

5. “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it was necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?” Reflect on this quotation by Alexander Solzhenitsyn and discuss its implications for thinking about ethics, religion, philosophy, or politics.

*You tell me I have murderous eyes
That’s a pretty thing to say, and quite probable
That eyes, that are so frail and soft,
And cowardly close themselves when there’s dust
Should be called tyrants, butchers and murderers.*
– As You Like It (3.5)¹

We often stand aloof when naming the participants in evil, quite assured with who we are at present and who we are prophesied to be in relation to the idea. But the truth is that the split is both “more profound and more alienating” than at first glance, “the rifts... more numerous.”² If this is so, can we even trust our eyes and the moral judgements they make?

It is sensible to consider the instigator of such a profound question. After his eight-year sentence in the Soviet Gulag, (recognised as a major instrument of political repression in the Soviet Union, and responsible for approximately 1.7 million deaths) Solzhenitsyn’s understanding of human nature metamorphosed from a vague humanism to a powerful conviction that there is in fact inherent evil in every human being: he concluded that this “somewhere” is everywhere and those “insidiously committing evil deeds” are everyone. While in prison, Solzhenitsyn took time to examine his own heart and recognised that he was just as much at fault for the evil in the world as were his persecutors. This infiltration of evil into the territory of good is the whispering voice that shapes our ethical discourse and reminds us that our interactions and decisions are not immune from the corrosion of evil. It’s important to note that the conversation surrounding morality may never be concluded, but confronting the ingredients of our existential unease make up the architecture of discovering the ultimate truth, or the absence of any.

It’s a denial of what institutes human nature to “separate (those who possess evil) from the rest of us and destroy them”³ for the world isn’t crafted to embody the good versus bad narrative; rather it is a more sophisticated story: a cosmic drama between Satan and Christ that manifests as an affray in our peripheral vision. How we see determines what we see. In the us and them dichotomy, the task is not only undermined by the very impossibility to distinguish the two, but the fact that Bernard Williams’s integrity objection⁴ can be applied here: can we—even if we could—reasonably require an agent to give up their sense of self in order to pursue the overall general welfare and “destroy them”? At one point God performed the role of this hypothetical agent in the story of the Genesis flood,⁵ but who is the assassin in our spiritual cleansing?

¹ Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (London, First Folio, 1623), Act 3 Scene 5.

² Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *World Split Apart*, (Harvard Speech, 1978)

³ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn *The Gulag Archipelago Abridged Edition* (Harvill, 1985) pg.75

⁴ Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism For and Against Part II*, (1973).

⁵ Genesis 6-9

To be a successful guide to others, one must be able to see where they are going. But in terms of morality, we personify the idiom “the blind leading the blind”⁶ despite our confidence. Nietzsche gave morality a genealogy⁷ and by doing so the dividing line can be understood as a result of the longstanding confrontation between the priestly and the warrior class, whereby the abused, oppressed, and suffering moralised and formed what he calls “slave morality,” and this stood in contradistinction to the warrior ethos of the ruling nobility. Ultimately, the word “good” itself came to represent two opposed meanings—both powerful and powerless—and so established morality’s contingency on the perspective of the individual and the society they occupy, thus inevitably framing it with a self-serving bias. This confirms both the subjectivity and consequential difficulty in drawing the “line” that would reconcile the tension and overlapping of “good and evil” as the slaves made its “good” into the antithesis of the original aristocratic “good,” which itself is re-labelled “evil.” A belief in the slave revolt as a historical event insists that morality as we know it is fundamentally reactive—the triumph of one over the other—and not an absolute truth.

This contamination of our trusted paradigm is also addressed by Kant who, with his statement that “the only thing that is unconditionally good is a good will,”⁸ implies morality is always under threat and attempts to defend it against those who reduce it to another way of attaining self-interest for this is an inconspicuous way of introducing evil into good acts: a will is good if it acts from duty and not just in conformity with duty. The problem with this is that altruism is very rarely performed. It seems that as babies we are at least honest with our dichotomous nature,⁹ but as we grow older, we deny and disguise it. If this is the case, then there are neither good people nor bad people, but people struggling between good and evil from within, and whichever becomes the internal hegemon is a matter of probability... and perspective as Nietzsche draws attention to. With this realisation, Solzhenitsyn concludes that “It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.”¹⁰

This led him to recognize the problem with revolutions, namely, “They destroy only those carriers of evil contemporary with them.... and they then take to themselves as their heritage the actual evil itself, magnified still more.”¹¹ If evil can constrict it can also expand. He proposes we should ask ourselves: “If my life had turned out differently, might I myself not have become just such an executioner?”¹² thus, we are urged to face our own capacity for malevolence. To understand evil, one must probe the souls of evil-doers, and Russian history offered ample material to do so, such as through the prison-camp novel, beginning with Dostoevsky’s “Notes from the House of the Dead.” Solzhenitsyn observed that, compared to Soviet interrogators, the classic evil-doers of Shakespeare seem “somewhat

⁶ The saying appears in the King James Version of the Bible (1611), Gospel of Matthew, 15:14: “Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.”

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, (1886) Chapter IX

⁸ Kant, I, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785)

⁹ Kiley Hamlin, J., Wynn, K. and Bloom, P., Three-month-olds show a negativity bias in their social evaluations. *Developmental science*, 13(6), pp.923-929. (2010)

¹⁰ Solzhenitsyn, A., *The Gulag Archipelago Abridged Edition* (Harvill, 1985)

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.* pg. 73

farfical and clumsy to our contemporary perception”¹³ as these villains recognize themselves as evil. But consider the scale of the twentieth century: the Soviet Union murdering over 60 million, the Chinese Communists 50 million, the Nazis 17 million... evil must, at its summit, have eliminated self-identification. Why? Solzhenitsyn explains: “To do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he’s doing is good,”¹⁴ and this is where I’d argue the most prominent extinguisher of the line dividing good and evil goes: when ideology is involved.

The reason villains such as Iago “stopped short at a dozen corpses”¹⁵ was because they were missing a key practice: they had no ideology. Ideology attaches to it a sense of impunity and has the ability to congregate many shadows, giving the evildoer “its long-sought justification.”¹⁶ Genocide, one of the ‘purest evils’, becomes a social project, or what Žizek calls a “positive spiritual project for which people are ready even to sacrifice their lives.”¹⁷ It inflates beyond the work of a few leaders at the top which means it’s impossible to have an easy moral reckoning with it. This large-scale involvement means that every post-genocidal society is haunted by its past, the White Sea-Baltic Canal, for example, built on the backs of gulag prisoners and, in the end, a pile of more than 25,000 corpses.

This idea was central to Jung’s psychology. Through his concept of the shadow, he posited the hard truth that there is a part of us that will do terrible things under the right circumstances and, with proper apparatus, maybe even without much provocation. By illustrating that “the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being”¹⁸ Solzhenitsyn is reminding us that every evil act committed was done by human beings, and we ourselves are human beings. As Peterson puts it, the shadow is “the way that you’re specifically attached to the archetype of evil.”¹⁹ The pathway to enlightenment is barred by the necessity of a passage through hell, both on a global and personal level, and very few are willing to do that. When Solzhenitsyn asks “And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”²⁰ he is addressing responsibility, or lack of, in people’s relationship with their actions. There seems to be a dissociation—a culture of victimhood—that permits us to say confidently “not me” and leave it at that.

When Solzhenitsyn exclaims “if only it was that simple”²¹ he acknowledges that there is a split but the understanding of it is too often limited to political conception: “the illusion according to which danger may be abolished through successful diplomatic negotiations or by achieving a balance of armed forces.”²² His warning is that we should not deceive ourselves into believing that the solution is without spiritual discipline. It is not surprising, therefore, that he tunes his prophetic spirit to the Christian message as he declares what

¹³Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago Abridged Edition* (1985) pg.77

¹⁴ *ibid.* pg.77

¹⁵ *ibid.* pg.77

¹⁶ *ibid.* pg.77

¹⁷ Žizek, S., *The Fall that Made us like God Part II* (2019)

¹⁸ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago Abridged Edition* (1985) pg. 75

¹⁹ Peterson, J., *Personality 04/05: Heroic and Shamanic Initiations* 201

²⁰ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago Abridged Edition* (1985) pg. 75

²¹ *ibid.* pg. 75

²² Solzhenitsyn, A., *World Split Apart* (1988)

contaminates the West is “a harsh spiritual crisis and a political impasse.”²³ His warning, like Nietzsche, was that a world where “God is dead”²⁴ is a dangerous one. “There's nothing triumphal about what Nietzsche is saying here,” says Wilkerson,²⁵ it is a matter of society's severance from God. Not only has the authority of the Church been nullified, but the very existence of “absolute.” There are now no philosophical absolutes, no logical absolutes, no absolutes in nature, and certainly no religious absolutes like absolute “good” or absolute “evil.” For Solzhenitsyn, the “failings of human consciousness deprived of its divine dimension” are the reason for the “major crimes of this century.” “Men have forgotten God.”²⁶

However, is it really lack of spirituality that causes evil, or is evil itself a spiritual force? Žizek explores this from a secular standpoint. If we analyse the very instigator of Christianity—the crucifixion—we see the distance that separates us from God is inscribed into God Himself. On the cross, the point where “Christianity culminates” and “in which Entzweiung (divisiveness, which for Hegel formally defines evil) is directly and explicitly transposed from the split between God and humans into God Himself who... is split from Himself,”²⁷ Jesus cried “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”²⁸ and for a brief moment God Himself becomes an atheist. If so, we are not simply separate from God but our separation from God is part of divinity itself. This brings to question whether evil is an essential part of life, for not even God can escape it.

Hegel's dictum from his *Phenomenology* is that “evil is the gaze itself which perceives evil everywhere around it”²⁹ and this is an appropriate place to conclude. As Žizek brought up in his debate against Peterson “the very liberal gaze that demonises Trump is also evil because it ignores how its own failures open up the space for Trump's type of patriotic populism.”³⁰ Similarly, we must question our own failures when we demonise others, for this brings to question the very society that creates these evil people in the first place, as Solzhenitsyn came to find out in his bitter experience of the camps.

Wordcount: 1998

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (1882)

²⁵ Ross, D., ‘*God is Dead*’ and 4 Other Quotes from Nietzsche Explained (2021)

²⁶ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Men Have Forgotten God*, (1983)

²⁷ Žizek, S., *The Fall that Made us like God Part II* (2019)

²⁸ Mark 15:34 New King James Version 34

²⁹ Hegel, G.W.F., *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1910 in English)

³⁰ Marxism: Žizek/Peterson: Official Video

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