenge of life is to keep our higher self, as it were, in control of the lower.<sup>29</sup> The day after he delivered those words he was assassinated.

It should be clear by now that it would be a categorical mistake to believe that understanding evil and developing a humanist response to it can easily be couched in scientific terminology or logical concepts. Evil has been customarily treated as a theological problem while science is ill suited to answer ontological inquiries. Literature, by contrast, as we have seen, can be a potent vehicle for the presentation and exploration of evil. We simply

then as free beings we can also abort or overcome it. If we don't, we violate our every being, we commit spiritual suicide.

We could, of course, accuse Kant of being a cold-hearted rationalist. But Kant is first and foremost a moralist and will not let human beings off the hook of ultimate responsibility for their actions. Is there not indeed an element of choice, of self-indulgence, in almost every form of mental illness? Are not Dan Gallagher and Alex Forrest equally if differently responsible for the plight in which they find themselves? Hate, like insanity, can be contagious. After all, by the end of the movie, Dan has become as hateful as Alex and almost as murderous, just as in Euripides' play, *Hecuba*, victimized by wrongdoing, is tried beyond endurance and becomes a bloodthirsty wrongdoer herself.<sup>7</sup>

In the late 1970's Ted Bundy came to national attention as one of the nation's more notorious serial killers, an articulate, attractive charismatic young man to whom the FBI attributed three dozen murders. One investigator commented: "It's hard to accept that this normal-looking guy gets a kick out of killing people." Bundy had recounted that somehow an *entity* had grown within him, possessing him so fully as to deprive him of any sense of guilt.<sup>8</sup> Confessing to a need to possess his women victims completely, Bundy became a self-appointed avenging angel, dumping brutalized corpses unceremoniously everywhere. St. Paul, we may reasonably speculate, would be horrified when murderous or hateful feelings welled up in him, so he would do his best mentally to expel their grip upon him. Not so in Bundy's case. In December, 1987, the judge in Bundy's 1980 murder trial testified in Orlando, Florida that the defendant's legal abilities were exemplary, that his mind had not been impaired by drugs, that Bundy, in short, was a highly competent, essentially rational being. Though originally sentenced to death, legal appeals have kept Bundy alive and his attorneys are presently angling for a new trial on grounds of incompetency.<sup>9</sup> But if an element of choice is assumed to be part of every human action, must there not be some residual rationality, however insanely encased, which can be underscored as the locus of ultimate responsibility?

Can we allow the commission of evil, by either children or adults, to be psychologized away entirely? Is the total, or near-total loss of self-esteem, which is unbearable and often the trigger of suicide or of brutal aggression against others, to be accepted as caused exclusively by forces outside oneself? As Robert Harbison says of Adolf Hitler: "Few minds have been as full of plague and poison, mad dogs, paralysis, and howling as Hitler's and it is not surprising he sought an *external source*, (i.e. a Jew) which was putting them there" (*italics mine*).<sup>10</sup> The example of Hitler's madness has long since spawned parallel madness in others: it was hardly accidental that Charles Manson, a uniquely enigmatic mass murderer, had a swastika incised between his brows. In the hands of the Nazis the swastika became a symbol signifying power and inspiring fear.

moral point underlying Mary Shelley's novel is that evil never exists independently of the human life out of which it arises. The author shows us how the quest for power and social isolation can conspire to create conditions for the possible emergence of malevolence; significantly enough, the novel's subtitle is *The Modern Prometheus*. In his quest for the ultimate secret of life - in other words, unlimited power - Viktor Frankenstein had to cut himself off from all human relationships; his consequent tragedy is unquestionably of his own making

Joseph Conrad's Kurtz, chief protagonist of *The Heart of Darkness*-like Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein, like Bram Stoker's Dracula who has to feed on the blood of young virgins in order to keep replenishing his power - has also withdrawn from all challenging social contact. Since ethics has to do with the nature of human relationships, to withdraw from social contact is to diminish and enfeeble one's moral muscles to the point where they weaken irretrievably. Any viable social order rests upon a moral order to give it legitimacy.<sup>13</sup> When the only basis of a particular social or political configuration is power, ethics has disappeared altogether and barbarism has triumphed over civilization.

Conrad's, like Stevenson's, is a cautionary tale. It was inspired by an actual story, that of Major Barttelot, who originally accompanied the great British explorer, Stanley, into the Congo. But the Belgians weren't the only Western imperialists in Africa, there were also the British, the French, and the Germans. In particular did the bored French colonial adventurers covet the passive Sahara. Paul Vaulet, a French officer, became insane in the jungle's heat and rot and, crowning himself up as the "black chief," ended up looting Nigerian villages and displaying the heads of native victims on spikes.<sup>14</sup>

Madness and cruelty easily feed one another when the social/ cultural restraints in which one has been reared are absent - which is why, one suspects, the British insisted on their afternoon teas wherever in the world they happened to be. Conrad employs the jungle setting as an ideal backdrop for exploring the logic of atrocity. In his novel, the quest for African ivory is revealed to be a quest for power through greed. Kurtz is the greatest trader of them all, his success having made him feel superior to everyone else; isolated at a remote trading post, he has become a law unto himself. Even when he elicits the best in others, he does so for the purpose of dominating them. Indeed, Kurtz gives the impression of needing to swallow the whole earth in order to go on living. Having made a moral vacuum of himself, Kurtz has long since allowed the jungle to enter his hollow soul. In the end he can only mutter, "The horror! The horror!" - a terminal flash of awareness that he had chosen to become a monster, that is, a spiritually dead human being. A human monster, like Kilgore in his helicopter assault on a Vietnamese village in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, like anyone addicted to eliminating human life, feels more alive the more he kills (as opposed to professional assassins who simply approach their task as a job).