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## Undressing Evil: On the Language, Function, and Eradication of Evil

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**Undressing Evil:  
On the Language, Function, and Eradication of Evil**

**Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College**

**by  
Nelson Hilario**

**Annandale-On-Hudson, New York  
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## INTRODUCTION

It is not strange to think of atrocities when recalling historical events—whether one thinks of the Armenian genocide, the Mongol invasions, European colonization, the Holocaust, or the Inquisition. Rather than the exception, these brutal events are the rule; indeed, human history is a saga of bloodthirsty monstrosities, a saga of power and death. But these historic, and therefore indelible, “evils” seem so distant to us today that they are hardly intelligible, hardly real: how can we make sense of genocide or slavery if not by resorting to manageable and rather convenient explanations? They strike our generation as incidents which can be explained by the “demonic” or “monstrous” nature of the involved. This is what we are taught: that evil is something of the “deranged.” And if derangement does not suffice as an explanation, we will say with some confidence that some evils are simply necessary or inevitable. Most people today are quite persuaded that the barbarities of the past were the result of some kind of moral deficiency, some special historical circumstance. Evil feels necessarily distant because we do not see ourselves capable of it, it is produced always by *the other*, never by ourselves. This is not to say that people today do not see the brewing of evil when it begins to boil, or that people are blind to evil because they feel as though we have overcome it, what I am saying is that we are never instruments or potential instruments of evil—but always at the periphery, at the margin, looking at it with apprehension or heroic provocation, we are always *responding*, not acting, to threats. We have come to think that we have seen it all, that we have seen religious militancy and cruelty in its apogee, that we have witnessed the vicious and murderous products of racialism, tyranny, and terrorism, that we have looked at what man is capable of and stared straight into the heart of

pure evil...indeed, it is the feeling that at this point in history what is evil is *obvious*, and yet it is this very idea that “evil” is obvious (i.e., easily detectable) which wreaks havoc. We know what man is capable of, never what *we* are capable of—there’s the rub.

A youth reads the accessible literature on the Holocaust and can’t seem to understand the proportions and terrible “logic” of this episode, and to make some kind of sense out of it, baptizes Hitler a demon or “madman” and his followers mentally disturbed, racists, or slaves who, out of fear for their lives, chose to not turn against the dominant ideology. This is why Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* deeply startled the world: her analyses showed that Eichmann was neither “demonic nor monstrous,” but rather ordinary. This is the fear, the incontestable terror: that Eichmann was not demonic, but average, *not different from us in any obvious way*. Eichmann’s evil—according to Arendt—is not one that stems from a fanatical hatred or a vindictive nationalist attitude, but from “thoughtlessness”... careless compliance with authority, a mere desire to advance his career. Eichmann’s case gave birth to abundant questions about people’s *participation* (whether direct or indirect) in evil as a result of thoughtless submission to authority.

Rather than asking why there is evil in the world, as philosophers and theologians (among others) have done for centuries, this project will begin by asking a different set of questions: What is the origin of the concept of “evil”? What purpose does evil serve in our lives? Why do we let evil occur? And, if evil is not to be understood as a sign of madness or the demonic, how should we understand it? Is evil necessary? And, if not, do we have a moral responsibility to abolish it? We will be looking at Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Ernest Becker’s *Escape From Evil*, Roy F. Baumeister’s *Evil: Inside Human Violence*

*and Cruelty*, and David Pearce's *The Hedonistic Imperative* and "Reprogramming Predators" to explore these questions. In considering the nature of evil from a linguistic/historical (Nietzsche), psychological (Becker and Baumeister), and ethical (Pearce) standpoint, I will argue that evil and power are inextricable, that evil is the result of *weakness and fear*—specifically fear of death—rather than insanity or incomprehensible malice, and that the problem of evil is, broadly speaking, the problem of *suffering*—psychological, physical, and spiritual suffering. Lastly, I will make the case for the abolishment of suffering by leaning on the transhumanist philosophical movement to argue that the elimination of psychological suffering through designer drugs and genetic engineering is both sensible and tenable—justified, *realistic*. And that the abolishment of suffering in the natural world by "re-programming" predatory species is an urgent ethical issue, for we ought to take the suffering and paralyzing fear of non-human animals as seriously as we take that of human beings. Moreover, I will be contending that this abolishment of suffering is consistent with modern psychoanalytic theory, that is to say, *that leaning on technology to alter our biological constitution is a way out of a problem that otherwise would persist indefinitely*.

We will analyze Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* to look at "evil" through the optic of *power*. We will investigate the emergence of the concepts of "good" and "evil" in Nietzsche's genealogical history of "slave morality," and what that means to our discussion of the nature of evil. Furthermore, we will explore the relationship between the *need* to discharge power (of Nietzsche's "Masters") and "evil," and why this need to *affirm oneself* is pivotal to understanding the logic of *wanting to inflict* suffering to another man, and the place it held in pre-moral society. Finally, we will analyze the relationship between power, evil, and weakness to

argue that the discharge of power was (and is) more of a *defense mechanism* against feelings of inferiority or animality which these “types” of men, these “Masters” of Nietzsche, could not bear.

Becker will show us that evil—from quotidian malice to the Nazi concentration camps—springs from “...man’s natural and inevitable urge to deny mortality and achieve a heroic self-image”; we will learn that evil, more often than not, is a *response to evil* rather than unexplainable human cruelty. The human condition, as Becker sees it and as the most recent psychoanalytic literature has concluded, is an enormous problem: one has an awareness of oneself and one’s uniqueness, and of the fact of one’s mortality. This awareness of one’s towering uniqueness in nature and one’s inevitable total annihilation creates a bundle of issues in the human psyche; and it is these issues that are the root of most, if not all, of human activity—and so to apprehend “evil” we must understand the *agent of evil himself*. It is this fear of death, and all that it implies and produces, which causes hostility, cruelty, and wars. We will see that culture (and ideology) is that constituent of society that is in charge of maintaining the fear of death as invisible as possible—because it gives us a sense of order, meaning, and purpose; and most importantly, because the protection of our beliefs is priority, for if *the other* is right, *we’re* wrong, and if *we’re* wrong, we die. Through Becker, we will see that understanding what makes a child bully another, or why we humiliate (casually, sarcastically...with a grin) each other in the ways society deems admissible, or laugh at the expense of another, will help us understand what is it that produces murders, genocides, and armed conflicts. Baumeister will show us that evil is fundamentally in the eye of the beholder, that evil operates within the

framework of victim and perpetrator, and that evil is often justified and rationalized in terms of one's own interests.

Finally, we will delve into David Pearce's *The Hedonistic Imperative* and "Reprogramming Predators" to look at the problem of evil as, fundamentally, the problem of *suffering*. We will examine the evil of suffering from a contemporary and prescient perspective—considering the ethics and methods of abolishing suffering (which is to say "evil") via the development of biotechnology. We will seriously consider the possibility of eradicating human suffering through designer drugs and genetic engineering, and whether this is a sensible aim or not; lastly, we will consider the prospect of removing the ceaseless suffering of the natural world by "reprogramming" predators and prey—by designing an ecosystem that does not feature organisms tearing each other apart. In the end, this project aims to probe into the problem of "evil" from a multitude of disciplines, not only to look at "evil" from linguistic, psychoanalytical, philosophical, and contemporary lenses, but to merge them, and arrive at an integrated understanding of what we call "evil."

## **Chapter 1—**

### **The Birth of Evil: Power, Powerlessness, Guilt, and the "Bad Conscience"**

It is sensible, necessary even, to initiate an investigation of evil with Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*. In this text, Nietzsche not only undertakes the ambitious and overriding task of *disentangling* the various strands (an amalgam of historical, psychological, etymological, and psycholinguistic-al "strands") that compose what we call "morality," or to be more precise, what we call "good" and "evil," but Nietzsche asks us—forcibly and at times mockingly, with an

unrivaled disarming tone—to look at good and evil through the framework of *power*. I will argue that for Nietzsche the problem of “evil” (a problem which, following the *Genealogy*, poses itself only in a certain type of individual) is really the problem of power: evil (the concept of evil, the *labeling* of a person or thing as evil) is in point of fact a result of the antediluvian struggle for the attainment and exercise of power. In other words, as long as there are powerful and powerless, *there will be evil*—that is to say, an “evil” agent, a “victim,” an enmity, a “conflict.” I should stress that the need to attain or exercise “power” will be a recurring psychological phenomenon in our examination of evil, moreover an aid to understanding the mechanics of evil in any given society.

In Nietzsche’s first essay in the *Genealogy*, “‘Good and Evil, ‘Good and Bad’,” we are presented with an account of “Masters” and “Slaves” which designate two contrasting *types* of men; leaning on these two modes of experiencing the world and oneself (the mode of the “Master” and that of the “Slave”), Nietzsche lays the foundation of the history of morality, and attempts to answer the unthought-of (unthought-of because of its seeming and deceptive *obviousness*) question: under what conditions did man invent the values “good” and “evil”? Simply put, how did the idea of “good” and “bad” arise, and how did they evolve into “good ” and “evil” in the moral sense? As is customary in Nietzsche, his *Genealogy* is set in motion by problematizing the predominant narrative of the hitherto “history of morality”—in this case, it is the narrative put forward by the “English psychologists,” which is, according to Nietzsche, a contaminated account of the true origins of “good” and “evil.” Nietzsche condemns, at the outset of his book, the whacking misreading of history by the heretofore psychologists and philosophers who have attempted to trace the roots of morality:

The crass ineptitude of their genealogy of morals is immediately apparent when the question arises of ascertaining the origin of the idea and judgment of “good.” “Man had originally,” so speaks their decree, “praised and called ‘good’ altruistic acts from the standpoint of those on whom they were conferred, that is, those to whom they were *useful*; subsequently the origin of this praise was *forgotten*, and altruistic acts, simply because, as a sheer matter of habit, they were praised as good, came also to be felt as good—as though they contained in themselves some intrinsic goodness.” (3)

Nietzsche sees this explanation as “coherent” and “psychologically tenable,” but the *method* of explanation as tragically unhistorical: it is not the question that falters, it is the method, which seeks and locates the roots of “good” and “bad” in the wrong place.

What Nietzsche maintains is that the root of the judgment “good” is not to be found “among those to whom goodness was shown,” rather, it is to be found in the persons who, in essence, felt themselves “good,” and hence defined and exemplified the “good”—it is “...the aristocratic, the powerful, the high-stationed, the high-minded, who have felt that they themselves were good, and that their actions were good, that is to say of the first order, in contradistinction to all the low, the low-minded, the vulgar, and the plebeian” (3-4). The “good,” then, were the vigorous, the high-octane, the *affirmers* and *lovers* of life; to be sure, they were the ones who discharged their strength in varied and destructive ways, in establishing control and order, in relishing life as they pleased, in exercising their freedom and “superiority”...*not* the ones on which their strength was discharged. Nietzsche argues, and I think rightly, that at that point in time “goodness” had nothing to do with utility, but everything to do with power. We could say, then, that the “powerful” was *synonymous* with the “good,” and there is a historico-etymological basis for this reasoning: the “...higher dominant race coming into association with a meaner race, an ‘under race’, this is the origin of the antithesis of good and

bad” (4). This is a peculiar proposition, by no means facile, and it rests first and foremost on the understanding that it is the “Masters” who manage the specifics of language, or as Nietzsche expounds, “The masters’ right of giving names go so far that it is permissible to look upon language itself as the expression of the power of the masters: they say ‘this is that, and that,’ they seal finally every object and every event with a sound, and thereby at the same time take possession of it. It is because of this origin that the word “good” is far from...altruistic acts...in accordance with the superstitious belief of these moral philosophers” (4). The origin of the word “good” has to be necessarily traced back to the Masters’ mode of valuation, since it was the Masters who initially composed language and infused it with meaning.

As is implied in the difference between what the Master calls the “good” and what the Slave calls the “good” (which, as we will see, is secondary to an active, clearly delineated “evil,” or, in other words, dependent on the Master), the Master and the Slave view and experience the world and themselves in categorically dissimilar ways, meaning that the two modes of existence cannot be reconciled. I call attention to this ontological polarity because to understand what I will later refer to as the “dynamics of evil” (meaning the relationship between victim and perpetrator), one should be clear on how these two ontological states operate: while one type of man “predates,” that is to say expresses and exercises power, the other type is passive, and though it seeks to attain power in some form, it is marked by an inability to frustrate the “predator” from making of them their “prey.” The Slave revolt in morality is a result of this inability to respond to the terrible dynamics of the Masters. Resentful and resolved, the Slaves set out to demonize and bastardize the existing system of values (that of the Masters) in order to obtain some measure of “goodness.”

## 1. THE LANGUAGE OF WEAKNESS: ON THE BASTARDIZATION OF VALUES

“It is not surprising that the lambs should bear a grudge against the great birds of prey, but that is no reason for blaming the great birds of prey for taking the little lambs.”

— Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*

Having spoiled the notion that the origin of the “good” is to be found in the altruistic, which is to say the “useful” and “purposive” *concerning* [the interests of a community], Nietzsche goes on to examine the root of the word “good,” rather than its concept—which has been mutilated, disfigured, and re-shaped throughout the development of language and civilization. What he found was that in most languages the concept “good” evolved from the same elemental idea: “...everywhere ‘aristocrat,’ ‘noble’ (in the social sense), is the root idea, out of which have necessarily developed ‘good’ in the sense of ‘with aristocratic soul,’ ‘noble’ in the sense of ‘with a soul of high calibre,’ ‘with a privileged soul’ —a development which invariably runs parallel with that other evolution by which ‘vulgar,’ ‘plebeian,’ ‘low,’ are made to change finally into ‘bad’ (6). This is hardly surprising when we take a look at anthropological literature: courage, tenacity, willpower, strength, vigor and the like, were *particularly prized attributes* among early organized society, and for good reason, since it was these attributes which assured the survival and “progress” of a tribe or community—despite the violence, injustice, indifference, and brutality that would necessarily have accompanied these values. Naturally, those of a more “weak” constitution were not as esteemed or respected. I take the words “aristocrat” and “noble,” which can indeed be confounding given the distinctly dull and pecuniary associations they have today, to mean precisely this strength, this willpower, this vigor and energy that is forcefully released into the world, more often than not at the expense of those who can’t help themselves.

The slave revolt in morality initiates as a response to this powerlessness. Nietzsche argues that the revolt rests on a principle of “ressentiment,” which, turned creative, sought to establish a “proper outlet of action” through the process of bastardizing the inveterate values of the ruling class. This bastardization, this *reversal* of values, served three main purposes: first to disparage the values of the ruling class, to depict these values (and the individuals who hold them) as “evil,” and finally (and most importantly) to re-define “goodness” in their image so as to elevate themselves (17-30). As Nietzsche deridingly writes: “And the impotence which requites not, is turned to ‘goodness,’ craven baseness to meekness, submission to those whom one hates, to obedience... his forced necessity of waiting, gain here fine names, such as ‘patience,’ which is also called ‘virtue’; not being able to avenge one’s self... forgiveness... They also talk of the ‘love of their enemies’ and sweat thereby” (30). By cleverly disguising their weaknesses in “fine” language and a philosophy founded upon the merit (and eventual reward) of possessing their impotent traits and values, the Slaves succeeded in affirming their own “goodness,” but most importantly their own *kind* of strength—a strength based on meekness, honesty, and patience.

The term “strength” here is not ill-suited, though it may appear contradictory: from the perspective of the Master, these traits may well be symptoms of insufficiency; but from the point of view of the Slave, these traits are the very things that earn them their sense of worthiness and calibre, meaning that these weaknesses are in fact transfigured into strengths—to be capable of *renouncing sexual pleasure* is a “strength,” to be capable of *abstaining from taking revenge* is a “strength,” to be able to *love one’s enemies despite their wickedness* is a “strength,” to *renounce the acquisition of material goods and earthly pleasures* is a “strength.” This transfiguration is the

necessary base of the Slave's "creative act," is it the foundation of their narrative: the Slave is unable to attain the sexual gratification he wishes due to his inadequacy, unable to avenge himself due to his frailty, unable to hate due to his fear, and unable to attain the goods and pleasures he desires due to his lack of vitality and command. It is here that the Slave's creative trick is at play, to claim not to want what they desperately want, and furthermore to demonize what they want and exalt what they already have—which is a sort of "negative magic," for instead of congratulating themselves for what they *do have*, the Slaves congratulate themselves for *not having* what the "evil one" has. The Slave engages in a continuous process of negation, of denial of life and their nature (i.e., their instincts and natural desires), he remains in absolute inertia (for their action is always a re-action), or as Nietzsche so aptly put it: "... it is good to do *nothing for which we are not strong enough*" (29). This "negative magic" is not present in the Master's method of affirmation, for while the Master appoints himself "good" and hence affirms himself and life, the Slave demonizes the Master and then goes on to find himself to be "good." In other words, the Slave finds himself to be "good" only secondarily, after having appointed the other as "evil." The point that Nietzsche is trying to make here is that while power *affirms*, powerlessness *negates*—while the values of the Master depend only upon himself, the values of the Slave are always in relation to the "evil one" (21-29).

Nietzsche concludes that the conflict between the two opposing values ("good and bad," "good and evil") reached its culmination, and that Slave morality has turned out to be triumphant: it has now become the universal morality, indeed, "...there are not wanting places where the fortune of the fight is still indecisive" (35). The meaning of this is straightforward: most if not all civilized societies have adopted the kind of values that perpetuate weakness of

spirit and promote unabated repression of one's animalistic impulses and instincts—the result of this is “a smaller, almost ridiculous type, a herd animal, something eager to please, sickly, and mediocre” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 62). One of the prices that civilized society had to pay for adopting Slave morality and for turning against the instincts of life is, as we will shortly see, is the choking...merciless lacerations by the hands of our “bad conscience”; indeed, the interminable justifying and rationalizing of our actions to avoid the mutilations of guilt, of the terrible feeling that we *ought not to have done that*, the feeling that we are “bad” (i.e., inhuman, fiendish, callous) when our instincts surface, because we are ashamed of our instincts. And, ashamed of our instincts, the cruel...the beast within us, labors to eat us alive in cold blood.

## 2. ONTOLOGICAL “GUILT”: ON THE FUNCTION AND MEANING OF “BAD CONSCIENCE”

*“Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.”*

“In the religious myths, the creative will appears personified in God, and man already feels himself guilty when he assumes himself to be like God, that is, to ascribe this will to himself.”

— Otto Rank, *Truth and Reality*

Nietzsche begins his second essay with a bold, perplexing statement: “The breeding of an animal that *can promise*—is not this just that very paradox of a task which nature has set itself in regard to man? Is not this the very problem of man? (40). For Nietzsche, this capacity to make promises, this ability to say “I *will* do this” or “I *will not* do that,” is the real problem with which we are born—suggesting thus that promise-making is a distinctive human faculty. The foundation of promises is memory, for to fulfill a promise one must remember to do what one

said one would—and to do it. Promise-making is essentially a technology that allows one to capture a will and *freeze* it through language. Indeed, it is to organize the future as befits a *past will*. The opposing force, argues Nietzsche, is that of *forgetfulness* (40); this force is of the highest order, for we would collapse under the weight of our memories if we were to remember every single thing that ever entered our awareness:

The temporary shutting of the doors and windows of consciousness, the relief from the clamant alarms and excursions, with which our subconscious world of servant organs works in mutual co-operation and antagonism; a little quietude, a little *tabula rasa* of the consciousness, so as to make room again for the new, and above all for the more noble functions and functionaries, room for government, foresight, predetermination... this is the utility, as I have said, of the active forgetfulness, which is a very sentinel and nurse of psychic order... and this shows at once why it is that there can exist no happiness, no gladness, no hope, no pride, no real *present*, without forgetfulness. (40-41)

The problem with promises is that they belie forgetting, they have an “*active* refusal to get rid of it, a continuing and a wish to continue what has once been willed, an actual *memory of the will*; so that between the original ‘I will,’ ‘I shall do,’ and the actual discharge of the will...we can easily interpose a world of strange phenomena, circumstances...without the snapping of this long chain of the will” (41). Promises, thus, come with the perilous task of ordaining the future in advance, of reckoning, of anticipating and calculating, hence making us regular...constant: this is ultimately the origin of responsibility. For Nietzsche, the birth of responsibility took place when man made a promise, for to make a promise is to sign a contract that requires the impossible, namely, calculation of the future and regularity of the self.

Guilt is born from the inability to fulfill a promise, to owe to one’s responsibility; pride, on the other hand, is born from the realization of promises, from their execution—and it is the “...*sovereign individual*, that resembles only himself, that has got loose from the morality of

custom, the autonomous ‘supermoral’ individual,” who can savor the privilege of responsibility and pride, which take in him the form of his “*conscience*” (43). Nietzsche examines the nature of promises and guilt to *cook*, so to speak, his overriding claim that *promises are debts*: when one makes a promise one makes a pact, and it is the breaking of this pact that produces guilt. To finance this point Nietzsche reminds us that the German word “Schuld” (guilt) is etymologically linked to “Schulden” (debt): he who is in debt is guilty (47). It is evident in this essay that we are no longer dealing with a genealogy of morality, but with a genealogy of guilt—and of what Nietzsche sees as the most hazardous and tragic of man’s sicknesses, the “bad conscience.” The “bad conscience” is the result of the excessive repression of the post-slave revolt period. This repression of our animal instincts and drives becomes integral to our psychological functioning: in order to feel “clean,” “good,” unpolluted by “evil,” “sane” even... it is necessary to maintain repressed desires and thoughts under constant surveillance—the psychological mechanism tasked with keeping one in “check” is the “bad conscience,” which tortures and evaluates man based on his deviations from social norm. What we will see is that this repression has monstrous consequences: the fact that natural instincts and drives are demonized and repressed does not mean these instincts and drives are disposed of. The *personal* price one has to pay to be “good” (in the slavish sense) is to perpetually suffer by the “bad conscience.” The *collective* price to be paid is much less obvious, but it should not astonish the reader: what better way to feel oneself “good” than to conceive of the other as “evil”? What happens is that evil (as it is ordinarily understood today) ends up being done as a response to evil (in the eyes of the slavishly “good”). A consideration of guilt, the “bad conscience,” and punishment (which is directly connected to the relationship between power and powerlessness, for as we will see, punishment is the venting

of power upon the powerless) is imperative to understanding evil today, since all three of these mechanisms are embedded in the psychological composition of man (post-Christianity).

Now, having established that man's conscience stems from this "...proud knowledge of the extraordinary privilege of *responsibility*," Nietzsche goes on to explain how certain memories (which are the basis of his conscience) are to be implanted in him (44). To be "conscious" is an *extension of consciousness*, an aberration, which now does not assess the world only, but also—and obsessively—one's own self: it is to be *self-conscious*, that is, to be cruelly aware of oneself, of one's display, of one's actions and their respective consequences—it is thus to be *socialized*, domesticated. To implant a memory in man, to make an *impression* in him which is both enduring and hypnotic, it is necessary to employ violence, cruelty, inclemency...and the most effective mnemonic device in history has been the administration of *suffering*: "When man thinks it necessary to make for himself a memory, he never accomplishes it without blood, tortures and sacrifice" (45). The logic being that "...only that which never stops *hurting* remains in his memory" (45). Leaning on Germany's history to validate this point, Nietzsche reminds us of the old German punishment exhibitions of the not-so-distant past:

These Germans employed terrible means to make for themselves a memory, to enable them to master their rooted plebeian instincts and the brutal crudity of those instincts: think of the old German punishments, for instance, stoning... dart-throwing, tearing, or trampling horses... boiling the criminal in oil or wine (still prevalent in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), the highly popular flaying ('slicing into strips'), cutting the flesh out of the breast... It was with the help of such images and precedents that man eventually kept in his memory five or six 'I will nots' with regard to which he had already given his *promise*, so as to be able to enjoy the advantages of society. (47)

To be able to participate in organized society, to *reap the benefits of society*, the individual must refrain from breaking his "promise," which is the fundamental promise, the promise we may

refer to as his *contract with society*—if he wishes to be a member of society, he must follow its rules and customs, must obey its mandates, if he is to avoid being severely punished or cast out. With the help of these picturesque and brutal displays, a cluster of memories are implanted in man which reserve the loftiest vibrancy, and he will remember a selection of “I will nots,” and will undergo a stringent and “tragic” transformation: from instinct-driven, as if “...carried by the water,” to calculative... self-conscious, constant, as though he were no more than a burden (76).

The notion that a man deserves punishment because *he might have acted otherwise* hasn't yet surfaced; hence, it was not because his undertaking was “morally reprehensible,” and furthermore that it was intentional, that he was subjected to torture; rather, he was punished as a way of repayment. One punishes, out of anger, he who produced the anger, so as to ameliorate one's vexation, or as Nietzsche so aptly put it: “...punishment was inflicted in those days for the same reason that parents punish their children...out of anger at an injury that they have suffered, an anger which vents itself mechanically on the author of the injury—but this anger is kept in bounds and modified through the idea that every injury has somewhere or other its *equivalent price*” (48). In other words, punishment was administered for the sole *pleasure* that it granted its manager, not because the other party “ought to have done differently” and should be taught a “lesson.” This “*equivalent price*” means a “compensation,” a re-payment, founded on a deep-seated animal delight, the fulfillment of being able to discharge one's anger upon he who failed us, the unrivaled satisfaction of releasing one's power on the abjectly powerless: and the more “unfavorable” one's position is within the social strata, the more satisfaction one will attain from delivering suffering, for it allows one to participate in the characteristic delights of the Master (50). Nietzsche maintains that the “...infliction of suffering produces the highest degree of

happiness,” and it is at this point that most of his readers become wary of the veracity of his turbulent claims; to be sure, one would be right in distrusting the contention that the administration of suffering generates happiness of the first order, since Nietzsche barely finances this idea—it feels insensitive, preposterous even, to grant Nietzsche this particular point, and since we do not need to accept this idea that suffering produces an unequalled excitement and happiness to follow or validate his other points, we don’t. I maintain that this idea is of the utmost importance in the genealogy of guilt, because what the infliction of pain bestows on an individual is an unshakable...relentless sense of power, of *being powerful*, of feeling—for a few little moments—like a small god, who has a man before him...at his mercy. Modern psychoanalytic theory has taught us that what we call “happiness” is a loose state in which we feel secure in our flesh, in which our self-esteem grants us the feeling of being truly well, valuable to creation; it is also a state in which an impenetrable, resolute feeling of *immunity* from the perils of existence allows us to move about freely and actively. To the extent that we administer pain, we feel *well, alive, powerful*, above suffering itself. At any rate, this is hardly graspable without the necessary insights that lead to this fundamental idea, but suffice it to say that it will be covered profusely in *Chapter 2*, where we will examine Roy F. Baumeister’s *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* and Ernest Becker’s *Escape From Evil*.

This model of punishment we could refer to as the *Masters’ Model*, a model which comprises no moral assessment, and that primarily revolves around the idea that every injury can be paid back—and, as we’ve already said, it is through the enjoyment of administering pain to the debtor that the creditor gets his equivalent. It was a *legitimate method of repayment* (we may refer to it as a form of rudimentary economics): the enjoyment of torturing the debtor was

sufficient to satisfy whatever loss the creditor may have experienced. The creditor did not consider the debtor's payment of flesh "inferior" to the original, nor did he deem the debtor "evil," it was a fair and valid exchange.

To understand Nietzsche's loathing of guilt and the "bad conscience," we have to understand his loathing of nihilism—which he believed to be the result of the triumph of Slave morality. For Nietzsche, nihilism is the ultimate evil because it reduces the magnificence of life to meaninglessness, tedium, and pessimism: it negates life absolutely, and the instincts along with the drives are invalidated, resulting in a thwarted...backward existence. Instead of thriving on the savoring and expansion of life, the nihilist thrives on the disintegration of life and of himself, on the fracturing of his very desires and life forces.

### 3. ON THE POWERLESSNESS OF POWER: WILL-TO-POWER AS NIHILISM

"All power is in essence power to deny mortality. Either that or it is not real power at all, not ultimate power, not the power that mankind is really obsessed with. Power means power to increase oneself, to change one's natural situation from one of smallness, helplessness, finitude, to one of bigness, control, durability, importance."

— Ernest Becker, *Escape From Evil*

Nietzsche's elucidation of the motivations of the "Master" and the "Slave" is infused with his often forceful...pictorial and severe psychological insights. Yet, though the motives of the Slave are bared with psychoanalytic insights very much ahead of his time (the notion of "ressentiment" and the Slave's "reversal" of values to fit their vital needs), the motives of the Masters are scarcely dealt with, and are rather simplified (or should I say *reduced*) to the "healthy" appetite and will of the Masters—their life-affirming virtues, their potent yearning for

self-expansion, their *need* to discharge their latent power and superiority. At any rate, it should be pointed out that the “goodness” with which the aristocrats credit themselves is of a *psychological nature*, meaning that they “feel themselves to be beings of a higher order than their fellows,” of course this is the same with the “goodness” of the Slave (7). To *feel* as though one is of a higher order, a higher species even, and then to go on to define oneself as “good” and those who are unlike oneself as “bad” is critical here: Nietzsche understood perfectly well that the masses of “weak” constitution which did not have neither the vigor nor the calibre to attain the feelings of superiority which they naturally desired (this we will get into more detail when we examine Becker’s *Escape From Evil*), had to necessarily demonize the humanity of the powerful so as to revere themselves for being what they are, that is, meek and passive, as opposed to assertive and overbearing; what Nietzsche did not seem to consider was that the aristocratic passion and obsession with power results from the same basic need for superiority. What this means is that the unabating discharge of power of the aristocrats *was not and is not* a consequence of Nietzsche’s romanticized “love” and “affirmation” of life, but an attempt to raise themselves from worm status to that of a god in order to feel secure in the threatening and annihilating world in which they found themselves—but more importantly, *secure* even in the face of death, which they played at delivering. It is sensible to remember here Nietzsche’s contention that the infliction of suffering produces great happiness, and though we will take this idea further in our Becker chapter, it is worth laying its basic foundation here. Nietzsche does not give us much as to why it is that the administration of suffering satisfies deeply the perpetrator; rather, the idea emerges and develops in the *Genealogy* without base: it is a remarkable and baleful observation about the nature of the human animal—that the sight of another animal

suffering *by our own hands* generates an inordinate measure of satisfaction. Moreover, one should note that the administration of suffering was “...all the more appreciated the greater the paradox created by the rank and social status of the creditor”; this detail should not be hastily set aside, since it is the cornerstone of Nietzsche’s observation, and the nub of our analysis (51). This conception is hardly intelligible, if not appalling, and to cut through the heart of it we need to be clear on *what it is that man gets out of the sight of suffering*—it is certainly true that the administration of suffering is a potent mnemonic, and it adequately explains why after the post-slave revolt public punishments and executions were so habitual: their function was both to accelerate *socialization* and to provide some sort of delight...a delight rooted in feeling *above* the victim, in *loathing* the victim, in seeing him suffer while we watch, *we the good ones*.

One should also be aware that Nietzsche claimed, in his 1873 essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” that truths are nothing more than *illusions*: “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions — they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins” (117). This is relevant because Nietzsche was outspoken about the idea that the search for “truth” is motivated by an unconscious desire for symbolic security—at the outset of *Beyond Good and Evil* he fervently attacks the search for “truth” of the philosophers who preceded him, condemning them of proving no more than their prejudices and evidencing no more than their personalities. Applying this understanding of “truth” to the *Genealogy* is not a difficult task, so it stands to reason that we doubt Nietzsche’s claim that the aristocrats discharged power as it grew within them in an act of affirmation. It can be argued, I think rightly, that the discharge of power was more of a tactic, a *defense mechanism*, against feelings of

inferiority or animality which these “types” of men could not bear—if this reading is correct, it problematizes Nietzsche’s vision of ridding mankind from a *nihilistic future*, for if the will-to-power of the aristocrat is little more than a mere defense against his meaninglessness and defenselessness (by playing at being gods and the “chosen” ones by nature) then this is the most absolute form of nihilism: *a nihilism that refuses to accept what man is by playing at being what man is not*—we should take man for what he is, not for what he pretends to be, or for what he claims to be. While the masses of weak men thought themselves to be the “chosen” ones by God, the aristocrats imagined themselves to be chosen by nature—to finance this point we could look back at Nietzsche’s etymological analysis, how in the various languages the meaning of the “good” was in direct psycho-linguistic relation to “the possessors,” “the lords,” “the godlike,” “the man of godlike race” (8-10). This interrelation between the “good” and “the godlike” should not be understood casually, it expresses the depth of the aristocrat’s desire to elevate themselves, to be more than animal, more than beast... Furthermore, Nietzsche claims that the Master "affirms" life, "celebrates" life, but given the Master's ruthlessness and brutality, it is more reasonable to think that the Master energetically denies it—they might indeed affirm their own lives, yet at the expense of the lives of others, which can be read (through a psycho-analytical perspective) as a form of weakness, for affirming one's life by diminishing and torturing (recall here the many meanings of "bad" at the start of our discussion, and the historical barbarism of Nietzsche's so-called Masters), in the sundry ways known by man, those unlike oneself is akin to the Slave's reversal of values—the Master *needs* the Slave to inflate his egoism and earn his feelings of superiority, this is evident in Nietzsche's derisive language to describe the Slave as fundamentally inferior. The “inferiority” of the Slave *does* give credit and value to the Master,

the Master needs the Slave just as the Slave needs the Master in order to demonize him and affirm his goodness and consequently his superiority.

## **Chapter 2— The Mechanics of Evil, Immortality, and the Human Condition**

“Cruelty can arise from the aesthetic outrage we sometimes feel in the presence of strange individuals who seem to be making out all right. . . . Have they found some secret passage to eternal life? It can’t be. If those weird individuals with beards and funny hats are acceptable, then what about my claim to superiority? Can someone like that be my equal in God’s eyes? Does he, that one, dare hope to live forever too — and perhaps crowd me out? I don’t like it. All I know is, if he’s right I’m wrong. So different and funny-looking. I think he’s trying to fool the gods with his sly ways. Let’s show him up. He’s not very strong. For a start, see what he’ll do when I poke him.”

— Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil*

### **1. VICTIMS OF EVIL, PERPETRATORS OF EVIL: A PHENOMENOLOGY**

Baumeister opens his examination of evil by problematizing the popular perception of evil (which he refers to as *the myth of pure evil*) and its reality. Baumeister argues that evil, as comfortable as it is for us to think, is not black and white—perpetrators of evil do not usually see their actions as “evil,” it is the victims of evil who expose the “evil.” It is important to note that Baumeister is not merely proposing that evil is “relative,” that is to say, he is *not making an ethical statement*, but rather arguing that in the minds of people, evil is intricately coiled by a number of variables. Baumeister writes: “Evil usually enters the world unrecognized by the people who open the door and let it in. Most people who perpetrate evil do not see what they are doing as evil. Evil exists primarily in the eye of the beholder, especially in the eye of the victim” (1); if “evil,” as a general rule, is not recognized by the perpetrators, then is evil a “victim’s question”? The perpetrators are not writing dissertations trying to understand their “evil” acts; it

is the victims who are mystified and perturbed, and can't seem to wrap their head around how *anybody could do such a thing, how anybody could be so cruel and blind to the pain they breed.*

What this means is that one can do evil with the best of intentions, convinced that one is doing right. There is no real need to exemplify this, it is enough to consider the many cases in which one person is perfectly convinced that the other treats them unjustly, while the other person is just as convinced that they are the ones being treated unfairly. Both persons are likely to have the same fundamental beliefs about "evil," and yet, their roles in the event (of either victim or perpetrator) dictate their experience.

By and large, we look at evil from the victim's perspective, we look at the painful and sometimes devastating results of the perpetrator's actions. We are curious and sympathetic, and more often than not, utterly and distressingly confused. As Baumeister explains, "The reliance on judgments by others is essential. Indeed, if we limited our examination of evil to acts that perpetrators themselves acknowledged as evil, there would be hardly any such acts to examine" (6). It is only natural to assume that perpetrators "know" that they are doing evil, that they enjoy committing their deplorable acts, that they extract great pleasure from causing pain and panic. Of course, this is true in some cases, but as a rule, this notion that perpetrators are aware that they're doing evil, and enjoy the pain they cause, is a fallacy. This is what Baumeister aptly calls "the myth of pure evil": the notion that perpetrators are "sadistic," and *intentionally harm* other people, while the victims are innocent and undeserving of their fate. These ideas of "wicked, malicious, sadistic perpetrators inflicting senseless harm on innocent, well-meaning victims" are repeatedly reinforced in film, literature, news broadcast, and other mediums to the point of defining the nature and mechanics of human evil (17). What we will learn is that evil is really "in

the eye of the beholder,” and to understand this—argues Baumeister—we must realize that we ourselves are capable, and possibly responsible, of many evils.

When we think of historico-political evil we tend to look back at the Nazis; we think of the concentration camps, of the persecution, the terror, and the senselessness of death. The Nazis, as Baumeister writes, have “replaced the red-skinned, pointy-tailed Satan as the prototype of evil” (34). To apprehend how Germany became a murderous totalitarian state we must scrutinize Germany’s psychic landscape at the time. It is important to understand that the Nazis were “idealists and utopians,” and so whatever evils they might have committed were guided by a “strong utopian vision” (34). What this reveals is self-evident: that regardless of the atrocities the Nazis so meticulously executed, in their eyes, they were doing a great good. It is critical to bear in mind that Baumeister is not trying to “make apologies or offer excuses for people who commit terrible actions”; instead, he maintains that to understand evil one must understand “the excuses, rationalizations, minimizations, and ambiguities that mark [the perpetrators] state of mind” (20). Note that Baumeister is not saying that to “know” that something is evil one must understand the “excuses” and “rationalizations” of the perpetrators; rather, he observes that in order to understand, to *decipher* how so much evil can be allowed to enter the world, we must pay attention to what the people that let it in are thinking, what are the “rationalizations” and “minimizations” that mark their patterns of thought. How can we hope to understand or to some degree minimize evil if we brush aside the processes of thought that precede it? In some cases, the evil is obvious (e.g., the Holocaust), what’s not so obvious is how millions of people who are neither better nor worse than us could allow such evil to take place. Less obvious is how a mere man, composed of the very things we are all composed of, can guiltlessly lead murderous armies

to “exterminate” masses of innocent people—nay, can *believe* he has the right to do so.

Baumeister writes:

They wanted to build a perfect society. In order to transform an overpopulated country into a Jeffersonian rural democracy (their idea of a perfect society) they required more land. They saw some very suitable land to the east. Unfortunately (in their view), that land was occupied by *all those Polish people*. Those people were in the way, and the logical plan was to move them out somehow. Concentration camps were initially for relocating people, not killing them. The systematic killings seem to have started only after alternative options for relocation became impractical ... Their argument was along these lines: “Look, the Americans have applied modern ideas to build a better society, and if we do not do the same *we will be left behind as a foolish, doddering, obsolete form of society*. Instead, we must rush to the forefront of historical and scientific progress. We must do as well as the Americans, and even better. (34-35; italics mine)

It is not simply that the Germans wanted power, that they wanted to surpass other countries by any means necessary, it is—as we will viscerally understand through Becker—that they wanted to build a world that was not subject to annihilation, a special world, greater than any other and that thus deserved immortality; a world where the people felt like they were at the cutting edge of existence, on its summit, and no thing or enemy could ever be a threat...the world was supposed to be theirs. Becker will show us that the public’s patriotic conviction and support is indeed a logical and expected response from the people of a nation in such circumstances, given that ultimately what the human animal seeks is to avoid the greatest of all evils: death (both literal and symbolic). We see this kind of utopian conviction even today, with North Korea regarding itself as the greatest nation, one that actively avoids being contaminated by foreigners. I remarked earlier that many historical evils seem to us today distant and inscrutable...hardly real, and North Korea is a paragon of this sentiment—few people are viscerally aware of the alarming perversity of North Korea, a country that seems to have been taken out of a dystopian sci-fi novel

in which real people live and real people are trapped. It is not an exaggeration to say that North Korea is a “different world,” and no foreigner can claim to understand the kind of security, direction, and sense of “meaning” that it offers its people.

Today, as half the world is suddenly dealing with a virus (COVID-19) that is both alien and lethal, the coliseum of protection and invulnerability that the people have built, thanks to the innovations of science and medicine, and the transcending powers of culture, is crumbling down in torrents. The countries who thought themselves to be immune to the “problems of the other” are now suffering the consequences of maintaining the self-esteem of their nation even in the face of death. In the US, President Donald Trump continues to spout inaccurate information about this deadly virus to soothe the public’s growing fear: that it is a form of “flu” (reminding us of something familiar and that we have survived before), that it is the “Chinese virus” (suggesting that it is the problem of the Chinese and not ours, that we should be fine because *we’re in America*, not China), that he has it “under control.” I had seen and heard dozens of people, days before the first confirmed case in the US was announced, mocking the situation in China, content because they were safe and sound, unshakably convinced that if the virus were to come to the US we would promptly find a cure and “solve it.” One particular comment from a friend back home struck me, I had asked her if she feared that the virus will come to the US, and she replied, grinning: “That’s in China, we’re in the US!” This false sense of security is necessary to make the fear of death invisible to the public, to make people feel like they’re immune to unexpected threats because they are under a caring system that looks after them, this is the transcending magic of culture. These two examples have nothing to do with evil, but with what the people of a country psychologically need (again, this is something that we will dive into

more deeply with Becker), how the psychic landscape of a given place is defined and treated. If these psychological needs are not met, we can be sure that evil will emerge as a consequence. As soon as people were told that COVID-19 originated in China, cases of hostility toward Asians could be witnessed almost instantly—this is hardly surprising, considering that people want to *feel* like they’re on the right side of the equation.

As Baumeister so well put it, “A full appreciation of the German mental state must also incorporate the shock of the war itself [WW1], win or lose, which is now rather difficult for people to imagine” (36); at the time, the Germans felt like they were being left behind, that the other countries were rushing past them and laughing at them, that they were being mocked by greater powers—that, in a quite literal but symbolic sense, they were approaching their death. Baumeister brings up the idea of “righting past wrongs” as a vital element of evil in the world, and this is exactly how one of the dominant Nazi perspectives operated:

Many Nazis regarded their actions as getting even for past wrongs and injustices. In their view, they had been mistreated and they were setting things right ... They felt their country deserved a leading position in Europe, but instead it had been treated with disrespect; conspired against by the older powers; tricked into losing the war; and then utterly exploited, humiliated, emasculated, and looted by the outrageous Versailles treaty and postwar settlements. It defied their common sense to see how their proud and mighty country had become a military, economic, and political basket case. The Jews had undermined the war effort and stabbed their country in the back (or so many Germans came to believe), and the Allied enemy powers, unable to win on the battlefield, had cheated and then exploited Germany ... The winners concluded that there must be no more wars. The losers concluded that there had to be another war to set things right: So much sacrifice could not be allowed to be in vain. (36-37)

As difficult as it is for us to imagine today, this was the German reality at the time. The point that Baumeister is trying to make is that while almost everyone would agree that Hitler’s Germany

was a fountain of evil, to them (the perpetrators) they were *responding to evil*—they were not sadistically murdering the Jews out of fierce bigotry, but trying to put their country back on its feet. The people were not “supporting” the bloodbath of Jews in the mythological sense of evil; rather, they saw it as “necessary.” To them, they were “unfortunate by-products of something that had had much to recommend it. The country had really gotten back on its feet, and there was a strong public morality with ‘family values’ heavily and consensually emphasized. After collapse and depression, the return to normality seemed a miracle” (38).

Another historico-political instance that shows that evil is “in the eye of the beholder” is the Colombian conflict in the 1980s. The narco emerges as a great Robinhood, as a revolutionary, entering the sacred world of the rich and serving as an example of opposition: to invade the place of the rich and give back to the poor. While the Colombian drug cartels bought the police and most politicians at the time, killed staggering numbers of people and designed loops of human trafficking, many communities in Colombia (who received financial help from these criminals) venerated these drug lords (amongst them the notable Pablo Escobar) and saw them as heroes who turned against a system that methodically oppressed their communities. Again, the idea of “righting past wrongs” is evident. Baumeister gives us the case of a gang of black teenagers who murdered a white man because they felt he disrespected their people and historically humiliated their kind, in an interview one of the boys had said, “Fucking up white boys like that made us feel good inside,” adding that as they walked away they laughed and boasted about who had done the most damage (24). What all of these examples demonstrate is that violence ensues when “people feel that their favorable views of themselves are threatened or disputed by others,” and this is the foundation of Becker’s work: the individual’s need for high

self-esteem, for ego-inflation, for a powerful feeling of self-worth, for a ticket to immortality. This is why the bully diminishes the other, and why violent husbands commit heinous crimes when they feel their “manhood” is under attack, and why we would laugh at the expense of another. Self-esteem, we will see, is the key to unravel the logic and promise of evil. As Baumeister rightly observes: “You do not have to give people reasons to be violent, because they already have plenty of reasons. All you have to do is take away their reasons to restrain themselves. Even a small weakening of self-control might be enough to produce a rise in violence. Evil is always ready and waiting to burst into the world” (14).

## **2. THE HUMAN CONDITION, DEATH, AND HEROISM**

Before we dive into Becker’s *Escape From Evil*, we must first discuss his earlier work, *The Denial of Death*, to lay bare his philosophy. Becker maintains, in his *Escape From Evil*, that human evil stems from “man’s natural and inevitable urge to deny mortality and achieve a heroic self-image.” Since *Escape From Evil* is the continuation of *The Denial of Death*, we must first understand why death is such a monumental problem for the human animal. If I have succeeded in this section of the paper, we should have no trouble understanding what is it that the school bully gets out of harassing others, or what does a gang member get by killing an enemy gang member, or what does a child get out of tearing apart a toy that belongs to his brother. All of these “evil” acts have the same underlying basis: self-inflation, *importance capital*, the undermining of the other for the aggrandizement of ourselves.

Becker argues, in his *The Denial of Death*, that the totality of modern psychoanalytic theory boils down to one fundamental principle, that “of all the things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death” (11). The question of the “nature” or “essence” of man is a

misleading question, for what makes the human animal so special, declares Becker, is not his “essence” but his condition:

...the essence of man is really his *paradoxical* nature, the fact that he is half animal and half symbolic... He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history. He is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity, who can place himself imaginatively at a point in space and contemplate bemusedly his own planet. This immense expansion, this dexterity, this ethereality, this self-consciousness gives to man literally the status of a small god in nature... Yet, at the same time, man is a worm and food for worms. (26)

Man is not a concrete animal, he is “neither angel nor beast,” he is ambiguous. Self-consciousness, which has given man the ability to reflect upon his condition and realize his uniqueness, has also given him the consciousness of *personal death*, the ability to foresee his own extinction—to conceive of his own inevitable and total perishment. The situation in which man finds himself is a scandal: he is thrown into an unintelligible existence, amid the terrifying vastness of the universe, to come of age, develop an identity, have deep inner feelings and yearnings, and all to be wiped off the face of the earth. What modern psychology has come to understand, according to Becker, is that “everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate” (27); this “symbolic world” is the world of culture, a world in which everything is seemingly figured out, in which we can act out different roles and derive our sense of cosmic significance in a straightforward way. The world is built in such a way that one can spend an entire lifetime without ever truly believing in one’s own death, without ever being convinced or viscerally aware that when the lights are out, they are out permanently. Naturally, says Becker, we can’t handle a reality like this, we can’t just accept that who we are, or who we think we are, is fundamentally a lie that we have carefully constructed to mask the total meaninglessness of our lives. To eliminate the threat of insignificance, we give

our lives meaning, we strive for great feats and try to stick out in subtle ways—how can our lives be so meaningless when we are so special? It delights us to feel better, smarter, or more talented than others because it reinforces our illusions of primacy, of cosmic value. Sibling rivalry is a paragon of this idea:

In childhood we see the struggle for self-esteem at its least disguised. His whole organism shouts the claim of his natural narcissism ... We like to speak casually about “sibling rivalry,” as though it were some kind of by-product of growing up, a bit of competitiveness and selfishness of children who have been spoiled, who haven’t yet grown into a generous social nature. But it is too all-absorbing and relentless to be an aberration, it expresses the heart of the creature: the desire to stand out, to be *the* one creation. When you combine natural narcissism with the basic need for self-esteem, you create a creature who has to feel himself an object of primary value ... the child cannot allow himself to be second best or devalued, much less left out. “You gave him the biggest piece of candy!” You gave him more juice!” “Here’s a little more, then.” “Now she’s got more juice than me!” “You let her light the fire in the fireplace and not me.” “Okay, you light a piece of paper.” “But this piece of paper is *smaller* than the one she lit.” And so on and on. An animal who gets his feeling of worth symbolically has to minutely compare himself to those around him, to make sure he doesn’t come off second-best.” (3-4)

It should not be too difficult for us to see how this natural narcissism manifests itself in adults—we see it in the parents who brag about how special or talented their children are; we see it in the gossiping, in the magical satisfaction of *feeling that we’re better*. “My daughter always gets the highest grades in her math program!” “How did you do on the test? I only managed to get a 92, what was *your* score?” Becker takes the idea that the human animal needs to feel himself an “object of primary value” and develops it further, introducing the notion that “heroism” is our chief psychological motive: “...human heroics is a blind drivenness that burns people up; in passionate people, a screaming for glory ... In the more passive masses of mediocre men it is disguised as they humbly and complainingly follow out the roles that society provides for their

heroics ... wearing the standard uniforms—but allowing themselves to stick out, ever so little and so safely, with a little ribbon or a red boutonniere, but not with head and shoulders” (6). It is within this problem of “heroism,” of wanting to achieve a heroic self-image, that we find the motivations for actions that often result in barbarity.

### 3. PRIMITIVE EVIL, MODERN EVIL: ON EVIL AS A RESPONSE TO EVIL

“The greatest cause of evil included all human motives in one giant paradox. Good and bad were so inextricably mixed that we couldn't make them out; bad seemed to lead to good, and good motives led to bad. The paradox is that evil comes from man's urge to heroic victory over evil.”

—Ernest Becker, *Escape From Evil*

Now that we can consider the misleading and paradoxical nature of evil (through the notion of evil as “myth,” evil as existing primarily “in the eye of the beholder,” and evil as a response to evil), and the unique and scandalous situation in which man finds himself (through Becker’s analysis of the human condition), we can move to *Escape From Evil* to explore the promise and logic of evil in human affairs. Becker begins his examination by positing that man is, above all, an animal—and although this is a truism, it is something that we must keep in mind for the rest of this paper. Like any other organism, “...man wants to persevere as does any animal or primitive organism; he is driven by the same craving to consume, to convert energy, and to enjoy continued experience” (3). We have already discussed why man is fundamentally different from other animals (his consciousness of his uniqueness and own inevitable death), and that to silence his fear of annihilation he has “erected cultural symbols which do not age or decay”—think back to the “heroisms” that allow him to stand out in either apparent or subtle ways, of how culture

sets up the world in such a way that it can be digested and is not overwhelming, of how one can increase one's worth as long as one adheres to what any given culture values, and how culture can provide individuals with meaning, security, and confidence. Or, in Becker's unblemished prose, culture is "... the 'religion' that assures in some way the perpetuation of its members. [A]ll systematizations of culture have in the end the same goal: to raise men above nature, to assure them that in some ways their lives count in the universe more than merely physical things count" (4).

Becker opens his investigation by examining primitive societies—how they managed their terror of death, how they conceived of evil, and how they were set up to successfully eradicate death anxiety and evil, and promote life. We know that every organism seeks, above all else, to perpetuate itself—to cause itself to continue to exist. Man, of course, is not exempt from this rule. An important detail that is often missed but that Becker categorically highlights, is the role that *averting evil* plays in this process of self-perpetuation. What stemmed from man's attempts at perpetuating itself and averting evil—once they managed to minimize the threat of other hostile animal species and formed communities of people—is the invention of ritual. Becker describes ritualistic activity as a "*technique for giving life*"; the point of ritual is to *control life*, to make man feel that he can firmly clasp his destiny, to make him feel that he can bend the natural world to his benefit (6). This is an idea that already foreshadowed disaster: man sought to control the world around him, and what he arrived at was the practice and furtherance of ritual (the fact that our "modern" rituals are severely different from those of archaic man does not entail that we do not perform rituals; we do, the *idea* behind ritualistic behavior is the same, it is the form that has changed). Naturally, this is rather difficult for us to comprehend today, but

as Becker writes, “The fact is that primitive man imagined he could transfer life from one thing to another, that he could, for example, take the spirit-power that resided in the scalp of an enemy and ... transfer that life from its former owner to the new one” (7). Here, the logic of the practice is clear: to take away life from an enemy so it can be passed on to an ally. In this fashion, men organized “invisible project[s]” that allowed them to believe they had power over life and death, and hence were above mere “animals.” We also know that animals tend to divide themselves into groups, and these groups often compete for prosperity. In man, this tendency is specially marked, and for good reason. Initially, it makes sense that men sought to form groups, there are limited resources and working by oneself to attain prosperity would prove unavailing, but that in itself doesn’t explain the exuberant violence and blood-thirsty competitiveness that occurred between groups (think of the Plains Indians of North America, who practiced “counting coups,” which is essentially touching an enemy with a coup stick without causing any harm). One is tempted to explain these violent encounters as mere fights for survival, but it is all too “dramatic” and thoroughly organized for that to be the case. Upon further inspection, we get to understand that men divided themselves not only because they feared each other, but because—and here is where we see, as Becker says, the “primitive genius”—they sought to set up society as a “continuing contest for the forcing of self-feeling” (13). What this means is that primitive societies were set up as playgrounds for the attainment of power; their whole world revolved around outshining their enemies and proving their superiority over them. To touch an enemy with a coup stick without intending to do damage demonstrates power over the enemy not only because *the enemy was at the mercy of the performer*, but because the life of the performer was put on the line...

they cheated death and taunted their enemy: what other proof for towering excellence does one need other than this?

Furthermore, at the center of rituals, we find the practice of “sacrifice” and “scapegoating”—which, in the last analysis, reveal the essence of ritualistic activity. Becker explains this with a stark, unusual depth: “The sacrificer goes through the motions of performing in miniature the kind of arrangement of nature that he wants. He may use water, clay, and fire to represent the sea, earth, and the sun ... if he does things exactly as ... the gods did them in the beginning of time, then he gets control over the earth and creation” (20). By performing a sacrifice, primitive man obtained control over earthly things—he appeased the gods and earned their favor. The idea is to take a life to affirm ours in such a way that the gods may offer us their approval. Scapegoating naturally enters primitive society as a way of *localizing evil so it can be rid of*—there is a lot to say on this, but the general idea is that by creating a narrative that focalizes evil, that tells us exactly where to find it, one is half-liberated from it because the next logical step is to eliminate it. This is why ideologies that seek to purify the world and rid it from evil generally end in atrocity—when evil is localized, what should one do but eliminate it? We should keep in mind the importance of getting rid of evil, given that it negates life and threatens an organism’s self-perpetuation project. From here, it is easy to see where this discussion is heading. From rituals, sacrifices, and scapegoating practices we tried to gain the favor of the gods through a means that was both material and vocal (rather than invisible): shamans, who claimed to be intermediaries between the physical world and the spirit world. The tribe villagers, naturally, sought to gain the favor of the shamans in order to attain the favor of the gods. From there, we moved to kingships, where kings were allegedly “chosen” people and appealed to the

public's necessities. Becker writes, "The king represented the new fountainhead of spiritual power in which the subjects were nourished" (67). Lastly, money entered the picture and gave man a direct way to measure his worth—the more objects he owned, the more immortal he was. Here, one can think of how gold (an inanimate and actively pointless object to own) can give one continued life and satisfaction—because it is itself an indestructible metal and has a long "religious" history. The reason why I am going through Becker's entire historical phenomenology (though I have only covered in detail his analysis on primitive societies) is because one can't understand how evil is *allowed today as it was back then* if one doesn't see the succession of events that have led to our times—and the ways we manage *our* immortality projects (which are the projects aimed at creating or becoming part of something that we feel will outlive us), and get rid of the evil of *our* world. Granted, all this perusal of sacrifice, scapegoating, shamans, kingships, and money may seem disconnected from the topic of discussion, evil, until we consider the following: How can we understand poverty (which is arguably one of the greatest and certainly avoidable evils in the world), if we don't understand why money is such a sacred part of modern human life? How can we understand why the world allows people to starve in spite of having an abundance of resources, if we are not clear on the "religious" nature of money, and the *need* (even if masked) of people to inflate themselves and indulge in possessions? How can a man buy a six-figure (or whatever figure, really) gold chain he doesn't need, or that expensive collectible for his growing collection, and not feel remorse for having essentially "wasted" money that could've prevented someone from painfully dying of starvation or disease? These are questions that are not meant to be taken lightly because they point to a disheartening conclusion: that there are evils we pretend to tackle, when in truth we

endorse them. We may say we want equality, but in reality we want more for ourselves. We may say we detest the filthy rich men who get to keep all the money while poor people are dying, and yet not hesitate to buy the latest pointless fad that comes out. We may say our ideas about morality are advanced and up to date, but the inhumanity of Hitler's Germany only a few years ago shows the contrary. The Roman arena games made of death a spectacle; and we may think that our civilized world is far from "organizations" of this macabre nature, but this can't be further from the truth, and this is the meaning of George Orwell's *1984*: war and peace over and over, without end... this is the spectacle of war, of *knowing that there is a war*, and that peace (the elimination of evil) has been achieved, that all is well now, that evil has been localized and annihilated, and when evil comes again, war may once more break out to bring the people the luxury of feeling evil's defeat. A look at history and its pointless wars are enough to energize this idea. The genius of Orwell was his extraordinary understanding of human nature: "War Is Peace" is not just a paradox, it is an observation on modern human society that is of scientific caliber.

Think of the irresistible appeal of Trump: he emerges as the hero who wants to fix a broken land, who wants to bring "greatness" to his once great country. He has localized evil—in the immigrants, the Mexicans, the Muslims, and the media who actively distorts the truth, and promises his people he'll fix it, that he'll vanquish the evil. How can someone who appeals so recklessly to man's natural necessities lose? Baumeister's observation that evil is in the eye of the beholder is correct, and it is deeper than it looks: it is those who claim to have a full view of evil that generally wreak havoc, because once this dynamic of "good" people vs "bad" people (who are the active perpetrators of "evil") is set, the most natural solution is to "fix" the bad people in order to "fix" the evil, at any cost. Today, we see the settling of this very dynamic within far-right

extremist groups, who seem to think all the problems of their country can be solved if only the people who are allegedly damaging it are kicked out. We see it, too, within far-left extremist groups, who are convinced all evil stems from white people and their unearned privilege, and have demonized whites for their past oppression and current privilege—this reminds us of Baumeister's "getting even for past wrongs." Of course, Becker enters the discussion and illuminates any doubts: this is human nature—and this is the world, a playground of ideologies that fight for power, because if they're right, we're wrong, and if we're wrong, we die.

### **Chapter 3—**

### **Re-designing Nature and Re-constructing the Genome: On The Problem of Suffering in the Technological World**

“The discipline of suffering, of great suffering—know ye not that it is only this discipline that has produced all the elevations of humanity hitherto? The tension of soul in misfortune which communicates to it its energy, its shuddering in view of rack and ruin, its inventiveness and bravery in undergoing, enduring, interpreting, and exploiting misfortune, and whatever depth, mystery, disguise, spirit, artifice, or greatness has been bestowed upon the soul—has it not been bestowed through suffering?”

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

"The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive; others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear; others are being slowly devoured from within by rasping parasites; thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst and disease."

—Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden*

It may have inconvenienced the reader that over the course of our examination a pertinent definition of “evil” has not been proposed. Yet, this absence of definition seems consistent with Baumeister’s claim that evil is in the eye of the beholder (in the decidedly *subjective experience* of the victim) and with Becker’s contention that the problem of evil is fundamentally the problem of death—that is, of an individual’s confrontation with their mortality. What we call “evil” is too elusive to afford a sensible definition: it lends itself to too many distortions and permutations. To look at the problem full in the face is bound to generate a plethora of inconsistencies and antinomies. Not only has the very phenomena we call “evil” changed and mutated throughout history, but our relationship to it as well (recall here the “myth of pure evil” and its allure, especially in the digital era, where any event can be filmed and lend itself to manipulation, to an abundance of *decontextualized interpretations and explanations*).

I should clarify, however, why is it that evil is so difficult to define and what it reveals about the nature of evil itself: it is not merely that evil is in the eye of the beholder, or that more often than not evil is a *reaction* against “evil” itself, but that the very idea of evil, and the notion that it is easily definable and identifiable—coupled with the course of its elimination—is what perpetuates it. Risking a rather palpable contradiction, I would argue that one “knows” what evil is, otherwise one could not have followed neither Becker nor Baumeister’s analyses. The problem isn’t “evil,” but what disfigures it—and hence what allows us to rationalize, justify, or overlook it. What we would ordinarily regard as evil may be distorted by our *subjective and collective experience* of a given incident, as well as by our relationship to it and how it affects us. Subjective in the sense that our propensity to victimize ourselves results in the vilification of some agent, and since this victimization produces an unbearable feeling of vulnerability and fear

(often in the form of hatred), it is only natural that the perceived evil will be met with either scorn or violence. As we have already stated, man (like any other organism) seeks to perpetuate himself, to guarantee his continuation, to attain prosperity and safety, and any *thing* that threatens or stands in the way of this continuation or prosperity will be deemed “evil”—evil because it is *against me*, in complex and symbolic ways. And collective in the sense that it is a *symbolic* danger, a danger not only to oneself but to one’s righteous neighbor, or culture, or ideology, or country. What all the examples of evil we have discussed here have in common, and this is likely to be the very essence of evil, is *suffering*—especially pointless or unnecessary suffering, and more so if the recipient of suffering is “innocent” (that is, thought to be absolutely *undeserving* of their misery) and unable to rid themselves of their suffering.

Becker’s brilliant analysis of primitive cultures and their elaborate rituals show us that since the beginning, man was concerned with attaining a sense of security by fending off the evil he recognized in nature. Today, we are no longer susceptible to the accidents of nature (evidently, we are, though not to the same extent, but in our scientifically oriented world, *we feel to be in control of nature, not at its mercy*), and so the greatest evil is not posed by nature but by man himself. I should underscore two things: that the essence of evil, as I understand it, is suffering, and that man is the greatest threat for man. I want to be clear that by “suffering” as the essence of evil I mean, and this is trite, that any adverse state of affairs is—broadly speaking—“evil,” just as primitive man regarded as evil any event which brought death or regression, i.e., any event which worked against his abiding longing for prosperity, for the satisfaction of his many cravings, for the improvement of his lot...the prolongation of his existence. This “definition” of evil includes, to be sure, mental suffering—which is possibly the most pervasive mode of

suffering today, for “mental illnesses,” these aberrations of the mind, are the hallmark of the techno-industrial world. Here we are going to diverge from what we have discussed so far, and we’re going to delve into the very specific problems that our highly technological world will inevitably face in regards to “fixing” this problem of evil—i.e., the problem of suffering in the world, both physical and psychological, and not only in humans but in non-human animals as well. The reader may well sense that we are setting foot on the territory of ethics, that we are now going to seriously consider questions such as: If suffering is no longer inevitable, owing to scientific and technological development, should we set out to eliminate it? Most people seem to care, to some extent, about animal suffering, and yet hardly flinch at the gruesome and murderous reality of the natural world. It is only natural to ask, do we have a moral responsibility to abolish suffering not only in humans but also in non-human animals? Is an “escape from evil” (suffering) something we really want? With the development of biotechnology and gene-engineering, their *normalization process* and ethical postulations, the question of the irremediability of suffering will have to be revisited—with serious and wide-ranging considerations. We will be looking at David Pearce’s raw and far-sighted “The Hedonistic Imperative” as well as his “Reprogramming Predators,” to look at the problem of suffering—the evil of suffering—from a present-day perspective and argue that the transhumanist project of abolishing suffering both in humans and non-human animals is a serious and practical undertaking. Furthermore, I will go so far as to say that the transhumanist project is compatible with modern psychoanalytic theory—that the human condition is a massive problem, that present-day society does not and cannot attend to man’s most elementary psychological needs and thus exacerbate the problem, and that if we were to look at man *soberly and without*

*one's habitual illusions*, we should arrive at the conclusion that *default settings do not work in a world that isn't in its default state, that is, the way that modern society is set up makes happiness an unattainable goal*. We are, quite literally, not wired to live the way we do today, our configuration is primitive, but our way of living (and our physical reality) has changed dramatically: our composition and current living conditions are not compatible.

## 1. THE ETHICAL POSTULATION

“On almost *every* future scenario, we're destined to ‘play God’. So let's aim to be *compassionate* gods and replace the cruelty of Darwinian life with something better.”

—David Pearce

The thought makes one immediately uneasy—to eliminate *that* element of sentient life, *that* sacred constituent...emblem of existence: suffering. The idea strikes one as ludicrous, and the sole suggestion (or possibility) of a future without pain, neither physical nor psychological, makes one ideate a dystopian or calamitous future in the form of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*: where people are drugged into bliss, but also compliance and lethargy, engage in unrestrained sexual activity to heighten happiness and enjoyment. Huxley's vision of a technological society that modulates suffering by expeditiously fulfilling the *immediate needs and desires* of every citizen is nightmarish and somber. It is a society with pleasure at its centre; a society which lulls, desensitizes, and stifles their human potential and growth—what need is there for art, intellectual development, or progress when one is constantly and unfailingly *happy*? We value these aims, and a world without them seems to us tragic. Suffering is romanticized in literature, religion, and philosophy—for it is inexorable, and to bear it courageous. What else

would we do with suffering but elevate it and give it meaning? Suffering is a curse we have turned into a *cult*, and we cannot do, it seems, with or without it. The “grind” culture of today, which exalts work and celebrates working several jobs or working overtime for barely any pay or reason other than amassing a few bills and feeling “productive,” is essentially a cult of suffering: to work is to live, the toil is *purpose*, and any length of time that is felt to be “unproductive” (that doesn’t contribute to one’s economic position or social capital) is deemed wasted. Suffering is the mark of a life that is spent *properly*, and being unable to work is akin to dying. It should be neither controversial nor surprising to argue that most people today look at work as a moral obligation and *sine qua non*, a life that does not involve work is not worth living—one’s very suffering is one’s trophy, one’s pain one’s reward...suffering indicates that one is doing what one should, it is rebelling against peace and contentment, for life is about duty, not pleasure. Pain does not produce meaning or purpose, *progress* does (whatever one understands progress to be), and suffering happens to be a byproduct of progress, albeit unnecessary; yet pain, by itself, is in no way desirable or valuable. Moreover, the trope of the “tortured artist” also contributes to our romantic view of suffering—that “good” art is necessarily a product of angst and mental suffering, that mental illness is a prerequisite to becoming a “true” artist...that the great poets and painters were great *because* of their mental illnesses, not *in spite* of them. Even when painless surgery was introduced in the mid-19th century there were reservations, as Katherine Power notes in her essay “The End of Suffering”: “...although many welcomed anaesthesia, some did object. In Zurich, anaesthesia was even outlawed. ‘Pain is a natural and intended curse of the primal sin. Any attempt to do away with it must be wrong,’ claimed the Zurich City Fathers. Painless delivery in childbirth was a particularly contentious issue. Some insisted that ‘in sorrow

thou shalt bring forth children' (Genesis 3:16) ... There was even a belief, expressed in 1847 in *The New York Journal of Medicine*, that pain was vital to surgical procedure" (Power, "The End of Suffering"). In fact, even today this continues to be an issue, where some people encourage mothers to opt for 'natural' childbirth (vaginal labor and delivery with no medical intervention). Suffering is only necessary when we begin to give it meaning and value, but if we look at it beneath a surface level examination, the notion that it is indispensable is just as ridiculous as claiming that "Pain is a natural and intended curse of the primal sin."

We know, through our examination of Becker's *Escape From Evil*, that man's search for meaning and immortality—as a result of his unwavering fear of death—leads him to create symbols which do not decay or die, and these symbols ought to be protected (for it is these symbols which give man meaning and security), and the cost of protection is often violence. My point is that man's very ambiguous condition, of being neither angel nor beast (as we have said and elucidated in our discussion of Becker), of being conscious of his inevitable death, has made him erect a system of values and symbols which, in spite of making life bearable and meaningful, restrains him. If one follows from head to foot the diagnosis that Becker has synthesized, since Becker's project is to sew and varnish the vast psychoanalytic literature since Freud, it is not too difficult to see that all of man's efforts have been devoted to abolishing suffering through the making of meaning and the erection of symbols. Needless to say, the process has been smeared with blood, and more—not less—suffering. The problem is the following: socio-economic reform (on its own at least), technological innovation in its current form, the expansive array of diversions and entertainment offered by any given culture, economic flourishing, political reformation, or any form of environment improvement *will not*

*eliminate the kind of suffering that is emblematic of the human animal, namely, psychological suffering.* All of these, though obviously necessary, do not make man immune to existential dread, fear of death, sadness, disappointment, envy, anger, melancholy, and general malaise.

There are many reasons as to why lifelong “happiness” is an unachievable ideal, but we will only consider one (aside from man’s natural search for cosmic “specialness” and fear of death which *nolens volens* results in anguish and malaise), and that is his biologically determined hedonic set-point—happiness, or more specifically our level of subjective well-being, is primarily governed by heredity, by our biological construction. And if there is anything we have learned about evolutionary biology is that evolution *does not care about an animal’s well-being more than it cares about its perpetuation.* The transhumanist movement aims at precisely eliminating the biological substrates of suffering—both psychological and physical, the latter of which abounds in the natural world. It is about transcending the human body, that is to say, about releasing man from the shackles of his natural constitution: to alter his condition (which is acutely tragic and soon-to-be needlessly painful) rather than romantically and masochistically accepting it. Nature is not concerned with an animal’s psychological prosperity, but with an animal’s survival.

Indeed, technological progress is on its way to making the abolition of suffering an immediate possibility. If one is to consider, rationally and soberly, the condition of man (without the illusions which make it bearable) the prospect of designer drugs and genetic engineering does not seem absurd, but rather logical—it is scarcely controversial to argue that on almost every future, as Pearce has correctly stated, we are to play “gods” on account of pronounced technological and scientific progress, why not be compassionate gods and spare future

generations of the pains of biologically determined existence? Furthermore, if we are witness to the perpetual devouring and persecution that proliferates in the natural world, a devouring and persecution that is fundamentally unnecessary, meaningless, and cruel, why not spare non-human animals from the excruciating agony of Darwinian life? It is, of course, understandable that one recoils from such a proposal—to alter the natural constitution of a living organism is no inconsequential undertaking. But the idea that we *do not already* alter the natural constitution of living organisms is palpably false. Indeed, the tantalizing notion that *that* much control over our composition and that of non-human animals would ultimately lead to ruin is also uninformed thinking, since it is anodyne to argue that man already has and will have (over the course of the next few years) even more control over the environment and his composition. One sneers at the possibility of the use of “drugs” to hoist mood and recalibrate the hedonic set-point, as if societies all over the world do not already indulge in a multitude of drugs and diversions to palliate unpleasant mental states. Designer drugs *would not* produce the torpor and passivity of Huxley’s “Soma,” but uplift mood and even improve brain function. Or, as Pearce put it: “...in *Brave New World*, there is no depth of feeling, no ferment ideas, and no artistic creativity... [but] even today, the idea that chemically-driven happiness must dull and pacify is demonstrably false” (“Hedonistic”). One may contend that a world in which man depends on drugs to be “happy” is a tragic world, for man’s happiness would not result from an acceptance of his precarious condition, but from technological invasion, from drugs or designing of his own. Still, people today already indulge in drugs, diversions, commodities, etc., which are arguably more tragic. The proposal that we should abolish suffering in the natural world seems to us sacrilegious because we are accustomed to looking at the natural world with the feeling that *this*

*is how things ought to be because that is the way that they naturally are.* But in a Darwinian world, as Pearce has rightly observed, "...the welfare of some beings *depends* on their doing harm to others" ("Reprogramming"). Most people do not objectively grasp the reality of the animal world, and the agony that accompanies it; one reason is our separation *from it*, another is the romanticized and dramatic (as opposed to cruel and remorseless) depiction of nature that literature and documentary films have fabricated. Nature is not serene and peaceful as popular thought would have us believe; far from it, the brutality and sheer viciousness of the natural world surpasses all presumptions. No one has put it as clearly and concisely as Pearce:

To get a conceptual handle on what is really going on during "predation", let's compare our attitude to the fate of a pig or a zebra with the fate of an organism with whom those non-human animals are *functionally equivalent, both intellectually and in their capacity to suffer, namely a human toddler*. On those rare occasions when a domestic dog kills a baby or toddler, the attack is front-page news. The offending dog is subsequently put down. Likewise, lions in Africa who turn man-eater are tracked down and killed, regardless of their conserved status. This response isn't to imply lions - or for that matter rogue dogs - are morally culpable. But by common consent they must be prevented from killing any more human beings. By contrast, the spectacle of a lion *chasing a terrified zebra and then asphyxiating its victim can be shown on TV as evening entertainment, edifying viewing even for children*. How is this parallel relevant? Well, if our theory of value aspires to a God's-eye perspective, stripped of unwarranted anthropocentric bias in the manner of the physical sciences, then the *well-being of a pig or a zebra inherently matters no less than the fate of a human baby - or any other organism endowed with an equivalent degree of sentience*. If we are morally consistent, then as we acquire God-like powers over Nature's creatures, we should take analogous steps to secure their well-being too. Given our anthropocentric bias, thinking of non-human vertebrates not just as equivalent in moral status to toddlers or infants, but as though they were toddlers or infants, is a useful exercise. Such reconceptualisation helps correct our lack of empathy for sentient beings whose physical appearance is different from "us". ("Reprogramming," italics mine)



Once viewed in this light, it is no longer preposterous to argue that abolishing the superabundant suffering of the natural world would be a desirable goal and a moral imperative. From a classical utilitarian perspective, and even a Buddhist perspective, the urgency of abolishing suffering in all sentient beings is an overriding ethical concern. We are *categorically desensitized* by a romanticized and dramatized narrative, abundant in literature and film, and made to view the cruel reality of the natural world without feeling, without *relatedness*. There is an air of “unreality” that the sight of predation produces: a lion chasing a terror-stricken buffalo who is too tired to scream after being knocked down and—understanding that there is no escape—sits silently as it is being ravaged and eaten alive by a flock of lions. Or a gang of hyenas cornering a pregnant zebra and then proceeding to tear it apart as it shrieks in agony. We look at the spectacle of terror and death of the natural world with amusement and levity, for us it is *entertainment*, since *that* side of nature seems frivolous to us. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, it is only natural that we have distanced ourselves from the reality of nature...and dramatized, disguised it. If any of this sounds labored, recall here our discussion of the fear of death (and the illusions that we entertain to quiet it): we *caricaturize* nature because really we are terrified of it. Those animals *suffer and toil as nature has intended*; they are animals who rely on instinct and

reflexes...machines who operate by rote, who can neither think nor feel as we do (if they do at all), and who are, strictly speaking, in *another* compartment—how could *we* be part of this vacuous and barbarous side of nature? How can the murdering of a zebra be as reprehensible as the murdering of a man? If one were to witness the screaming and shrieking of soon-to-be torn apart non-human animals, one would soon re-evaluate one's understanding of nature. As Pearce put it, "It would be a mercy if the experience of suffocation were fundamentally different in human and non-human animals" ("Reprogramming"). Note that so far we have focused on the problem of *predation* specifically, which excludes all other ruthless behavior—think of a lion slaughtering a lioness's cubs so that she mates with him, a cowbird dumping her eggs into another species' nest to avoid wasting time and effort in childcare (and if the hosts expel the alien eggs, it returns to *demolish the entire clutch*), a slave-making ant who *steals and exploits* the brood of other ant species to strengthen the worker force of their colony. Examples like these are bountiful, but we do not have time to discuss them here. Suffice it to say that the natural world is an auditorium of murder and suffering, where merciless deception and cruelty abound, and if we are to be morally consistent, the passive acceptance of this problem (while having the tools to eliminate the problem) is indeed unethical by any decent measure—at least according to the transhumanists. Now, that this is a "problem" is not entirely obvious, this is why Pearce compares the suffering of a zebra (by suffering we mean not only physical pain, but panic, dread, fear, etc.) to that of a human toddler; if one is capable of understanding, viscerally rather than intellectually, one can begin to sense the urgency of the question: is not abolishing the endless toil and suffering of the natural world, *while having the tools to do so*, morally justifiable?

As Pearce notes: “Most modern city-dwellers do not lose any sleep over the cruelties of Nature, or indeed give them more than a passing thought. Implicitly, it's assumed such suffering doesn't matter. Or if it does matter, it doesn't matter enough to mitigate or abolish” (“Reprogramming”). There are many reasons as to why the suffering that takes place in the natural world *doesn't seem to matter*, and Pearce mentions a few. The feeling that *that is the way that things ought to be* is perhaps the most obvious of reasons, and it ties back to the inevitability of suffering. The problem, as Pearce correctly points out, is that suffering will no longer be inevitable, and so future generations will have to necessarily deal with the prospect of its abolishment. We have also touched on what Pearce refers to as a “television-based conception of the living world,” which is the narrative that film and television perpetuate. This is anchored to what Pearce refers to as “selective realism,” which is our tendency to take the “good” portrayals of nature to define nature, while entirely ignoring the “bad” depictions. Or, as Pearce soberly puts it:

Realistic depictions of the full nastiness of predation are taboo. As David Attenborough once remarked to some viewers who complained that a scene shown was too gruesome: "You ought to see what we leave on the cutting room floor". This text hints at the horror, but words don't really portray it. And even the most explicit video couldn't evoke the first-person reality of being *dismembered, strangled, impaled, drowned, poisoned or eaten alive*. The problem of suffering in Nature described here is worse - and its prevention more morally urgent - than we suppose. For example, try to imagine what it's like *slowly dying of thirst over several days during the dry season. There may be no overt drama. It's just subjectively horrific. Hence the ethical obligation on the dominant species to stop such horrors as soon as we acquire the technical expertise to do so.* (“Reprogramming,” emphasis added)

Indeed, even with descriptions like these most of us are hardly moved, that is to say, we do not *feel* for the animals in question: “Human empathetic responses are shaped by natural selection...it's fitness-enhancing for parents to experience an empathetic response to the feelings

of their children, but maladaptive to feel compassion for their children's "food". Selection pressure for empathy toward members of other races or species...is weak to non-existent since such empathy wouldn't promote our reproductive success" ("Reprogramming"). All of these, coupled with man's natural narcissism (that it is *he*, or *his* species, the one that really matters), make for the body of hindrances that the transhumanist project will face when the technology becomes available (or its production theoretically feasible), and the philosophy widespread.

To be sure, the removal of predatory behavior in the natural world will have its reverberations, and it depends first and foremost on the method. The least appealing modus operandi would be *selective extinction*, by applying "indiscriminate depot-contraception" on carnivores we could drive predatory species to extinction quite rapidly ("Reprogramming"). Yet, something *feels wrong* about steering a species to extinction, especially a species that is highly respected or idolized—and this "respect" lies "...in our fetishizing the strong, handsome and powerful over the gentle and vulnerable" ("Reprogramming"). Recall here Nietzsche's assertion that the good, in the premoral period, was that which was strong and vigorous rather than weak and vulnerable: we fetishize the fearless, the courageous and the powerful—indeed, "...the spectacle of large predators hunting and asphyxiating their terrified victims is more visually compelling than herbivores browsing inoffensively. Which would you rather watch on TV? ("Reprogramming"). But more than that, we value the strong and the fearless because it is *precisely the strong and the fearless* who have a higher chance of survival, and, as we have repeatedly said, every organism strives for survival and prosperity. We value these "types" of organisms because they are strong and apt, but "Why fetishize life-forms endowed with a heritable tendency to prey on and strangulate others? Some monstrous life-forms are best

banished to the archives for good” (“Reprogramming”). It might have done us proper service to fetishize organisms with violent predispositions in ancient times, but today, having an escalating mastery over nature and a piercing understanding of our human condition (not to mention a towering intelligence and sensitivity), it serves us no longer to idealize the powerful and violent. As Pearce notes: “...to judge that lions should exist is to affirm that it is better, in some sense, that sociopathic killing machines prowl the Earth rather than alternative herbivores” (“Reprogramming”); I think that Pearce’s reasoning here is not as outrageous as it sounds, but in order to even consider flirting or accepting the idea one has to necessarily look at the natural world from an objective and disenchanting point of view. It should be noted that no moral judgment is being made here: we are not saying that the lion who ravages and eats a live zebra or the cat who torments a terrified mouse to then swallow it whole *know* what they are doing, we are not saying that they are “evil” and thus deserve to be driven to extinction; rather, we are arguing that these animals *do not have an ideal or desirable composition* in terms of the suffering they produce in nature.

The alternative methods are *genetic reprogramming* and *behavior modification*, which are less controversial. The former would involve bio-engineering predatory species so as to eliminate violent activity, and “prey” species would also be genetically modified to lose their “...well justified terror of predators” (“Reprogramming”). The latter, on the other hand, would involve electrodes anchored to the pleasure centres of predatory species: “With suitable surveillance and computer control, whole communities of ex-predators could be discreetly guided in the norms of non-violent behavior. No ‘inhumanity’ would be involved in the behavioral reshaping process since at no time are the brain's pain-centres stimulated. Nor does

the augmented animal ever experience a sense of being made to act against its will” (“Reprogramming”). Both of these options seem to me to be well-argued, and much more “ethically sound” than the prospect of selective extinction and kin options, which involve a more radical approach but less intrusion (since the organism will not be genetically modified or surveilled, but simply unable to procreate). In any case, we ought to consider Pearce’s cunning remark: “If any creature, by its very nature, causes terrible suffering, albeit unwittingly, is it morally wrong to change that nature? If a civilised human were to come to believe s/he had been committing acts that caused grievous pain for no good reason, then s/he would stop - and want other moral agents to prevent the recurrence of such behavior. May we assume that the same would be true of a lion, if the lion were morally and cognitively ‘uplifted’ so as to understand the ramifications of what (s)he was doing? Or a house cat tormenting a mouse? Or indeed a human sociopath?” (“Reprogramming”).

## CONCLUSION

“If I wanted to give in weakly to the most utopian fantasy I know, it would be one that pictures a world-scientific body composed of leading minds in all fields, working under an agreed general theory of human unhappiness. They would reveal to mankind the reasons for its self-created unhappiness and self-induced defeat; they would explain how each society is a hero system which embodies in itself a dramatization of power and expiation; how this is at once its peculiar beauty and its destructive demonism; how men defeat themselves by trying to bring absolute purity and goodness into the world... Then men might struggle, even in anguish, to come to terms with themselves and their world.”

—Ernest Becker, *Escape From Evil*

“The masses have never thirsted after truth. They turn aside from evidence that is not to their taste, preferring to deify error, if error seduce them. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim. An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will.”

—Gustave Le Bon

How does one conclude a discussion about evil? The reader may have observed that the question of evil is approached by different thinkers via fundamentally different routes, leaning on disparate methods, and asking distinct questions—the basis and intention of each inquiry differ. Nietzsche's *On The Genealogy of Morality* shows us that the region of violence is language, that violence begins with language. This is Nietzsche's categorical contribution to the study of evil: that "evil" belongs to the domain of language (in *defining* "evil," *contrasting* "evil," and *developing* a dialect to talk about "evil"). Furthermore, Nietzsche's understanding of the role of guilt, and what one does to avoid feelings of guilt (for guilt is not merely a reflex of remorse, but an active endurance: guilt is a *condition*, produced by the feeling that one *owes* one's life to one's nation, society, family, etc.) is imperative to understanding "evil." Nietzsche also understood the significance of the perverse enjoyment we derive from seeing others suffer, and a Beckerian reading of his genealogy of punishment clarifies why this is so. Becker, in *The Denial of Death* and *Escape From Evil*, identifies the source of "evil" not in the ways that we talk about it, but in its *function*. Becker addresses the question of "evil" by looking at man's obsession with heroism, by diving into the logic of human hate and barbarity...and by exploring how existential anxiety, fear, insecurity, self-esteem, and the terror of death are the engines of violence. Similarly, Baumeister approaches the question through the mechanics of evil and the *relativity* of its perception, tackling head-on the notion that evil is obvious by delineating the involuted dynamics between "victims" and "perpetrators." Pearce engages in the question from an ethical standpoint, where "evil" is essentially "suffering," and maintains that human suffering ought to be abolished through germline engineering and designer drugs, while non-human animal suffering ought to be eliminated through *ecosystem designing*.

In the introduction to *The Denial of Death* (which prefaces *Escape From Evil*), Becker does not shrink away from informing the reader that the book does not contain a panacea to the problems and evils of the world. He is not intent on “solving” the world's ills and providing the reader with a sense of optimism by laying out a solution to the problem of the human condition or the problem of evil; rather, it is hope that one can hope for. As Becker dejectedly writes, “For twenty-five hundred years we have hoped and believed that if mankind could reveal itself to itself, could come to know its own cherished motives, then somehow it would tilt the balance of things in its own favor” (8). In the final analysis, “evil” operates as an *ouroboros*; it is cyclical in that its [heroic] elimination, time and again, results in more “evil.” It is ideology against ideology, religion (whether secular or sectarian) against religion, and it seems like we cannot do without fetishizing evil, without pointing at *the other* and diabolizing him (in the subtle, intricate ways we do). The biggest problem (or rather challenge) with minimizing evil in the world is that its execution does not feel any different from the execution of the “good”: one can do cruel, inhuman things, while feeling—all things considered—*one is undoubtedly doing “good.”* One of course says, *they (evildoers) don't know any better* and that's why they are convinced they are doing “good.” This collective belief is precisely what produces the most horror, as history has repeatedly shown.

This tendency to be suspicious, to demonize, to hate or diminish in some shape or form *the other* is embedded in our composition. Existential anxiety, and the many psychological needs (needs that are overriding and unconscious) that stem from this anxiety, are installed in our psyche. For this reason, Pearce's sober and almost tragic solution to the problem of unhappiness and suffering does not strike me as unwarranted. It is a hitherto impossible solution to the

impossible condition of man. It is a solution that I imagine will call forth serious and far-reaching discourse, but it is discourse that cannot be taken seriously without looking at our ill-starred situation in nature from a detached standpoint. Moreover, as we have said earlier, we are enamored of suffering, and our cult-like predilection for pain—claiming that through suffering and pain there is *always* growth and possibility for meaning—renders the prospect of abolishing suffering improbable.

Reading Nietzsche alongside Becker reveals how *the language of evil and the lust for power* irrevocably prescribe our understanding of “evil.” Unlike Becker, Baumeister shows us the *relativity of evil*, elucidating the dynamics of “victim” and “perpetrator,” hence making Becker’s idea that evil is generally a response to evil much clearer and immediate. And, as I have already remarked, Pearce’s proposal of abolishing both human and non-human suffering cannot be soberly apprehended if one does not have an adequate understanding of the impossibility of our situation in nature: Becker lays the groundwork necessary to consider Pearce’s ideas. After grappling with Nietzsche, Baumeister, Becker, and Pearce, I am moved to ask, somewhat optimistically: Is it possible to fundamentally reform our human nature *without* following Pearce’s recipe? Can we transcend our condition, as Becker hopes, by *knowing and understanding* our cherished motives? Or are we bound to our “fixed” condition and the inexorable products thereof? Is a revolution in the human mind—a revolution in consciousness—that admits that much of our suffering is caused by our inexhaustible longing for security, by our helpless narcissism, by our strangulating fear, possible?

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