

Teaching Politics, Imagining Evil

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November 13, 2003

People who care about politics can no more be indifferent to the ideas of justice and injustice (and therefore good and evil) than a physician can be unconcerned about the ideas of health and illness. Maintaining and advancing human health is the purpose of medicine and informs every aspect of its practice. Similarly, the just and good regime, namely that nation and government where human beings flourish, constitutes an inescapable idea without which both participation in, and the study of, politics becomes ill-defined or largely unintelligible. Thus, most people who participate in politics, who advocate this candidate or that policy, do so because of a belief that at least their good, or more laudably the public good, will in some meaningful way benefit. Similarly, those who study political science examine a subject whose understanding necessarily points beyond mere description toward evaluation. Political facts become completely intelligible and therefore most important only when they are evaluated in light of some standard or end associated with human well-being. Of course, such a standard often may be only dimly perceived or unclearly understood. Yet, just as the doctor cannot fully comprehend the meaning of medical data absent the informing idea of health, so the student of politics cannot understand the significance of mere observation or facts absent some informing notion of a human and political good. Thus, even the number-crunching political scientist who collects reams

of data in order to determine why citizens vote, discovers largely uninteresting information absent some larger understanding of the importance of voting to democratic self-government and, more importantly, absent some judgment of the merit (or lack of merit) of democratic government.

Informing almost all political action and study, therefore, is some idea of the good. But such a statement proves immediately controversial. What is the human good? Is it diversity? Or freedom? Or virtue? Or piety? Or simple egalitarianism? And what kind of nation and government is best equipped to attain such a good? It hardly exaggerates to say that thoughtful people disagree profoundly about such matters. But this is not a fatal problem. Fortunately, ascertaining the good for human beings does not refute the recognition that *some* understanding of the human good is essential if political action and study is to be rendered comprehensible. Furthermore, identifying what harms human beings –that is, what is unjust or evil –proves much easier to identify, and therefore becomes far less disputable, than specifying what is best for human beings. Reasonable people may disagree about the relative value of freedom, equality or virtue. But only tyrants, aspiring tyrants, psychopaths, or zealots unashamedly advocate tyranny, repression, or approve of genocide.

Nonetheless, often we are uncomfortable identifying or discussing evil. Partially this is because we have been well taught the pitfalls of fanaticism and intolerance, and partially it is because of inhibiting cultural forces (to be identified shortly). Despite the power of these dampening forces, the sober student of politics can never adopt nonjudgmentalism as a serious study option. This observation does not deny that there

are political and moral questions that, because of their difficulty, prompt much study and reflection. Nor does it deny that wrestling with such questions can lead to doubts and to a reluctance to pronounce moral judgments. To contemplate challenging moral or political questions is not the same as a dogmatic reluctance to render conclusions to such questions. Thus, a value free political science is the wrong answer to that question which asks why matters of injustice and justice sometimes prove so disputable. Not only is a nonjudgmental approach intellectually unsatisfying, it is worse: it is morally deficient. For example, the student of politics who understands Nazi society and British society in 1942 to present simple political alternatives about which any moral judgment is either arbitrary or unnecessary, subtly posits a moral equivalency. Such a person is indifferent to the crucial distinction between justice and injustice, and therefore to the difference between good and evil. This is both sloppy and dangerous thinking, for to be indifferent to evil means neither to condemn or oppose it, and that which is neither condemned nor opposed is often widely understood to be permissible.

If identifying the persistent evil of this world appears problematical, perhaps it is because too many of us possess limited imaginations. This is the intuition behind the papers we are asked to write. The idea that imagination is the key to moral discernment most likely can be traced to Rousseau generally, and to his *Emile* in particular. In that work, Rousseau's tutor wishes to enhance his student Emile's morality by teaching him to master and direct his imagination so that Emile might properly order important emotions (such as compassion). The idea that imagination

helps direct an individual's moral sense was part of Rousseau's larger project to describe human beings largely as feeling, rather than reasoning, animals. Whether Rousseau was right that this understanding constitutes the best, or even a good formulation of human ethical awareness, raises complex questions well beyond the scope of this brief paper. For the present, I merely accept for the sake of argument the notion that human beings who effectively exercise an imaginative capacity are better able to conceive of injustice and evil. In the same spirit, I will also assume that in some undefined but non-trivial sense, such people are more likely to understand more clearly, or act better, than are people who possess far more limited, or non-existent, moral imaginations.

We cannot assume that any need for such an imagination is obviated by the technology that supplies us with around-the-clock news. True, every day, the mass media provides ample examples of human evil and injustice small and large; even genocide today seems routine. Yet, there is a difference between hearing or seeing and comprehending. Furthermore, even for that minority of people whose imagination can be stirred in this way, no person—even an individual with the most finely honed moral imagination imaginable (!)—can focus on all, or even most of, the dreadful events of the world. Not only is such a task beyond human capacity, it is also utterly debilitating. What we expect from a well developed moral imagination, therefore, is something different and more limited: namely, the capacity to recognize and identify that evil -- understood as significant, intentionally human caused undeserved pain and suffering -- in both a general sense and in individual instances, is real. Sometimes we expect even

more from such a person, specifically a willingness to act in a way that helps alleviate the harmful effects of specific injustices.

It would seem that this idea of imagination can bear a great deal of moral weight. This perception points to a query we are asked to address: why do our students suffer from a limited moral imagination? Perhaps it would be wiser to not limit this question to our students. Therefore, we might profitably reformulate this initial question and ask what influences today inhibit a person's moral imagination and therefore negatively impact that individual's moral discernment? Although there are many possible answers to this question, I would suggest that there are four factors that deserve particular attention.

The first limitation upon the development and exercise of a moral imagination is the most obvious: namely the concreteness of our individual existence and the particularity of our immediate circumstances. Obviously, we know that which we most immediately experience. Each of us is a creature of a specific time and place. Given that most of us do not encounter evil first hand, or directly observe its existence, understanding its very possibility can be challenging. To take a specific example: the sense of affable decency that typically defines relations among democratic citizens often makes it difficult for them to envision, and therefore to acknowledge, evil's existence. A historical illustration highlights this fact. Scholars have pondered how it was that even though many in the West knew about the Nazi genocide against the Jews, there was little reaction or even outrage (by 1942 stories about wide scale atrocities were being widely reported, yet the facts somehow did not register mentally or morally). Thus, the distinguished British

historian Martin Gilbert has observed that “[i]n part, the story of the negative Allied response to many of the Jewish appeals for help was one of lack of comprehension and *imagination*, in face of the ‘unbelievable.’ ” (*Auschwitz and the Allies*, 141, emphasis mine). Why this failure of imagination occurred is explained by Walter Laqueur (*The Terrible Secret*, 206):

Democratic societies demonstrated on this occasion as on many others, before and after, that they are incapable of understanding political regimes of a different character. . . . Democratic societies are accustomed to think in liberal, pragmatic categories; conflicts are believed to be based on misunderstandings and can be solved with a minimum of good will; extremism is a temporary aberration, so is irrational behaviour in general, such as intolerance, cruelty, etc. The effort to overcome such basic psychological handicaps is immense. It will be undertaken only in the light of immediate (and painful) experience. Each generation faces this challenge again for experience cannot be inherited.

In other words, not having encountered evil directly, many human beings (in this instance those who live in democratic societies) interpret reality through accustomed, benign lenses. Literally, they cannot imagine people who intend, much yet embrace, evil acts and policies.

Reinforcing this impediment to an active moral imagination is a second, important influence. Our pervasive contemporary culture reflects the egalitarian ethos that both defines our age and simultaneously challenges the development of a moral imagination. Well over 150 years ago Tocqueville pointed out that equality was the moving idea of modernity. The idea was particularly influential in the United States, where it produced a number of important effects, one of which was a basic inward turning by citizens. Equality had undermined the customary sources of moral authority –tradition, the church, the family etc. Tocqueville observed that Americans constantly deferred only to

two authorities for their opinions: to public opinion or to themselves. This explains why he believed that Descartes –that philosopher who doubted everything except himself –was the most followed (but least read) of all philosophical thinkers in the United States. Tocqueville thought Americans were constantly led back to their own reason “as the most visible and closest source of truth.” Thus, each American “withdraws narrowly into himself and claims to judge the world from there, allowing each to “deny what they cannot comprehend.” (*Democracy In America* , Vol. II, part I, ch. 1). In other words, to many Americans, events beyond ordinary experience had no saliency, and therefore have seemed largely irrelevant or uneventful.

In this regard, today things have gone from bad to worse. With the rise of psychology as America’s reigning public religion, self-immersion has been blessed with a kind of moral legitimacy. And to a discouraging extent, American education at all levels has both acquiesced in and promoted what James Davison Hunter has called a pervasive culture of therapeutic individualism. Rejected in the process is the idea of a liberating or liberal education that aimed at overcoming parochialism by understanding the individual in light of a more comprehensive reality beyond the individual. Ironically, this traditional understanding of education has been mechanically praised at the same time it has been widely jettisoned. Its place—in the schoolroom and in the larger society –has been taken by a pervasive emphasis upon the self, by a virtual obsession upon empowering feelings, by creating a vibrant sense of self-worth, and even by creating an intense focus upon one’s own race, or sexual orientation, or gender. These are all causes and reflections of the inward turning that characterizes our time. Above all, today we remain

concerned about ourselves, about who we are, how we feel, about what is due us. This is no cause to celebrate. A critic (or perhaps a cynic) might observe that this descent into the self enables a prideful tendency that generally flourishes well on its own and therefore hardly requires further encouragement.

For the present, we would make a narrower point: that such a self-indulgent state of mind is destructive of moral sensibility. Consider: our civilization has been informed by two great traditions, one religious that points toward revelation, the other philosophical that crucially depends upon human reason. According to the religious tradition initially rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord. By contrast, the beginning of philosophy, observes Socrates, is wonder. Fear and wonder are different emotions that inform, and in turn are directed by, different states of mind. Nonetheless, fear and wonder have at least this in common: each is rooted in the radical insufficiency of the self. Fear of God points to an awesome God. Next to God, the human being is small. Similarly, the need to question everything –the essence of philosophy –results from a realization that our knowledge is small compared to what we do not know. Both fear and wonder are compatible with self-effacement and therefore with humility.

Such modest individuals are prone to seek wisdom outside of themselves, for example, by studying God's teachings or nature's ways. The pious who follow in the religious tradition have been taught of evil that can be caused by those who persistently reject and act contrary to God's moral truths. Philosophers, too, have recognized evil (and human vice). These students of nature and the human soul necessarily examine

human nature, and therefore contemplate both its highest potential as well as its basest longings. Even if neither faithful practitioners nor philosophical questioners directly encounter injustice or evil in their ordinary lives, each can imagine it as a human possibility. By contrast, inward looking human beings imagine only – themselves. For such people, only the sum of personal experiences constitutes the data base upon which moral and political judgments are based. In such an instance, the moral imagination is more a distant potential to be developed than a faculty to be exercised.

Related to this problem is a closely related, third impediment to the development and exercise of a moral imagination: namely, a simplified understanding of ethics that posits moral well-being self-referentially. Most often, this commonly occurs when a person defines moral action simply in terms of intentionality. The eclipse of traditional moral authority, and the related inward turning that so characterizes our age--has led to a pervasive social-wide moral belief—namely, that what matters morally is what I intend and what I believe. Each individual is a unique source of individual morality and (of course!) each of us intend to do well (and when we fail to do well we only make a mistake). At bottom, this is a kind of relativism masquerading as (third-rate) Kantism. For to believe that the moral person's morality is established by a commitment to any cause or concern worth caring about—is a cheerful, wishful thinking that, at bottom, holds that morality is not a restriction upon human desire, but its fulfillment.

The inherent danger of a subject rooted morality is aptly illustrated by by the somewhat notorious example of perhaps the century's greatest philosopher, Martin Heidegger. Now, Heidegger was hardly a cheerful chap. Nor was he concerned with

morality as an example of caring or even intentionality. In fact, having rejected his traditional Catholic upbringing, one might say he was not much concerned about any traditional understanding of morality at all. In his great work *Being and Time*, he rejected this tradition while positing an understanding of human existence and action that was nothing if not self-referential.

Heidegger pictured a human being who lived in an active relationship with the world. For that person, it was important to be resolute and to act, as opposed to being merely acted upon. This was most apparent in how one faced death, the very negation of a person's being. In Heidegger's opinion, one could either face death by acting boldly, that is, authentically, or flee from it—an inauthentic response. The key to understanding Heidegger's idea of authenticity is that it, too, was the result of inward looking. The human being was most fulfilled when acting decisively and boldly, according to a decision autonomously made. What is most interesting about this emphasis upon deciding and acting (but not upon deliberating) is that it admitted description but not direction. It was in this way that Heidegger was able to posit an ethical understanding of the human being while simultaneously eschewing ethics.

Having barred the front and back doors to his house of philosophy, Heidegger could not discuss human life absent some reference to moral concerns. They wafted in under the cracks in the windows and through the minuscule openings in the siding. Nor need we ask what it would look like to live according to a bold authenticity that he offered up as a substitute for traditional moral or religious virtue. We have the clearest of examples. For it turned out that Heidegger lived his philosophy. Thus, intrigued by the

Nazi Party's aspiration to greatness, early in 1931 he publicly endorsed Nazism and proclaimed a bold future for Germany. Heidegger joined the Party in May 1933, days before his appointment as Rector of Freiburg University. He occupied this post for almost a year, during which he actively and enthusiastically propagandized on behalf of Hitler and the Third Reich, including championing the law which banned Jews and other "undesirables" from the German Civil Service. The problem with Heidegger's inward looking ethics was clear; the ethic of authenticity only sounded like a traditional moral vocabulary but was compatible with great evil. The moral language of authenticity (like Nietzsche's language of commitment and or values) aped an older moral tradition but proved utterly incompatible with, and indeed was subversive, of that tradition. How could any informed moral imagination develop from such a sterile ground?

Indeed, Heidegger's house of philosophy rested upon Nietzschean ground, and Nietzsche's metaphysical foundation proved to be a kind of moral quicksand. For that reason, we must face the possibility that Nietzsche's postmodern metaphysics provides a fourth, and arguably the greatest, impediment to the formation and exercise of an informed moral imagination. Although widely (and sometimes wildly) popular in western academic circles, Nietzsche's belief that all overarching ideas (such as God) had been widely exposed to be mere concoctions with no credibility within the flux of a chaotic reality. For Nietzsche, there was no truth, only values, no love of truth, only the will to power. To accept Nietzsche's description of reality is to deny both the possibility of revelation and the persuasive power of reason. Nietzsche's description of what has since come to be known as the postmodern world rejects the truth of any reality

beyond that which a person projects, constructs, or wills. Ethics are mere values and values are what any person values. I value this, you value that, we have our values, but our values are little more than subjective preferences, rooted neither in God or nature. Politics is personal, indeed, everything is merely personal. Thus truth is simply an offshoot of personal preference, as it must be, because ultimately there is no truth.

What is the status of the moral imagination in light of a metaphysic that rejects anything that smacks of transcendence or objectivity? In some ways, a world where truth is merely a human invention and where preferences are willed and imposed but not discovered, is imagination friendly. In fact, postmodernism empowers imagination. Because everything is possible, there is at best a a dim line between the real and the imagined. The practical effect of this emancipation of the imagination is to overpower and numb it. No longer can it supply any moral force. In a world where anything is both imaginable and possible, only endless possibilities exist. Yet, such possibilities envisioned and willed can no longer inform any understanding of the good or supply any guide to moral action. In Nietzsche's universe, what has traditionally been understood as evil becomes merely one human possibility in a world of infinite possibilities. No longer is it the perversion of the good, or the noble, or the sacred. Absent any architectonic understanding of good and evil, and absent the possibility of agreed upon facts, moral condemnation becomes problematically subjective and therefore morally uninteresting. It would seem that Hegel was right: in the night, all cows are black.

To summarize: the student of politics can no more escape moral judgments than a doctor can avoid favoring health and opposing illness. Yet, today the student and

teacher of politics encounter challenges defending the necessity, much yet the rightness, of such judgments. To the extent cultivating a moral imagination constitutes an element in understanding (and even reacting to) good and evil, such an imagination is inhibited both by a lack of education and by a misguided educational impulse. Parochialism is an ever present human condition, whose effects in our age have been exacerbated by a culture of therapeutic egalitarianism. Each has created an inward looking individual whose moral awareness is turned on the self. Parochialism, and an emphasis on oneself and one's own tradition and culture, cry out for liberal, and therefore a liberating, education. But too often such an education has been rejected by a society that celebrates a self-emphasis that is deleterious to the development and exercise of an informed moral imagination.

One manifestation of this turn toward the self is a morality that focuses upon the individual as the ultimate source of morality. Such a condition exacerbates the already discussed problem of cultivating an informed moral imagination. Often, this emphasis upon the self results in a morality of intentionality. Sometimes, as in Heidegger's case, it emphasizes counterfeit virtues such as authenticity. No matter. Understanding the self as the source of morality almost always results in an overly simple and therefore unsatisfactory understanding of morality itself. And while this inward focus has become common in our society and age, it also can be partially traced to a kind of trickle down effect of a metaphysic widely endorsed in the academy. To say that this metaphysics denies the existence of God or the power of human reason constitutes a defining characteristic and infrequently a criticism. And while the self-focused individual often

suffers from a stifled moral imagination, the metaphysics of the possible threatens to overwhelm that same imagination. In their own way, each is an enemy of necessary moral distinctions and therefore each is an enemy of moral discernment. What a pity. Having just concluded a century of unparalleled genocides and brutality, it is unfortunate that our capacity to recognize and judge the human potential for such malevolent actions has been diminished. This sharp disjunction between reality and discernment is hardly inconsequential; unfortunately, it points to nothing less than a full blown intellectual crisis.

–Peter Schotten --