Introduction

> The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes.) The real foundations of his inquiry do not strike a person at all.—And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.
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> —Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, #129

The eighteenth century used the word *Lisbon* much as we use the word *Auschwitz* today. How much weight can a brute reference carry? It takes no more than the name of a place to mean: the collapse of the most basic trust in the world, the grounds that make civilization possible. Learning this, modern readers may feel wistful: lucky the age to which an earthquake can do so much damage. The 1755 earthquake that destroyed the city of Lisbon, and several thousand of its inhabitants, shook the Enlightenment all the way to East Prussia, where an unknown minor scholar named Immanuel Kant wrote three essays on the nature of earthquakes for the Königsberg newspaper. He was not alone. The reaction to the earthquake was as broad as it was swift. Voltaire and Rousseau found another occasion to quarrel over it, academies across Europe devoted prize essay contests to it, and the six-year-old Goethe, according to several sources, was brought to doubt and consciousness for the first time. The earthquake affected the best minds in Europe, but it wasn't confined to them. Popular reactions ranged from sermons to eyewitness sketches to very bad poetry. Their number was so great as to cause sighs in the contemporary press and

sardonic remarks from Frederick the Great, who thought the cancellation of carnival preparations months after the disaster to be overdone.

Auschwitz, by contrast, evoked relative reticence. Philosophers were stunned, and on the view most famously formulated by Adorno, silence is the only civilized response. In 1945 Arendt wrote that the problem of evil would be the fundamental problem of postwar intellectual life in Europe, but even there her prediction was not quite right. No major philosophical work but Arendt's own appeared on the subject in English, and German and French texts were remarkably oblique. Historical reports and eyewitness testimony appeared in unprecedented volume, but conceptual reflection has been slow in coming.

It cannot be the case that philosophers failed to notice an event of this magnitude. On the contrary, one reason given for the absence of philosophical reflection is the magnitude of the task. What occurred in Nazi death camps was so absolutely evil that, like no other event in human history, it defies human capacities for understanding. But the question of the uniqueness and magnitude of Auschwitz is itself a philosophical one; thinking about it could take us to Kant and Hegel, Dostoevsky and Job. One need not settle questions about the relationship of Auschwitz to other crimes and suffering to take it as paradigmatic of the sort of evil that contemporary philosophy rarely examines. The differences in intellectual responses to the earthquake at Lisbon and the mass murder at Auschwitz are differences not only in the nature of the events but also in our intellectual constellations. What counts as a philosophical problem and what counts as a philosophical reaction, what is urgent and what is academic, what is a matter of memory and what is a matter of meaning—all these are open to change.

This book traces changes that have occurred in our understanding of the self and its place in the world from the early Enlightenment to the late twentieth century. Taking intellectual reactions to Lisbon and Auschwitz as central poles of inquiry is a way of locating the beginning and end of the modern. Focusing on points of doubt and crisis allows us to examine our guiding assumptions by examining what challenges them at points where they break down: what threatens our sense of the sense of the world? That focus also underlies one of this book's central claims: the problem of evil is the guiding force of modern

thought. Most contemporary versions of the history of philosophy will view this claim to be less false than incomprehensible. For the problem of evil is thought to be a theological one. Classically, it's formulated as the question: How could a good God create a world full of innocent suffering? Such questions have been off-limits to philosophy since Immanuel Kant argued that God, along with many other subjects of classical metaphysics, exceeded the limits of human knowledge. If one thing might seem to unite philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic, it's the conviction that Kant's work proscribes not just future philosophical references to God but most other sorts of foundation as well. From this perspective, comparing Lisbon to Auschwitz is merely mistaken. The mistake seems to lie in accepting the eighteenth century's use of the word *evil* to refer to both acts of human cruelty and instances of human suffering. That mistake might come naturally to a group of theists, who were willing to give God the responsibility for both, but it shouldn't confuse the rest of us. On this view Lisbon and Auschwitz are two completely different kinds of events. *Lisbon* denotes the sort of thing insurance companies call natural disasters, to remove them from the sphere of human action. Thus human beings are absolved of responsibility not only for causing or compensating them but even for thinking about them, except in pragmatic and technological terms. Earthquakes and volcanoes, famines and floods inhabit the borders of human meaning. We want to understand just so much about them as might help us gain control. Only traditional—that is, premodern—theists will seek in them significance. *Auschwitz*, by contrast, stands for all that is meant when we use the word *evil* today: absolute wrongdoing that leaves no room for account or expiation.

    Initially, then, no two events will strike us as more different. If there's a problem of evil engendered by Lisbon, it can occur only for the orthodox: how can God allow a natural order that causes innocent suffering? The problem of evil posed by Auschwitz looks like another entirely: how can human beings behave in ways that so thoroughly violate both reasonable and rational norms? It is just this sense that the problems are utterly different which marks modern consciousness. The sharp distinction between natural and moral evil that now seems self-evident was born around the Lisbon earthquake and nourished by

Rousseau. Tracing the history of that distinction, and the ways in which the problems refused to stay separate, is one aim of this book.

A central reason for locating the modern as beginning at Lisbon is precisely for its attempt to divide responsibility clearly. Close look at that attempt will reveal all its irony. Though the *philosophes* perpetually accused Rousseau of nostalgia, Voltaire's discussion of the earthquake left far more in God's hands than did Rousseau's. And when Rousseau invented the modern sciences of history and psychology to cope with questions the earthquake brought to the surface, it was in defense of God's order. Ironies notwithstanding, the consciousness that emerged after Lisbon was an attempt at maturity. If Enlightenment is the courage to think for oneself, it's also the courage to assume responsibility for the world into which one is thrown. Radically separating what earlier ages called natural from moral evils was thus part of the meaning of modernity. If Auschwitz can be said to mark its ending, it is for the way it marks our terror. Modern conceptions of evil were developed in the attempt to stop blaming God for the state of the world, and to take responsibility for it on our own. The more responsibility for evil was left to the human, the less worthy the species seemed to take it on. We are left without direction. Returning to intellectual tutelage isn't an option for many, but hopes for growing up now seem void.

The history of philosophy, like that of nations or individuals, should teach us not to take for granted the intersection of assumptions where we find ourselves standing at particular moments in time. Learning this is a crucial part of the self-knowledge that was always philosophy's goal. But history of philosophy achieves such knowledge only when it is sufficiently historical. More often, the history of philosophy is approached as if our constellations and categories were self-evident. In broadest terms, we probably agree with Comte's view of intellectual history as progressing from theological to metaphysical to scientific ages. On such a view, thinkers whose world was shattered by the Lisbon earthquake would confirm all conviction in Enlightenment naïveté. At best, their reaction seems quaint, a sign of intellectual immaturity befitting an era that found itself on the border between theology and metaphysics. If one believes the world is ruled by a good and powerful father figure, it's natural to expect his order to be com-

prehensibly just. Jettison that belief, and whatever expectations remain are unresolved residues of childish fantasy. Thus the intellectual shock waves generated by Lisbon, when noticed at all, are seen as the birth pangs of a sadder but wiser era that has learned to live on its own.

This view, I will argue, is itself a historical one, for nothing is easier than stating the problem of evil in nontheist terms. One can state it, for example, as an argument with Hegel: not only is the real not identical with the rational; they aren't even related. To make this observation, you need no theory. Any observation of the world that continues for more than a couple of minutes should do. Every time we make the judgment *this ought not to have happened*, we are stepping onto a path that leads straight to the problem of evil. Note that it is as little a moral problem, strictly speaking, as it is a theological one. One can call it the point at which ethics and metaphysics, epistemology and aesthetics meet, collide, and throw up their hands. At issue are questions about what the structure of the world must be like for us to think and act within it. Those questions will quickly become historical. For what most demands explanation is not how moral judgments are justified, but why those that are so clearly justified were disregarded in the past. When one begins to seek explanation, one can end in anything from myth, like the Fall, to metaphysics, like Hegel's *Phenomenology*. What's important is that the place one begins is perfectly ordinary.

I believe it is the place where philosophy begins, and threatens to stop. For it involves questions more natural, urgent, and pervasive than the skeptical epistemological quandaries conventionally said to drive modern philosophy. It's *possible* to begin to worry about the difference between appearance and reality because you notice that a stick looks refracted in a pool of water, or because a dream is so vivid that you want to grasp one of its objects for a moment or two of sleepy half-consciousness. But you wake in your bed, slap your face if you have to, pull the stick out of the water if you're really in doubt. Were the problem of evil that easy to dispel, the massive effort spent in hundreds of years of philosophy would be in need of explanation.

The picture of modern philosophy as centered in epistemology and driven by the desire to ground our representations is so tenacious that

some philosophers are prepared to bite the bullet and declare the effort simply wasted. Rorty, for example, finds it easier to reject modern philosophy altogether than to reject the standard accounts of its history. His narrative is more polemical than most, but it's a polemical version of the story told in most philosophy departments in the second half of the twentieth century. The story is one of tortuously decreasing interest. Philosophy, like some people, was prepared to accept boredom in exchange for certainty as it grew to middle age. What began as metaphysics—the description of the basic structures of reality—ended as epistemology: the attempt to track if not to ground the foundations of our knowledge.

On literary grounds alone, the narrative is flawed, for it lacks what is central to dramatic movement anywhere: a compelling motive. Except for the anachronistic desire to distinguish themselves from natural scientists, it's a narrative of philosophers who act without intention. The ground for earlier metaphysical inquiries is nearly as opaque as the motives for their successor. In both cases, great thinkers simply got stuck out of sheer curiosity investigating very general questions about the way things are. There is no good reason for the history of philosophy to have consisted in this story: as Descartes himself knew, none but madmen ever really think all our representations might be dreams. Throughout the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant wrote that something must account for the inexhaustible effort that philosophers devote to a subject that brings no results. He thought the labors could not be guided by pure speculation alone. They are too hard and too frustrating to be driven by purposes and problems that are not urgent.

Kant's conclusion that speculative labors are moved by practical ends should not be read narrowly. For the last thing I wish to argue is that in addition to epistemology, the history of philosophy was *also* concerned with ethics. It was, of course, as contemporary work on the history of ethics has shown well. But the problem of evil shows the hopelessness of twentieth-century attempts to divide philosophy into areas that may or may not be connected. To see this, we needn't consider explicitly holist authors like Spinoza or Hegel. The most skeptical of empiricists himself should give pause. Which miracles did Hume want us to question? Which customs did he want us to keep? Is he

more concerned with sympathy or with substance?—Is *Anna Karenina* about love more than justice?—Twentieth-century philosophy is not unique in its ability to confuse puzzles with problems. Even Socrates did it sometimes; it's an ability that may be part of the impulse to question opinion with which philosophy begins. Medieval philosophy revealed how questions not merely of life and death, but of *eternal* life and death, could turn into quandaries about substance. The dangers of sophistry and scholasticism are present in the possibility of philosophy itself. What is new is not these dangers but a fragmentation of the subject that would have been foreign to philosophers from Plato to Nietzsche. This very fragmentation may prevent us from seeing the problem of evil for what it is. The fact that the world contains neither justice nor meaning threatens our ability both to act in the world and to understand it. The demand that the world be intelligible is a demand of practical and of theoretical reason, the ground of thought that philosophy is called to provide. The question of whether this is an ethical or a metaphysical problem is as unimportant as it is undecidable, for in some moments it's hard to view as a philosophical problem at all. Stated with the right degree of generality, it is but unhappy description: this is our world. If that isn't even a question, no wonder philosophy has been unable to give it an answer. Yet for most of its history, philosophy has been moved to try, and its repeated attempts to formulate the problem of evil are as important as its attempts to respond to it.

Let me summarize the claims for which I will argue.

1. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy was guided by the problem of evil. Like most short statements, this one is too simple. Nevertheless, I intend to show that as an organizing principle for understanding the history of philosophy, the problem of evil is better than alternatives. It is more inclusive, comprehending a far greater number of texts; more faithful to their authors' stated intentions; and more interesting. Here interest is not merely an aesthetic category, important as that is, but also an explanatory one, which answers Kant's question: What drives pure reason to efforts that seem to have neither end nor result?

2. The problem of evil can be expressed in theological or secular terms, but it is fundamentally a problem about the intelligibility of the

world as a whole. Thus it belongs neither to ethics nor to metaphysics but forms a link between the two.

3. The distinction between natural and moral evils is itself a historical one that developed in the course of the debate.

4. Two kinds of standpoint can be traced from the early Enlightenment to the present day, regardless of what sort of evil is in question, and each is guided more by ethical than by epistemological concerns. The one, from Rousseau to Arendt, insists that morality demands that we make evil intelligible. The other, from Voltaire to Jean Améry, insists that morality demands that we don't.

My own sympathies tend toward the former line of views, while acknowledging the force of the latter. This allows me, I hope, to answer the objection that is most troubling: the problem of evil facing the eighteenth century was so different from our own that comparing them involves not just conceptual but moral confusion. Comparing Lisbon to Auschwitz can seem not mistaken but monstrous, for it risks either viewing the latter as one more or less natural disaster, thus excusing the architects; or comparing the Creator to criminals of the worst sort. It is hard to say which is worse: contemplating the redemption of the commandant of Auschwitz or the violation of images of God even atheists want to retain. For this reason, apart from isolated remarks, the two events have been left to stand as symbols for the breakdown of the worldviews of their eras, and the question of how we got from one to the other has not been addressed. If some uneasiness about understanding seems right to preserve, I trust it will shape inquiry rather than preclude it.

Among the many things this book will not offer is a definition of evil or criteria for distinguishing evil actions from those that are simply very bad. This might be a task for a book of ethics, but the problem of evil concerns something else. To describe that problem, one might ask: what's the difference between calling one action evil, and another, a crime against humanity? They can often be interchanged. But a crime is something for which we have procedures—at least for punishing, if not for preventing. To say this is to say that a crime can be ordered, fit in some manner into the rest of our experience. To call an action evil is to suggest that it cannot—and that it thereby threatens the trust in

the world that we need to orient ourselves within it. I will argue that evils cannot be compared, but they should be distinguished. What happened on September 11 was one kind of evil; what happened at Auschwitz was another. Getting clear about the differences will not put an end to evil, but it may help prevent our worst reactions to it.

To lament the loss of absolute standards for judging right and wrong ought to be superfluous a century after Nietzsche, but someone seems to do it every day. Nearly anyone who ever taught a humanities course will have met students who discovered that words like *good* and *evil* are out of date, since used by different cultures in different ways. What may have gone unnoticed is that while few today will claim certainty about general ethical principles, most are quite certain about particular ethical paradigms. Loss of certainty about the general foundations of value has not affected certainty about particular instances of it; perhaps quite the contrary. Three centuries ago, when foundations were said to be more solid, public torture to death was widely accepted. Today it is pretty universally condemned regardless of differences over principle. As Rwanda or Bosnia can show us, universal condemnation may be worth next to nothing. My point is about the relation not of theory to practice, but of general principle to particular paradigm. There may be no general principle that proves torture or genocide wrong, but this does not prevent us from taking them to be paradigmatic of evil.

I therefore assume that we have such examples, and that they change over time, without any interest in giving justification, or even criteria, for them. Even if we lack general principles of the kind we imagine other ages to have cherished, this is enough for my purposes. Since I do not think an intrinsic property of evil can be defined, I am, rather, concerned with tracing what evil does to us. If designating something as evil is a way of marking the fact that it shatters our trust in the world, it's that effect, more than the cause, which I want to examine. It should follow that I have even less intention of solving the problem of evil than I do of defining evil itself. My interest is, rather, to explore what changes in our understanding of the problem of evil reveal about changes in our understanding of ourselves, and of our place in the world. I proceed on the increasingly shared assumption that examining the history of philosophy can be a way of engaging in phi-

losophy itself. Traditional intellectual history might proceed by chronicling successive thinkers' accounts of evil, and tracing sources and patterns of influence. Traditional philosophical studies might evaluate the success of competing accounts and try to offer a better one. My goal is another entirely: to use different responses to the problem of evil as a means of understanding who we have become in the three centuries that separate us from the early Enlightenment.

This book began as the study of an interesting topic oddly ignored in the historiography of philosophy. It soon threatened to explode all confines. If I am even close to correct, the problem of evil is so pervasive that an exhaustive and systematic treatment of it would require an exhaustive and systematic treatment of most of the history of philosophy. Merely listing the right names can seem hopeless. Instead of attempting such a project, I've made several choices that eschew it. First, I've limited my discussion to the period beginning with the Enlightenment, and dated the Enlightenment as beginning in 1697, with the publication of Bayle's *Dictionary*. There are good reasons for dating it earlier. One would be to explore gnostic imagery in the person credited with fathering modern philosophy, René Descartes. Descartes's evil demon is not a thought experiment but a threat. Unlike its pale heir, the brain in the vat, the devil was a real concern. What if the world were created by a Being whose whole purpose was to cause us torment and illusion? God knows it sometimes looks that way. If the absence of Descartes may seem troubling, that of Spinoza may be worse. Both are clearly crucial for understanding later discussion of these problems, but then, so is Plato. One could easily spend a lifetime studying the problem of evil and be no better for it. Instead, I have chosen to restrict discussion to its development from the beginning of the period in which we began to be most recognizably who we are. If history, as Bayle wrote, is the history of crimes and misfortunes, attempts to make sense of it are doomed not just to falsehood but to ridicule. It's a choice, but not an arbitrary one, to view the Enlightenment as beginning under pressure to prove Bayle wrong.

Even within these confines, this study cannot be exhaustive, and to mark this I have chosen nonchronological form. Though my interest is in the development of ideas such as those that link Rousseau's second

Discourse to Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, I have explored such development thematically. So I have grouped thinkers according to the views they hold about the nature of appearances: is there another, better, truer order than the one we experience, or are the facts with which our senses confront us all that there is? Is reality exhausted by what is, or does it leave room for all that could be? Dividing philosophers according to their stance on one large question is rough division, and produces odd alliances. Among philosophers who insisted on finding order in addition to the miserable one presented by experience, I include Leibniz, Pope, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Marx. Among those who denied the reality of anything beyond brute appearances, I discuss Bayle, Voltaire, Hume, Sade, and Schopenhauer. Nietzsche and Freud cannot be fit into either division, however broadly construed, but raise sufficiently similar questions to deserve their own chapter. As I argue in the final chapter, the twentieth century presents particular philosophical problems. The fragmentation of tradition will be reflected in fragmentary responses illustrated by Camus, Arendt, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Rawls.

Grouping philosophers this way overlooks many crucial differences between them. But it's no cruder than the division of thinkers into rationalists and empiricists, a schema with which it is partly coextensive. The latter will seem more natural to those who believe that the guiding questions of modern philosophy are questions about the theory of knowledge. If these are your main concern, you will group philosophers according to whether they believe the main source of knowledge to be reason or experience, and will view other differences between them as incidental. Yet this division was not obvious to Kant, who is credited with overcoming it, or to Hegel, the modern philosopher who devoted most thought to the history of philosophy itself. For the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the first controversy in the history of philosophy concerns appearance and reality: are ideas or experience the final court of appeal? This question takes us through the history of philosophy all the way back to Plato. The worry that fueled debates about the difference between appearance and reality was *not* the fear that the world might not turn out to be the way it seems to us—but rather the fear that it would.

Many of the thinkers discussed in chapter 1 would reject each other's company. But despite occasional elements of melancholy, all are united by some form of hope for a better order than the one we experience. Those in chapter 2, by contrast, share a brilliant, cheerful bleakness that concluded with Schopenhauer's stupendous pessimism. Nietzsche and Freud maintain a sort of heroic scorn toward discussions of the subject that preceded their own, and any straws we might be tempted to clutch thereafter. The thinkers chosen to illustrate twentieth-century thought about evil display humility born of a sense of fragility and awe. Thinkers can be grouped in terms that belong to metaphysics (how do they view the reality of appearances?) as well as terms that come from psychology (do they make room for a fundamentally hopeful stance toward the world?). I will argue that the problem of evil requires thought about both. The way we organize philosophical discourse is not the most important thing challenged by the problem of evil, but it is surely the easiest to change.

In general, I focus on major figures in the canon. This underlines the fact that the problems discussed are not peripheral to the tradition but basic to the work of its most central thinkers. Were this an ordinary history of philosophy, it would be irresponsible to describe the transition from Kant to Hegel without discussing Fichte and Schelling, or to move from Hegel to Marx without addressing Feuerbach. I have done both, and probably things that are worse. My interest is less in tracing causal connections between authors than in showing how certain general developments make sense. For this, it should be enough to choose samples of work that were particularly exciting and important, in the hope that they will illuminate the rest. But hundreds of rich and influential texts will thereby be ignored, and choices could have been made differently. The only consolation for the resulting inadequacy is the way in which it confirms my initial claim: the history of philosophy is so steeped in the problem of evil that the question is not where to begin but where to stop. An attempt to be complete would be doomed to failure from the start. Should this book open lines of inquiry, rather than exhaust them, it will have achieved its goal.

I have called this an alternative history of philosophy because its aims are as different as its style and methods. One aim, in the felicitous

expression of an anonymous reader, is to reorient the discipline to the real roots of philosophical questioning. I am grateful for the metaphor, which allows me to argue that, in some form or other, the problem of evil is the root from which modern philosophy springs. Once brought to life, philosophical discourse can grow on its own, and its branches may extend or tangle in all directions. Thus entire schools of thought could develop that have little to do with the questions raised here. Kant and Hume and Hegel all raised questions that would lead philosophers reading them centuries later to think about relationships between language and world, or the foundations of knowledge. But if, as I argue, those questions are less central to the heart of their thought than was previously assumed, we must come to view our own philosophical landscape differently.

This book is not merely intended to be of interest both to those who are professional philosophers and those who are not, but to show that throughout most of its history, philosophy itself was of interest both to those who were professional philosophers and those who were not. Like many others, I came to philosophy to study matters of life and death, and was taught that professionalization required forgetting them. The more I learned, the more I grew convinced of the opposite: the history of philosophy was indeed animated by the questions that drew us there. Thus I have written in a manner that should be open to those without formal philosophical training, keeping notes and other scholarly apparatus to a minimum. In the spirit of that Enlightenment, then, in which Lessing and Mendelssohn coauthored essays for international prize contests on the relations between poetry and metaphysics, Kant wrote for the eighteenth-century version of the *New York Review*, and Sade begged to have volumes of Rousseau sent to him in the Bastille, this book is written in tentative hope.