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Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Autumn 2005), pp. 130-150

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/498008>

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# The Shadow on the Picture: Of Evil or the Negative

François Jullien

Translated by Gila Walker

Contemporary discourse—or, to put it more precisely, globalized official discourse—seems to be invoking its ultimate purpose when it persistently dings our ears with its legitimate aspiration to an all-embracing positivity: peace (repeated relentlessly in all languages as a univocal directive), cooperation, communication, and so on. As if the elimination of the negative were at last within reach, that we had but a few final obstacles to remove before casting it out of history once and for all, or at least that such a purpose *could* be accomplished if only we had the will to do so, ambient discourse boldly brandishes the optative in a chain of resolutions: no more wars, no more divisions, no more borders, and so forth. Not so fast, the realist pensively sighs, there may still be a long road ahead; but insofar as the end is concerned, there is nothing to discuss. Henceforth, political and religious discourse (the grand ecumenism of the pope and the dalai lama) are in total agreement on the subject.

Yet, hand in hand with this triumph of aseptitized unanimity, at least on the level of discourse, we have been witnessing an amazingly primitive resurgence of diabolical figures whose elimination would purportedly suffice for history to finally show its radiant face. “Call it, as I do, axis of evil; call it by any name you choose, but let us speak the truth.”<sup>1</sup> Apparently one last “conspiracy” is unexpectedly delaying our progress (in just the same way communist regimes used to speak of final conspiracies diabolically obstructing the road to a “radiant future”). Evil, I repeat, or whatever else you call it, it’s all the same. A point of resistance or blockage is being designated whose nature is such that it has no part in any coherence and whose erad-

1. George Bush, speech to the German Bundestag, Berlin, 23 May 2002, [www.bundestag.de/bic/presse/2002/p2\\_0205233.html](http://www.bundestag.de/bic/presse/2002/p2_0205233.html)

ication can be engineered by an act of will. It may even be a matter, for the will, of delivering one more (final?) assault *against*, so as to be deemed worthy at last.

It seems to me that what is now conventionally termed *globalization* has radically changed the conditions of the possibility of the negative. Until now, the negative could be readily designated as the *other*, and the world could be split in two. There was always an exterior that could be opposed to the self. The negative was the other bloc (the USA for the USSR and vice versa) or the other class (the bourgeoisie for the proletariat, and so on). A negative of this sort could be readily targeted during the period of the cold war or of the class struggle. Globalization has put an end to the exteriority through which the negative could be channeled (and with which history worked). Given that there is no other camp on the outside where it can be situated but that it has nevertheless not disappeared, the negative is *logically* internalized and finds itself “repressed,” no longer operating overtly but in secret; it has become “terrorism.” This brings us to the question of what I have just put forward as a matter of logic. For is September 11 really the momentous event it is presented to be and even the momentous event par excellence? It may indeed fulfill the function of a momentous event by its surprise effect and by what it triggered (particularly in terms of traumatism), but as far as its origins are concerned I would be more inclined to see it as the sudden yet resultant surfacing of a “silent transformation” (I draw the concept from Chinese thinking: *mo hua*).

Another silent revolution: I belong to the first generation in France, since the very existence of France in fact, that has not lived through war on its soil and that has even come to regard such a prospect as not just improbable but impossible. I do not believe, however, that today’s urban violence can be explained without regard to this fact, against which it is a backlash, another manifestation of the internalization and dissemination of a negative that has nowhere else to be expressed and hence cannot be targeted anymore (in going to war against Iraq, Bush acted as if it could be externalized and targeted again). The old strategies are useless because terrorism and violence cannot be interpreted in moral terms alone (even though morality may be called upon to pronounce a judgment). Neither can they be fitted into pure sociological principles of causality (the result of poverty in countries that have undergone forced Westernization or in underprivileged

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neighborhoods in the West) or reduced to ideological issues (such as religious fundamentalism that, as we know, is highly reactive). Still less can they be treated as secondary or transitory phenomena over which the will would have sufficient leverage. Rather, they prompt us to think about the outlet that we offer to the negative (and not simply an expulsive outlet) now that the ordinary figures of confrontation with which history used to work no longer apply.

Regimes characterized by strong negativity, or reacting to a strong negativity, become more dynamic as a result (witness the Consulate after the French Revolution or China after the Cultural Revolution); the opposite is true of regimes of *feeble negativity*, such as France today where a good many social movements and special interest groups are motivated solely by the defense of previously acquired benefits. Unaware, our political forms themselves are suffering from the suppression of the negative. If there is one thing that is clearly dysfunctional in Western democracies—and that leads to citizen disengagement, which is then bemoaned to no avail—it no doubt stems from the fact that the interplay of oppositions either does not work or boils down to nothing more than a superficial stance without any real substance (or mere rivalry for power with barely differing agendas, as has been the case in recent elections). In contradistinction, the Greek principle of democracy is founded on the possibility of an opposition between discourses—discourse *against* discourse, *logos* against *logos* (the “antilogies”), be it in court, council, or the assembly, and even in the theater with the *agon*. For, according to a requirement attached to Protagoras’s name, a discourse may develop an idea, but to test its truth there must be two opposing discourses and a witness (listener, spectator, or citizen), acting as a third party, who judges on the basis of the points of contradiction of the arguments put forward.

Likewise, people tend to lazily dream of a Europe that, as a matter of principle, would abolish all internal barriers and spread to its farthest reaches, while complaining that this Europe remains abstract as far as its citizens are concerned, as if they did not grasp the fact that the process of individuation that determines by opposition (the latter in turn calling for its resolution) is what gives rise to vitality and engagement of the mind. Haven’t we learned this well enough from our close-at-hand experience with what constitutes a style? For there is no style that has not exercised its negativity, operating through differentiation and opposition vis-à-vis the given, conventional order of the slightest phrase and of the slightest form. And hasn’t this been made sufficiently clear to us by the history of Europe and the divergence between its various centers of dissemination? Even the production of concepts pertains to an individuated, and hence a particular, intellectual “milieu” (it is ecological, Nietzsche says). There is nothing to

see from a highway that cuts through the landscape. But Renaissance Italy (despite the proximity of Siena, Pisa, Florence, and its other centers), romantic-period Germany (young Hegel's Germany, between the more orthodox Tübingen, the freer Jena under Fichte's influence, and Weimar under the sway of Goethe), and, last but not least, the city-states of ancient Greece all owe the inexhaustible exuberance of their intellectual life to the inventive tension that arises from such an unlimited, truly disclosing, power of cleavage, and not from the often denounced spirit of rivalry, chauvinism, or parochialism.

If indeed Europe remains or, rather, is becoming abstract, in the manner of the Roman Empire, which dissolved the individuality of its city-states into a legally formal entity, in a process described by Hegel, this is because it has given in to its own homogenization. To begin with, by way of its languages, it has stopped putting this negative to work (and I see in this a symptom at the very least). Not only is translating a matter of thinking but in Europe thinking has also (traditionally) been a matter of translating. The philosophers may well have lived in Greece, but philosophy itself was born in Rome. For it was in the act of wrestling with the negativity inherent in the untranslatable—with Lucretius's and Cicero's groping translations of Greek terms—that Rome discovered its universal vocation. What will become of a Europe under the domination of English, which is now underway (another silent transformation)? What productive tensions (for these resistances of Babel provide matter for work) will disappear as a result? In his examination of the conditions of a perpetual peace, Kant himself recognizes the dangers of an extension leading to fusion and posits instead the separate existence, *absonderung*, of neighboring states as established by "differences of language and of religion" (at the height of the period of Enlightenment and the kingdom of "Man," Kant hazards the "singular expression," "difference of religion," although he feels obliged to justify his use of it in a footnote). Saying this does not mean siding with the local against the global. It means positing a *universalizing* sharpened by the fecundity of the negative (this universal being not so much a given as a process of going beyond) and subsequently refusing to give in to the leveling process of standardization and uniformity with which universality is so often confused. *Universality* is a concept of reason, *uniformity* a concept of production; the former invokes a necessity, the latter relies solely on a commodity.

We cannot however avoid addressing the following question (which justified the "European construction"): Shouldn't this negative of cleavage and conflict (Heraclitus's *antixoun*) be condemned because it leads to war? (Heraclitus himself deemed it commendable.) Kant, calling for the establishment of international law, argued that war had usefully driven people

to the confines of the Earth to inhabit even the most uninhabitable regions and prompted them on the inside to constitute states to oppose the force of others, but that war was now a thing of the past with no claim to epic or heroic nobility. States, like individuals, would have to abandon the state of nature. To which Hegel replied that war is not to be explained by contingent causes or by hate between peoples and that the existence of singular peoples is a necessity of spiritual life. A people, insofar as it is an individuality, which implies uniqueness and exclusion, revives its cohesiveness through war by revitalizing the sense that its individual members have of belonging to the whole. Through war, a people negates the negation of itself that threatens it with dissolution in the ever-growing empire of material life and particular interests. (In ordinary experience, on a lesser scale, as soon as an *other* appears on the horizon in a negative way and “we” start fighting or at least criticizing him, the bond between us is strengthened, and we find ourselves united again.) What is at issue here is more than just an antagonism between two theoretical models: Kant’s formalism and Hegel’s organicism, or the risk of an impoverished universality (with Kant) because concrete determination has been eliminated and the opposite risk of a reactionary attachment to vitality (with Hegel) through empathy within the “ethical substance.” We have today to rethink the cooperating destiny of the negative and to distinguish in particular between that which destroys and produces nothing (which I will call evil, for a start) and that which could be an activating, *mobilizing* negative, with the capacity to generate tension, to elevate, to innovate, and to intensify.

I even see a renewal of the intellectual’s vocation in the age of globalization in this capacity to deal with the negative without sterilizing it or, rather (*dealing* being too managerial), to lift it up and make it productive instead of defusing it. The intellectual’s “engagement” would no longer involve taking up an extreme stance in a quest for radicalism as a matter of principle. (Hasn’t this figure, as it was manifested in France in the antagonism between blocks or classes from Sartre to Foucault and Bourdieu, been exhausted?) Rather it would consist in the following: discerning the paths in this new context by which the negative, instead of being banished, can serve to set in motion and activate; bringing out perspectives from which what appeared bad is revealed to harbor unexplored, even unimagined, resources, a potential fertility, and a capacity to cooperate; and in a converse and complementary movement, restoring divergence to thought, reengaging the conditions of a *dissensus*, which would counter the consensus that tends to rob thinking of its vigor and lull it to sleep. The question is how to use resistance to give rise to consistence (which is all the more important in that we are currently, as I have said, in a regime of feeble negativity in

Europe). Overt conflicts, structured by contradictions, are better than hidden, biased, or latent conflicts. We could content ourselves with “soft-core” substitutive forms of an acceptable, cushioned negative, partly expulsive, partly probative, but no longer martial—such as the world football championships with their popular media heroes. But we could also hope to delve into a more intelligent, more virulent negativity that would call the mind back to its uneasiness.

### 1. Subject/Process, Salvation/Wisdom

Let us initiate the necessary distinctions. To remove the negative from its dubious and, as it were, ambient kinship with evil, I will start by eliminating the ambiguity on various sides. Between evil and the negative there is a distinction in the orientation, not the content of the terms; each time you think you have located an intersection between them, a rupture of planes appears. And you find that even after having been enumerated and paired off, these different planes end up, in and of themselves, pitching evil and the negative opposite one another as rival options. The two terms refer to the same order of reality but on opposite registers. And if they occupy the same place in the picture, they do so with their backs turned to each other. Evil *or* the negative: the two terms deepen an alternative in thought, swinging in one direction or the other. (We see this alternative culminating in the history of philosophy with the displacement—in a way *displacing everything*—that was effected from Kant to Hegel.)

The manifold divisions that diametrically oppose the two will form my starting propositions; I will thereafter return to these roughly outlined formulations to expand upon them and test them.

1) Evil pertains to *morality*, which pits it—in terms of suffering, imperfection, or sin (according to the classic tripartition, evil is physical, metaphysical, moral)—against an ought that, for its part, is always assumed; the negative, on the other hand, pertains to *functionality* and, consequently, to a problematic of effectuation and not of intention or, yet again, to what I will more broadly call, following a common notion, the course of the world.

2) Evil reflects the point of view of a *subject*, be it an agent or a patient. To my mind, what justifies the invention of Evil in the history of humanity is not so much the punitive, repressive function, traditionally advanced, as the fact that it has served as an exploratory structure of *interiority*. In a word, evil has made man greater or, if you like, it has opened him up, it has wrought him; Baudelaire would say *cultivated*, Nietzsche, *refined*. Evil revealed to man his capacity for ambivalence, choice, perversion, and exacerbation; in short it took him out of the great logic of regulation. The

negative, on the contrary, reflects the perspective of a *process* and, first of all, the process of speech, developing, in all legitimacy, in terms of positive and negative assertions. Or evil is to be conceived from the standpoint of action or passion and the negative from that of operation (including mathematically in terms of negative numbers, magnitudes, or quantities; and in this respect Kant explains in his essay on the concept of “negative magnitudes” that it is also positive and that the negation in it is only a convention, indicating nothing about the intrinsic nature of a particular species of object).

3) Evil detaches and isolates a *singularity*; it takes on the clear-cut figure of an individual act, person, or story. The negative takes a *globality* into account; it stands in relationship to a whole that it serves and in which it takes part.

4) Evil institutes a *duality* whose two terms are conceived outside each other (even though each term is contradictorily signified by the other): good or evil. The negative, on the contrary, posits a *polarity* as an internal difference in a system whose two terms, positive and negative, are at once opposed and joined. One can imagine establishing absolute Goodness by overpowering and abolishing evil, but anything positive always implies something negative and is inconceivable without it.

5) As a logical consequence, evil is the object of a judgment, which in principle pronounces its *exclusion*; the negative, on the contrary, requires *comprehension* and is the object of *integration*. Evil harms, the negative co-operates.

6) Lastly, evil is *dramatic* (it causes conflict, lamentation, and perseverance); it is enigmatic (it points to its ultimate inscrutable, *unerforschlich*, ground, Kant tells us: after all who can say where evil comes from?); and it is metaphysical (it presupposes a disjunction of planes, between the is and the ought, and in so doing it introduces a norm, a model, and a transcendence). In contrast, the negative does not oppose the real to the ideal; it couples and coordinates what it separates. The negative is *logical*.

These initial traits already form a system. By following their opposition, we are led to set up these two options of thought face to face as poles to form two ideals, and they, too, are rivals. Indeed, behind this opposition and as a consequence thereof, another opposition comes into view. On one side, there is the idea of salvation, founded on and escaping evil; on the other, that of wisdom, integrating the negative in the course of things. In fact, this is the first choice facing anyone, regardless of culture or period, who naively wonders how to live. What I mean is that this choice is logical as it is based solely on the formal opposition, exclusion / inclusion, and, for this reason, it oversteps the *ideo*-logical opposition: “I exclude as evil / I

include as negative.” Whence emerges a second, even more synthetic picture, depicting this alternative according to the following modalities:

1) Salvation, which proceeds from the thought of evil, is conceived from the standpoint of the *soul*, isolated in its destiny. On the contrary, wisdom, which takes the negative into account, is conceived in relationship to the *world* and in cooperation with it.

2) With salvation, which radically pits good against evil, the antagonism is pushed to the pitch of a *clash*, and this clash is unremitting (since the alternative spells perdition). Conversely, wisdom, which comprehends the function of the negative, leads to the *sponte sua* resorption on a larger scale of whatever causes conflict.

3) Starting with the Fall (into evil), salvation calls for a *narrative*, or rather it is intrinsically construed as a master narrative. First a downfall creates a momentous event, like that of Adam and Eve cast out of terrestrial paradise or, according to other ancient tales, of souls of heavenly origin descending into the world and losing their innocence; this triggers the story, episode after episode, station after station, of a painful climb out of Darkness to Light, restoration, and reconciliation. By contrast, wisdom is fundamentally unstoried (it teems with individual anecdotes but has no history). It neither waits for events nor revels in promises. Having discovered a role for the negative in the overall economy of things, it explains its validity and exposes the *coherence* of this world. Or, to restate it from a Greek framework, salvation pertains to *muthos*, wisdom to *logos*, and their opposition is built on the divergence between these functions.

4) In short, the idea of salvation delivering us from evil, from this flaw, makes tension irrupt and stirs passion; it organizes and governs a *dramaturgy* and stands heroic. The thought of wisdom, dissolving evil in the negative, justifies a *harmony*. On one side, the destiny of a soul (tragically) unfolds; on the other, the order of the world, or better yet what Plotinus terms its syntax, is serenely considered. *Sun-taxis*, the Sage plumbs the rules of concordance that make for the fact that the world—*this* world—is composed *justly* as it is.

These two figures, the Saint and the Sage, have been so petrified and ossified by hundreds not to say thousands of years of self-righteous normative ideology that it is hard to see what could be made of them, if it were not for the following operative capacity that wells up from them: they can serve to separate evil and the negative retroactively, and they can even contribute to bringing to light and illustrating, beneath these antagonistic portraits, the genuine disjunction between the two. For the Sage is not, as he is often depicted, on the road to saintliness, and wisdom is not a step on the path to supreme elevation (the European Orientalist tradition still tends to

use the term *sage* for the one who is not yet a saint, in Chinese *xian* as distinguished from *sheng*). Rather, the Sage indicates a path that is diametrically opposed to the Saint's. To the plaint of an existence distressed by Evil and aspiring (and working) toward deliverance, he answers that one does not go without the other and that, to use another common saying (since the Sage readily sticks as close as possible to everyday language and thought), it takes all sorts to make a world. To the desperate harangues against Darkness, he replies that, without shadow, we would not perceive light, or at least we would not be able to enjoy it, and that it is in the darkness of night or death that things are quietly reconstituted and coherences re-established.

The two opposing figures thus arising from this initial theoretical classification may seem at first too clear-cut. But I think that they will prove justified as we see how the entire, very broad spectrum of what we too abstractly call the great conceptions of life or of existence (since the two terms are still confused) fits conveniently and tidily between these poles: those of evil or the negative, of salvation or wisdom—but not of the sacred or profane (the religious or secular). These are notions that are usually assumed to underpin the basic opposition, with the Sage, choosing to live in this world, placed in the category of the profane and the Saint, aspiring to salvation, in that of the sacred. These categories come after. Rather I see at the start of the split that *either* one aspires to freedom (from evil) *or* one comprehends (the negative), and religion can encompass both cases. In the first, one beseeches God and calls upon him for help; in the second, God is the name given to a way of simply saying yes to whatever arises. There are religious men and women tormented to the point of terror and anguish, and there are serene religious people like Saint Anthony or Saint Francis. Witness the Bible: the two poles of wisdom-integration and holiness-damnation are present already in the Old Testament. And in the history of philosophy itself, it is as if each person were moving a cursor between the two extremes to work out a position in relation to them. Plato ostensibly bows to the theme of the Fall (which is not a mere residue or gift wrapping in his thinking) and so his reflections logically assume the form of a story (*muthos*): the fall of souls (in *Phaedrus*), having lost their wings in the celestial procession and finding themselves imprisoned in solid bodies and deprived of sight (or the fall of souls into the Underground where they are embodied again for punishment). Consequently Plato advocates asceticism and calls for turning away from the world below and “escaping” to God (*Phaedo*). However, and more generally, Plato's *logos* works to produce an interaction between genres and, to begin with, between the same and the other, to the point of recognizing that not-being is and that in a way being,

in turn, is not (the *Sophist*) and thereby calling the negative back to its vocation of negation to serve as the condition of possibility of the argument; and in what has become the “likely” story of creation in *Timaeus*, the creator, intent on securing the best, resolves to bring order to everything by stemming the event structure of this inaugural act.

Faced with the proven success of the *logos*, one would have thought that one of these poles had been abolished long ago and that the grand narrative of the Fall and salvation, despair and deliverance, had run its course. Yet it is clear to see that this is not the case; this overarching narrative has not released its grip on us (by “us” I mean at least in Europe). It is not only present in Dante, drawing inspiration from the biblical story. It also constitutes the narrative development of Hegel’s phenomenology of our spirit: from the immediacy of sense certainty to the long, trying process that leads consciousness through mediation-extraneation, figure after figure, stage after stage, to discover each time an altogether different form of certainty before sinking back into doubt or, rather, despair, *Verzweiflung*, until absolute knowledge is gained. (In this sense, the Hegelian *logos* lapses into the mythological notwithstanding the concept of the negative that allows it to progress dialectically.) Similarly, it structures the dramatic development of Proust’s *Lost Time*: the innocence of childhood (in Combray), *then* the journey into Evil (into the depths of the abyss: Sodom and Gomorrah), *until* the restitution of “time regained.”

## 2. The Manichean and the Stoic: Narrating or Describing

If we could effect a catalysis of thought, in its pure state, two figures would emerge from these two poles of evil and the negative, turned respectively toward salvation and wisdom: the Manichean and the Stoic. These names are still ours today and in a way that I think is not merely emblematic. We are wont to say, “his views are” or else, as a negative proposition commonly formulated in the first person singular, “my views are not” Manichean. Would then believing in Evil be bad and need we defend ourselves against it to this extent? What is it here that is unacceptable solely because, in this area and apparently in this area only, simplifying would be detrimental, and this to the point of putting in danger the whole of humanity? In other words, what is it that, immediately, from the standpoint of common judgment, demands more patience and complexity? At any rate, these two figures seem so deeply embodied in an *ethos* that they engage from the outset the very substance of how each person lives. And we are tempted to turn these categories of thought into categories bordering on the psychological and even on psychological rigidity. The Manichean radicalizes evil to the point of making it a principle in its own right and a driving force

in history because it is adverse to and is as consistent as the good; a relentless struggle ensues unfolding from the beginning to the end of time and sweeping souls into this cosmic destiny. Conversely, the Stoic deems that we must work meticulously to bring to the fore the hidden positivity lying at the edge of evil—one that goes with evil, compensates for it, and discloses its legitimacy. This, in the Stoic's eyes, is the case no matter what kind of evil is being considered: whether it is what human beings do to each other—war, theft, rape, betrayal, the list, we readily admit, could go on forever—or what human beings are called upon to endure—to begin with, sickness and death. Consequently, he considers that we must treat evil as a mere negative, since it carries a flip side or an inseparable counterpart, and these two parts combine as an overall logic and call upon us to go beyond it.

Handed down to us under a cloak of darkness over the course of centuries of Christianity, these two figures are transhistorical, but they are also transcultural, so there must be something of an archetype in them. I have already had the occasion to point to the many Stoic features of ancient Chinese thought, notably in Confucian philosophy, without there being any reason to suspect an interchange between these worlds: the concept of a coming into being through immanence, the operative distinction between what depends on me and what does not, the idealization of the Sage to the pitch of absolutization, and, especially, the “joy” derived from an assent and adhesion to the flow of things. And when Christian missionaries failed in their propagation of the faith, they promptly fell back on Stoic positions that could effectively serve as a bridge to China.<sup>2</sup> As for Manicheism, which spread to both sides of the Middle East and was equally controversial on either side, it is surely the only current of ancient thought that can be examined as readily in Latin texts as in Chinese, in Augustine as in the manuscripts discovered at Dunhuang and clearly established by Chavannes and Pelliot.<sup>3</sup> More remarkable still, as Peter Brown notes, the need was felt to consign Manichean books to the flames by Emperor Diocletian at the end of the third century and by imperial China nearly a thousand years later. Such a concurrence cannot be fortuitous, and, here again, there is no question of influence in it. Rather it seems that pitting Evil as an absolute against Good poses an inherent threat to organized political power. If the only true clash is between these principles, established as cosmic forces surpassing the scale of human beings, what sense can there be to all human efforts to arrogate power in history, be it in the form of the vastest of empires?

2. See François Jullien, *Procès ou création: Une Introduction à la pensée des lettrés chinois* (Paris, 1989), p. 219.

3. See “Un Traité manichéen retrouvé en Chine,” trans. and ed. Ed. Chavannes and P. Pelliot, *Journal Asiatique* 10, no. 18 (1911): 499-617, and 11, no. 1 (1913): 99-199, 261-394.

Because Manicheism stands these two principles (Good and Evil, the realm of Darkness and the realm of Light) in opposition to each other and especially because it holds that man has two opposing souls (one ingrained in the flesh and springing from the race of Darkness; the other stemming from the adventitious part of God as it was sent by God to fight against Darkness) engaged in an unrelenting battle, the Manichean could conceive of history only in terms of the Fall and salvation. Already the gnostics, whom Plotinus attacks, had the last elements of intelligible reality engulfed by matter, from which first a demiurge arose and then the world, where reflections of intelligible things remain trapped until, after many trials and tribulations, these spiritual seeds will ascend back to their origin, and the sensible world will be destroyed at last.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the Manicheans, against whom Augustine turns, structured their narrative in three stages.<sup>5</sup> In the first act (in the past), Light and Darkness were wholly apart, equal in power but in total opposition. In the second act (in the median time of the present), Evil, due to its own disorderly movements, catches a glimpse of Good, which it ardently desires and sets out to conquer; Light reacts by sacrificing a virtue emanating from God's substance to fight Darkness but is vanquished by it, and from this defeat comes the commingling that now constitutes the soul and the world and condemns both to intestine struggles. In the final act (to come), the Angel of Light will work free from the Old Man by separating the forces of Light and Darkness and thus open the door to redemption and to the definitive reintegration of Good into its sovereign kingdom.

We have here the makings of a metaphysical novel. Yet Augustine does not seem shocked by it despite all the energy he invests in fighting against a form of heresy to which he himself had long adhered in the hopes of finding an answer to the question of evil. The fact that such a *muthos* elicits no irony on his part is probably because the entire story of the Fall and salvation and the entire pathos of decline and deliverance are ingrained in Christianity, too, and are even consubstantial with it. That is, Christianity is also founded on an eventful dramatization. Or else, if he were to speak of fiction here, where would he have it begin? On the other hand, Augustine has an argument that goes beyond disputes of filiation and interpretation or controversies concerning God's nature, an argument that suffices to knock down the Manichean edifice in a single blow. For once, it is not an argument

4. Plotinus, "Against the Gnostics," *Ennead*, trans. A. H. Armstrong, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), vol. 2, sec. 9.

5. See Augustine, "Actes ou débat avec le manichéen Fortunat," *Six Traités anti-Manichéens*, vol. 17 of *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, trans. and ed. R. Jolivet and M. Jourjon (Paris, 1961), §1, pp. 133, 135.

like any other, always more or less disputable; this one is irrefutable. For once, the polemic brings out an existential truth. Undermining the possibility of dualism from the outset, Augustine's argument sets a definitive limit on all forms of Manicheism to come. It shows what is simplistic and ultimately unacceptable about any sharp opposition between Good and Evil. The question is not so much, If nothing can injure God (otherwise he would not be God), then was God cruel in sending souls into the world to engage in such a hard battle? This argument, used by Nebridius who converted Augustine,<sup>6</sup> still depends on dogma. The question Augustine raises is unrelated to dogma: How could Evil (at some point in time) rush to the kingdom of Light and desire Goodness? Even if Evil was out to corrupt Goodness while remaining Evil, it still means that it was aspiring to Goodness. Wanting or desiring something, even wrongly or maliciously, always implies an inclination to what one thinks is good (for oneself).

That the Stoic is to be seen as opposed to the Manichean means, in this respect, that, whereas the latter disjoins good and evil, the former holds them completely associated—and not that whereas the Manichean deems evil radical, the Stoic regards it as a secondary phenomenon or an illusion. Ancient Stoicism does not deny the actuality of evil and even sees it as threatening human reason itself. Still less is the opposition between the two to be framed in terms of optimism and pessimism (Doesn't Bréhier emphasize Chrysippus's "pessimism" on several occasions?<sup>7</sup>—but what meaning could this have?). Even though these conceptions engage existence globally and are the source of attitude, their opposition is to be understood in a logical way and not as a matter of temperament, over which we would have little control. The Stoic treats evil as a negative because he regards it as necessarily accompanying the positive and hence integrated with it in a common functioning principle: a good thing (the thinness of the bones of the skull, for instance) implies by way of consequence or, more precisely, "by accompaniment" (*parakolouthesis*) a bad thing (the fragility of the head); so if you hit your head and fracture it, you should think about the concomitant advantage that such a constitution ordinarily offers, in other words, about what is the (all too often unnoticed) obverse of this reverse side.<sup>8</sup> This takes the form of a sustained argument according to which (with any opposite logically implying its opposite) good suffices to explain evil and virtue, vice; in conformity with this affinity of opposites, sickness goes hand in hand with health, and so on, the two being arranged each time in

6. Ibid., §26.

7. See Émile Bréhier, *Chrysippe et l'ancien Stoïcisme* (1910; Paris, 1951, 1971), pp. 168, 206.

8. Ibid., p. 206.

an aggregate economy dividing them between the positive and negative of a single reality, which is ultimately nothing less than the life of the universe. Stoic thinking is demonstrative, in its *logos*, of this global order incorporating the two; its task is to make visible, across the wide diversity of phenomena and down to the slightest detail (including the most marginal and anecdotal phenomenon, such as the usefulness of bears or seashells), this government of the world that, like that of the city, guarantees the coherence and adaptation of all these aspects through concordance and sympathy.

All we would have to do then to be convinced of the reason for things is to open our eyes. The Manichean tells a story, the Stoic gives us the universe to behold, and both acts are equally immemorial. Thus God addressing Job tells him that to silence the plaints of the soul it suffices to consider the beauty of the world (Job 38–39). There is no better proof of God's existence than his creation; simply calling upon it to bear witness is enough, for its eloquence is in things (the marvelous yet outdated expression, the *leçons de choses*,<sup>9</sup> says as much). Likewise, Balbus, in picking up Chrysippus's position in Cicero, has no better argument than to point to the admirable constancy of the forward and retrograde courses of the stars, the concordance of all their many different courses and the intelligence that this manifests, thus reminding us, in terms that have come down to us from Aristotle, that we no longer perceive the splendor of the sky because of its daily recurrence and the habit we have of seeing it, that we no longer look for the reasons for things that we see all the time.<sup>10</sup> Consider, closer still, the membrane of the eye. It is thin and transparent enough to let the eye see through it, yet solid and consistent enough to hold the eye in place. Likewise for the lashes, the pupil, and the lids; this "art," observable in the slightest natural manifestation, the list of which could go on forever, is more convincing to begin with than any argument, for it is immersed in its perfection. The heady metaphysical lure is stemmed by the slightest physical organization wherein the why dissolves into how. Ultimately, between the Stoic and the Manichean, the opposition can be stated in terms of functions of discourse: describing / narrating. I narrate *or* I describe. *Narrating*, to be structured and create tension, requires catastrophe and restoration (salvation and, in its absolute form, death and resurrection). *Describing* (or depicting), on the other hand, if only by tracing the outlines of the configuration, leads to going back to the reason for what is constituted in this way as its "nature." Narration overturns, or at least it undermines; its event uproots. Descrip-

9. *Leçons de choses*, literally "lessons from things," was a method of object-centered learning current in French elementary schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.—

TRANS.

10. Cicero, *De natura deorum*, ed. Arthur Stanley Pease, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 2:19–67.

tion, by its very movement, is justification. Otherwise put, narration *intrigues* by jarring, while description *adheres* and legitimates from the start.

I wonder if we could extend the scope of this distinction even further. Describe a flower (an eyelid, and so on). When you trace its subtle unending network of functions and connections, you implicate a *raison d'être* and sink into this *cohesiveness*; you espouse its coherence. Tell a story. All stories create a breach if only by the advent of an event; they introduce a risk and even a threat; you find yourself opposing actants and then structuring their clash. In other words, when I narrate, I create drama; when I describe, I create order.

### 3. Past the Negative: The Ugly, the Abject, and the Painful

Ultimately, hasn't evil proved to be a lazy notion or, at any rate, an insufficiently considered one? It is the result of a hasty initial gesture, which retains an element of panic. It has left its fossilized imprint across the diversity of languages to serve as a peg on which we confusedly hang our fear, grief, and loathing or its opposite, temptation. The first task of thought is to see through this confusion (and isn't the main merit of wisdom, here and there, to start by detaching all these affects from evil in order to think them through as they are in their own right and be free of them?). Evil is a lazy or at any rate a simplistic notion not so much because of the heterogeneous and composite quality it retains despite all efforts to construe it, torn always in all theodicies between its moral, physical, and metaphysical senses, and especially brutally swinging between its plural and its singular. The break between goods and Good, evils and Evil, is asymmetrical, for Evil is not just the hypostasis or the absolutization of evils, but phantasmally deepens an abyss. And it is not so much by what such a notion preserves of metaphysical reliance on a Good that either sets it up as a rival, sometimes even as a triumphant rival, or reduces it, on the contrary, to its shadow and to nothingness; or by what it maintains of a mythological dependence, bound as it always is to the structure of a story (the Fall) that serves not only to articulate it but also to construct it. Neither is it by what it retains of an irremediably ideological nature despite the preemptory, categorical character of the judgment pronounced. The content of evil, as moral philosophers have always observed, varies continuously; at another time, in another place, according to other customs, it may even be considered a good (reread, in this regard, the catalogue in Montaigne). The relativization of evil, which usually aims at maintaining its use more modestly and functionally, cannot rescue the term from that which, after having been a force of progress that helped humankind deploy its interiority and detach itself from the silent system of organic or cyclical dependencies that constitute the natural world, is now

turning into a force of *regression*, so much so that it infantilizes. A remnant of archaic terror, as of exterminatory vociferations, interminably seeps out from under it, and all the efforts of theodicies to make order out of the notion and raise it to coherence have failed to absorb it; there is always some residual tremor or hysterical tension in it. In short, evil always brings with it an edema effect that the many attempts at “logification” are at pains to eliminate.

In contrast, the negative, in which this long history of theodicies leading up to Hegel culminates as a substitute, produces a logical effect and is conceptually useful, but it is of no moral value. It can incorporate any destiny, on any scale (people, individual, impulse) into the coherence of a whole that structures it and makes it cooperate, but it does not indicate personally how to behave. It has all the sharpness of an operational tool, and it even ostensibly eliminates all religious or simply affective residues—that is its merit; but it is not a *practical* notion (whereas evil is at once practical and dramatic). So ultimately all we can do is pick up where Hegel left off and this time work our way back in the opposite direction to Kant. The question, What do I have the right to hope for? emerges radically changed from the promotion of the negative, or rather it finally finds itself resorbed because the negative provides reason not so much for hoping by positing (and waiting for) some justification or retribution but for comprehending, with this *com* to be taken in its emphatic, inclusive sense. On the other hand, as to the question, What should I do? and as long as ethics will not let itself be subsumed by an all-embracing historical approach, the negative remains silent. Therefore we will have to resort to other terms to take on what the negative has relinquished.

I will propose at least three that reach past the negative while breaking down what evil all too impatiently encompassed and diffracting it from three viewing angles that, to my mind, are independent (which is why evil cannot subsume them) and that no longer contain the dark relics by which the “purity” of morality is threatened: they are the ugly, the abject, and the painful. These will be the first brushstrokes outlining a *litigious subject* based on the following three disconnected planes that we see coordinated in morality: (1) Morality posits an operation of evaluation and judgment without which it loses awareness of itself and cannot set itself up as an ideal (and it is the aesthetic judgment that most purely engages the requirements of this ideal). (2) Morality is itself based on a primary reaction of rejection, a reaction that is at once immediate and unplanned, in the face of the intolerable that threatens humanity in us (what I call here the abject). (3) Lastly, morality cannot be detached from the order of affects, in spite of the insensibility recommended by wisdom (which is why I will take up the painful

in this regard). All things considered, as patient thinking has shown here and there (take Spinoza here or the neo-Confucian literati in China), leaving aside the idea of evil or getting rid of it as too cumbersome and awkward rather than actually superseding it does not mean renouncing morality.

1. It would be vain to try to substitute a judgment of *ugliness* for a judgment of evil in the hopes of escaping through aestheticization what now renders suspect all forms of moralism; it would be equally vain if we were to content ourselves with harking back to some period prior to the culture of resentment that we now suspect Christianity of bearing to some pre-Christian and even pre-Platonic (Heraclitean) precedence of beauty over goodness (the Greek ideal of *kalos kagathos*, “the beautiful and the good,” prior to the sin). The difference between the two is radical, and to begin with it resides in the following: When I state that an act is evil, I am presupposing the existence of transcendent values in the name of which I judge it (this “in the name of” drives home the exteriority involved); whereas, when I state that an act is ugly, I judge it only in relation to the particular situation in which it has been committed, delineating the horizon and framing the picture, and I denounce the sudden tainting of this situation. Such conduct is an eyesore and through it humanity finds itself not raised but diminished. There is then no relativization or subjectivation involved in such a transfer from evil to ugliness but rather an evaluation through immanence and self-reflection of the act committed. What good is there, for instance, in declaring that lying is evil when, despite all Kantianism, we know (“we know perfectly well” or, rather, “we can just sense”: the sensing of *sententia*) that such a judgment cannot be pronounced absolutely (for lying can obviously serve a higher purpose). Moreover, a lie can be morally assessed only in relation to the other to whom one lies, because lying, like love, always involves two people (or oneself split in two) and is even fundamentally a reply. Consequently there is no need to engage in casuistry, always a more or less dubious practice, or to claim a special status for this lie. If I have to treat the other as an adversary or, worse, as an enemy, not telling him the truth (and even leading him astray) is a strategic requisite. On the other hand, stating that lying is ugly amounts to judging that this lie harms the relationship that has or that could have been established and that it does so from the point of view of anyone who would consider it (according to the same universality posited by Kant for reflective aesthetic judgments). This ugliness is relational or *compositional* (situational) but not relativistic. The ideal it betrays is not (lazily) normative; rather, it must be constituted each time intrinsically. Morality is not given from the outset; it is not manifested once and for all but has to be discovered more precisely time after time.

I see a twofold theoretical interest, at the very least, in replacing the judgment of evil by the judgment of ugliness: (a) by assessing conduct in terms of the situation in which it takes place and according to the requirements that such a situation reveals, I avoid referring it to values that I cannot firmly establish; (b) at the same time, by judging that such conduct is ugly, I indicate that my judgment is disinterested (which is, as we know, the defining quality of aesthetic judgments) and that I am considering the conduct in its own right (contemplatively), hence without regard to eventual consequences, strategic interests, or personal benefits. Thus, when I judge that laziness is bad, I am doing so in the name of principles that are questionable (the work ethic, work, family, homeland, and so on). But when I state that laziness is ugly I am judging it in terms of the loss, or damage, that it itself manifests in relation to an aspiration and without regard to what I would stand to gain if this other person, or I myself, got to work. As a result, I am judging less in the name of a *should be* (that would be imposed) than according to a *could be* (what humanity *could be* through promotion)—not because one mustn't but because it is not fitting (it does not *convient*, with this *con* to be taken in its emphatic sense again); and this "convenience," or *decus*, is to be understood in moral, that is to say ideal, rather than social terms. There is no postulation of an obligation but rather the subtle discernment of a requirement. Finally, evil and ugliness call for different forms of redress. In delivering its judgment, evil immediately condemns and demands to convert to the domain of good or traps in perversion; whereas the ugliness that a critical eye discerns lets an analysis emerge as to why (how, from where) this weakness occurred and how it can be taken up again (as one might take up a phrase or a picture) and carefully corrected.

2. Morality, however, is not merely a matter of appreciation; it implies decision making to be practical, and it even necessitates exclusion to remain an ideal. The *abject* comes under this heading. No longer bound up with deliberation, the abject pronounces the verdict initially, or rather it *has already* pronounced it. The term itself is performative; denouncing something as abject means not only condemning it as bad but actually casting it (*jeter, jacere*) away from oneself (*ab*). The term spells execution; it is required notably in politics. Judging the condition to which people were subjected in the camps as representing an extreme form of evil, if not Evil itself, maintains us in an indefinitely evaluative attitude, no matter how strong our feelings are. Whereas considering it abject, or better yet *abjecting* it, involves straightaway a posture of revolting against it and casting it aside. Just as abreaction in psychoanalysis acts as the cathartic discharge by which the subject releases that which would otherwise constitute a threat for the psyche, so abjection of the abject is to be understood, in an active way, as

the sharp and immediate reaction of evacuating (once any possibility of development has been removed) something inside us that would otherwise endanger humanity.

Following the parallel between psychoanalysis and morality even more closely, we need to keep a watchful eye on these processes. Just as a lack of abreaction, psychoanalysis warns us, leaves something in an unconscious state that inevitably leads to neurotic symptoms, so any failing when it comes to such a moral abreaction leads to the interment of something that will eventually undermine common dignity more and more forcefully, without our knowing it. At this stage, from either perspective, ethical or mental, any temporizing in view of a compromise is a foreordained disaster. Mencius confines himself to the following diagnosis: There is something in every man that he will not endure (something intolerable that happens to others); then there is something in every man that he will not do, that is, will not consent to do, otherwise he is not a man (note that *man* here is not in the position of subject first, hinging thereafter on a determination of essence, but serves rather as a predicate, defining an affiliation and, as such, generically constituting the *commonness* intrinsic to morality). According to Mencius, from this alone surfaces, verifiable in experience itself, what can be extended *thereafter* to morality. This a priori *refusal* (in the face of the intolerable and prior to experience) is what morality leans upon in its endeavor not to depend on some established order or external principle and not to be merely empirically (and relatively) determined, but rather to find inside itself the self-justification that underpins it and the force it needs to prevail.

3. It is surprising to see all the efforts over the course of so many centuries, as much there as here, along with the rhetorical outlay made everywhere, if always in vain, to suppress the *painful*. The deformation wrought by the-odicies is dual in this respect, as if an excess of roughness could compensate for a faulty analysis. For they bias and force at the same time. They *bias* the negative by not recognizing that it has any part in the principle of the positive or that the good needs to push itself away from itself, or deny itself, to be active and not disappear. At the same time, they *force* in order to avoid recognizing the fact that enduring the (painful) work of the negative is exactly what qualifies the human. The Sage has to act as if he were not suffering; and so he hardens and elevates himself through insensitivity. But why confuse the two? The need to understand that the suffering human beings complain about reveals coherence, be it merely syntactical or more intrinsically dialectical (historical), and in no way implies the need to repel, as a weakness, the emotion by which we participate in life. Comprehending, that is to say grasping one *with* the other as going together, makes it possible to “logify,” and this intelligence helps dissipate vain expectations and senseless fears. But it need not lead to the “apathy” (the Greeks’ *ataraxy* and Men-

cius's *bu dong xin*) to which sages in all countries cling with the same Stoic, somewhat theatrical and mannered gesture by which they strike a pose. The Stoics claim that they are opening a door to immanence, but they do so in the imperative mode: a pointless rigidification. Simultaneously, I perceive death involved in the workings of life and hence inseparable from it (in this way, I get rid of recriminations as well as supplications), *and* I make a passage inside myself for the emotion of passing and loss. I reject the plaint but keep the pain. If there is wisdom, it is always in opening up and letting even pain enter, proceed, and pass through, and not in closing, be it heroically.

There as here. We read of such a blockage against the painful in a passage from the *Liezi*:

There was once a man named Wu of Dongmen among the people of Wei. His son died and he did not grieve. His steward said to him; "No man in the world could love as much as you loved your son, and now that he is dead, you feel no sadness. How is it possible?"

Wu of Dongmen replied: "In the days when I had no son, I felt no grief. Now that my son is dead, it is as if I had no son. So why should I be distressed?"

What the Taoist sage is extolling here is nothing other than the refusal to recognize a traumatic event or what we ordinarily call denial (and, in this codification-rigidification, the *Liezi* has already lost the *Zhuangzi*'s cleverly disarming mobility). Because, try as one might, this line of reasoning can do nothing to hide the fact that the after will never again be the same as the before (his death). A son was born, he grew up, he wanted, he lived. Through him something of humanity came to be. That this then returned to the undifferentiated does not mean that it was not. Or if (after having been dragged by the dramatization of evil to the brink of a dereliction calling for a destination), existing is finally recoverable, this is because it suddenly drives home, with force, apropos, and even in a necessary way, the undeniable factuality of this surging forth; in fact, such a son did exist (as we would say that a character is not imaginary, that he existed). And henceforth he is to be mourned.

To say that he lived merely means by euphemism that it is finished, as when the bedroom door opens solemnly to announce that this life has forever retreated, reverted to silence, returned to the infinite cycle of deaths and births—that it is over. But to say that this life existed, discreetly takes the opposite view: it designates this life as irreversible, despite the definitive oblivion into which it is sinking; it takes it out of its inconsistency and puts it on the plane of essence ("*Tel qu'en lui-même enfin*").<sup>11</sup> This barely distin-

11. These are the opening words of Mallarmé's "The Tomb of Edgar Poe." The whole line reads "Tel qu'en Lui-même enfin l'éternité le change," meaning, "As to Himself at last eternity changes

guishable distinction (living/existing) initiates, in and of itself and without calling on faith, a reversal in perspective. From this point on, instead of opting definitively for one or the other, their very divergence, the interstice between the two, will enable us to afford insight or rather to let insight emerge from their in-between. Rather than hastily postulating a meaning in a search for some sort of beyond and deliberately fixing destinations (or impatiently waiting for revelations), let us take what is ever always at the start only an infinitesimal distinction between words, languages, traditions, and thoughts and turn it into a resource. Let us think *between*: between evil and the negative (or as between China and Europe). Let us separate one from the other: existing from living or, conversely, coherence from meaning (or wisdom from saintliness), and out of this preliminary split open up new junctions *from the very inside* of thought—expecting nothing from intelligibility besides probing this difference. Instead of letting thought be extrapolated to the nebulous summits to which belief all too speedily clings, let us begin by addressing what is closest—the nuance—and start sinking into it.

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him” (Stéphane Mallarmé, “The Tomb of Edgar Poe/Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe,” *Collected Poems*, trans. Henry Weinfield [Berkeley, 1994], p. 71).—TRANS.