

INTRODUCTION

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Sodom and Gomorrah are places good as any to reflect on goodness and evil, but the reasons may surprise you. They usually stand for simple cases of crime and punishment: The Sodomites sin and God destroys them, turning a thriving town into a pile of rubble and a woman into a pillar of salt for a wistful backward glance. For fundamentalists, the sin is sexual license in general, homosexuality in particular, making both into abominations that threaten community survival. For gay people, the towns' destruction is an example of the injustice of traditional religion. For the Marquis de Sade, the story was an invitation to imagine the kind of violence that stands law on its head. Sade knew the Bible better than most contemporary readers.

The story may be clear, but it's marvelously complex. To begin with, you needn't be a fundamentalist to abhor the sin that does in the Sodomites: It isn't fornication or homosexuality, but the local demand to drag out and gang rape two strangers whom the good-hearted Lot had offered to shelter. Ancient Mediterranean convictions about what hosts and guests owe each other formed the basis of traditional morality, and violations threatened social bonds at their core. The Greeks thought such violations reason enough to start the Trojan War. Lot takes his duties as host so seriously that he offers the raging mob his virgin daughters if they'll leave his guests alone. The guests turn out to be angels, who blind the Sodomites

storming the door and prove their undoing. But whether or not you believe in angels or ancient rules of hospitality, you're likely to find the Sodomites' transgressions beyond every pale.

Some versions expand on the account in Genesis, as if gang raping your guests were not quite enough to merit annihilation: They suggest that the Sodomites were not simply immoral, but deliberately antimoral. According to one Jewish tale, gang rape of strangers wasn't an accidental occurrence, but prescribed by Sodom's laws. According to another, helping strangers was punishable by death – a fate suffered by one of Lot's daughters, who was burned on a pyre for giving bread to a poor man, and by another nameless maiden who was smeared with honey and left on a bee-swarmed rooftop for doing the same. Even its taxes were perversely regressive: Owners of two oxen were liable for one day's civic service, while those with one ox were assessed for two. Sodom's crimes were all the worse for being thankless, for the city was showered with wealth. Gardeners rinsing greens in its water could shake down gold flakes from the soil that clung to their roots, sapphires lined its streets in place of stones, and each of its paths was shaded by seven trees – grape, fig, pomegranate, walnut, almond, apple, and peach. Yet blessed with such abundance, the Sodomites only dread that they might have to share it. One source says Sodom killed all its birds lest they take even a peck at the grain. Where kindness to strangers forms the framework of civilization, what the Sodomites do is a double outrage. Many places ignore moral law; Sodom turns it upside down.

The most important part of the story, however, is what happens before the cities' destruction. Having called Abraham into His confidence and promised to make him mighty, God reveals His plan to destroy the cities. Abraham's reaction is awesome. Until then, he received God's word without question; now he pauses and speaks up. *What if there are fifty innocent people among the sinners? The judge of all the earth cannot be so unjust as to let innocent and guilty suffer alike!* The judge of all the earth agrees; if there are fifty righteous

people in Sodom He will leave the city alone. *But surely the Lord is not a pedant. What if the number turns out to be smaller? Would He destroy the whole city for lack of a mere five?* The answer is readily forthcoming: The Lord will save Sodom if forty-five righteous people can be found there. *But the Lord cannot be arbitrary! What if there are only forty good people in the city?* Abraham bargains God all the way down to ten, and the number isn't an accident. It's easy enough for a handful to flee a burning city, which is just what turns out to happen. Though Lot tries to warn them, even some of his family refuse to listen, so he gathers the others and runs.

Three things about Abraham's action stir hearts like mine. One is his resolute universalism. Abraham's concern for the innocents of Sodom is not concern for his friends or his neighbors, it's concern for innocents everywhere. The people of Sodom are abstract and nameless and still worth the risk of his life. Another is his resoluteness, period. In his concern for innocent life he endangers his own. This is not, after all, a democracy, but a world in which kings are ill inclined to let subjects rebuke them. Abraham dares to remind the King of Kings that He's about to trespass on moral law. The text makes plain that Abraham is scared. His words are neither proud nor wheedling, but the plea of a servant to a master who could extinguish him with a glance. 'Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes' is what he says to get the negotiation going. 'Let not the Lord be angry if I go on' is what precedes the line that bargains God down to thirty. The third striking point to this story is its attention to detail. Moral judgment is not a matter of decisions made once and for all, but of keeping your eye on distinctions. Numbers matter. Gradations matter. Abraham's tone may be that of a merchant, but his mind is the mind of a moralist. If he can make God stop and think about small differences, none of us is ever exempt. Moral judgments are slow, specific, and seldom absolute. Yet two things in the biblical story emerge perfectly clear: Rape is a criminal action – and so is collateral damage.

We have moral needs, needs so strong they can override our

instincts for self-protection, as the story of Abraham shows. It also shows those needs are not based in religion, or any form of divine command. They include the need to express reverence and the need to express outrage, the need to reject euphemism and cant and to call things by their proper names. They include the need to see our own lives as stories with meaning – meanings we impose on the world, a crucial source of human dignity – without which we hold our lives to be worthless. Most basically and surprisingly, we need to see the world in moral terms. These needs are grounded in a structure of reason. While they may be furthered by religion, or emotion, that is not what keeps them alive. As I will argue, they are based in the principle of sufficient reason that we use as a compass. Moral inquiry and political activism start where reasons are missing. When righteous people suffer and wicked people flourish, we begin to ask why. Demands for moral clarity ring long, loud bells because it is something we are right to seek. Those who cannot find it are likely to settle for the far more dangerous simplicity, or purity, instead.

This book began in response to needs expressed by readers of my last book, *Evil in Modern Thought*. Conceived as a history of philosophy, it stirred readers beyond academia who were hungry for serious discussion of ethics and value. More people than I'd ever expected said it was the sort of thing they'd always hoped for from philosophy, and asked me to go one step further. I had reinterpreted the history of modern Western philosophy to show that its major thinkers were driven not by epistemological puzzles, but by the search for the meaning of evil and suffering as seen in the events of their day. Was I prepared, readers asked, to give an account of my own views in relation to contemporary events?

I was not. The task was daunting, and it seemed presumptuous even to try. Perhaps nothing but the 2004 U.S. election would have persuaded me to do so. Like many who were dismayed on that third of November, I was stunned by the claim that voters chose George W. Bush because they cared about moral values. Either they had been utterly bamboozled, or the opposition had dramatically

failed. The election was probably a result of both, but that's now for historians to settle. The most useful thing I could do as an American philosopher was to examine philosophical underpinnings of contemporary political discourse, and offer a framework for alternatives. The phrase *moral clarity* wasn't a conservative invention – journalist William Safire traced it back to a 1934 speech at the American Philosophical Association – but by 2001 it was firmly in conservative hands. In America, the phrase is so deeply associated with Bush that only his defenders were inclined to use it. This book is committed to taking it back.

For it was never enough to argue that if Republicans had captured the field of individual virtues, Democrats still cornered the market on social ones; or to point out that many people go to church not in search of spiritual solace, but to get simple services now missing elsewhere. In *Conservatives Without Conscience*, Nixon's former legal counsel John Dean even argued that the culture wars were constructed to give the right a platform as its traditional targets collapsed with the Cold War. All these claims may be true, but they overlook a gnawing gap. Western secular culture has no clear place for moral language, and its use makes many profoundly uncomfortable.

The 2004 election made some things crystal clear. All over the world, people argued about what caused its outcome, but this much was certain: Everyone, everywhere, was running on moral passion. Whether voters were moved by their views about terrorism, or the war in Iraq, or abortion, what did *not* decide that significant election was the bottom line. Bush supporters were likelier to be those his economic policies had hurt, while many of his fiercest opponents stood a chance of benefiting from his tax cuts. Cynics, and old-fashioned Marxists, must return to the drawing board. 'Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral,' Bertolt Brecht's famous claim that grub comes first, and ethics later, turns out to be just a matter of chronology. As soon as our bellies stop rumbling, we begin to moralize.

Barack Obama's ability to address moral needs was the key to his improbable 2008 victory. When the first edition of this book went to press that January, I had already done a bit of canvassing – much to the amusement of my savvier friends, who insisted that only an intellectual who'd lost touch with America could give Obama a fighting chance. Reading his book *Dreams* had re-fired my own: that a man of deep intelligence, palpable integrity and quiet passion might actually become president of the U.S.A. Almost superfluous to mention the fact that it would fulfil aspirations of the civil rights movement, which had formed my own political consciousness. Born in the South half a century earlier, I'd heard men and women of nearly superhuman patience sing lines like 'I'm gonna be a registered voter one of these days.' However high our hopes may have run in the sixties, no one imagined *any* African-American coming so far. Nor need one rely on childhood memories: I hadn't begun to envision, one short year earlier, that someone running for the American presidency could regularly end campaign rallies with lines like: 'OK, Pennsylvania, let's go change the world.' It's a line he delivered with the hint of coolness that undercut possible pathos, while running the best campaign organization in recorded history. Talk about grown-up idealism!

But not twenty-four hours after the election, there was ready analysis: it was the economy, stupid. Critics who pride themselves on their ability to cut through cant insisted that the fall's financial crisis left voters so desperate they were willing to ignore their other hopes and fears. Those inclined to providential explanations called the Wall Street meltdown an act of God. (I heard this argued by a black Southern Baptist nurse as well as by a Jewish fair-trade entrepreneur.) Within a month such claims began to harden into conventional wisdom: Obama's unlikely victory was the result of an even less likely event, the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Indeed, some said, the crisis was so deep that Republicans didn't *want* to inherit it – and were thus willing to forego some of the dirtier tricks that had brought them victory in the past.

A small flurry of cartoons suggested Obama was just another black man hired to clean up the mess white folk leave behind.

Hard on the heels of the economic explanations were the demographic ones that stalked the election. Graphs and charts gave them the air of hard science. It was inevitable, some said, that the Republicans lost the election, because their position on immigration undercut the Hispanic vote. Long analyses that broke down the American population by category felt no need to defend their most basic assumption: when all is said and done, what counts is tribal loyalty.

Perhaps from a distance such analyses looked sensible, but they made no sense of the facts on the ground. Millions of Americans across races and classes and generations spent time and money they didn't have to participate in the process with everything they did; the wit and creativity that studded the campaign were at least as impressive as the numbers. What tribal impulse moved the 45,000 lawyers who stood at the polls from dawn to dusk to make sure no votes were stolen this time? Like the steel workers and housewives and doctors who registered voters and knocked on doors across America, they were seeking the common good – the Roman *res publica* that formed the basis of the word *republic*. They were too different on every matrix to reduce to statistics; perversely persistent cynics would conclude they had drunk an invisible potion.

It's always easier to reach for familiar explanations than to acknowledge a truth that challenges them. You could see such truth in the faces gathered in Chicago on the night of November 4 to celebrate what everyone knew would be a moment of history. Call it what it was: nobility. When the Wall fell in 1989, Berliners watered their gray streets with champagne. Obama's election, by contrast, streamed sheer sombre joy. These were the faces of those inspired as we should be – by ideals that, in the person of Barack Obama, have a chance of coming closer to realization than we had long dared hope. No doubt the state of the economy played a role; economic changes often produce political ones. But what got people

onto the streets in the right kind of way – instead of simple mob rage, or crowds demanding fascism – was not economic anxiety, but the right kind of ideal. If we do not understand why this election was won, we will have little chance to realize its promise.

This is even clearer in view of the international reaction to Obama's victory, which cannot be reduced to any particular interests at all. Wave after wave swept in with a force that wasn't explained by simple relief: that the most powerful country in the world would no longer be run by men nobody trusted. In Germany, the newsweekly that had spent the year making jaded references to the candidate's supposed messianic pretensions suddenly proclaimed Obama's victory to be nothing less than a second American revolution. From Kuala Lumpur to Cape Town, leaders joyfully demanded that America resume its title as leader of the free world. Israel's lowbrow daily ran a two-word headline: *HaTikvah*, which was stunning for those who know that the words, which mean *The Hope*, are also the title of the haunting Israeli national anthem that serves as a secular hymn. Nobody was surprised when Kenya declared the day after Obama's election a national holiday. But who could predict that an Irish group would write a song with the chorus 'O'Leary, O'Reilly, O'Hare and O'Hara/There's no one as Irish as Barack Obama'? Or a Beduin tribe in the Galilee hurry to claim him as member? The Israeli paper *Ha'aretz* concluded 'The day of his election wrought a change in the entire world, and will grant those living there a reason to look forward to the future with hope.' The headline of the national paper *The Scotsman* put the same thought more bluntly: ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE.

These words are all risky. As I write them, Barack Obama hasn't had much time to disappoint. Even his own victory speech warned that disappointment is inevitable, given the height of the hopes that were raised. Yet we are still living in a long moment to be savoured, whatever turns out to follow. To be sure, good news is hard to savour. Like many things, from airplanes to the enfranchisement of women, Obama's election went from seeming impossible to

ordinary in very short time. International elation was succeeded by a general rush to worry, for counting the ways it might go wrong felt familiar. Lingering in the moment was disorienting: outside of the movies, we've come to expect that the good guys lose the fight, or lose their souls.

Two centuries ago, Immanuel Kant sought signs of progress in human history. As this book will show, neither he nor any serious Enlightenment philosopher thought progress inevitable. Kant saw so many reasons to doubt it that he was willing to settle for very little: the hope people felt, all over the world, when they learned of the French Revolution was sign enough that the human race could be moved by a vision of a better world – and hence had the chance to progress towards it. He was writing in 1794, when the French Revolution already displayed clear marks of moral rot. Yet the collective hope and joy that attended its onset was enough to sustain Kant's faith in humankind's future.

The 'Yes, We Can' T-shirts printed in Korean and Hindi and Russian suggest that Obama's election was another such moment, which will have meaning whatever happens next. If it is to be more than one brief shining moment we must understand how it came about. Untangling the ideas of the previous decades will enable us to do so. Far more importantly, it will prepare us to take up new and active positions in a deeply connected world. Understanding the ideas that lead to action is especially important where memories are as short as the temptation to revisionism is strong: partly, no doubt, to forestall prosecution, the Bush years are already being rewritten as a failure of excessive idealism. How this came to pass – and how to avoid such revisions in the future – is one of the questions this book will answer.

Of all the forces that contributed to the rightward turn in American culture, none is more surprising than the philosophical exertions behind contemporary conservatism. In the sixties, conservatives used the very word *intellectual* as a term of abuse – remember Spiro Agnew? But when the left turned its sights on matters more

pragmatic, the right went off to build think tanks. Under the influence of writers like Leo Strauss and Ayn Rand, young conservatives were reading Plato and Aristotle. Through organizations like the Liberty Fund and the Olin Foundation, midwestern businessmen who made their fortunes producing chemicals and telephones were sponsoring seminars in the mountains of Hungary on the nature of evil, or flying scholars to Chicago to discuss law and virtue. Meanwhile, in the interest of being effective, the left decided to forsake utopian visions for the more solid ground of interest-based politics. It was a fatal mistake, for it meant jettisoning the moral compass that had guided the best efforts of the sixties – the civil rights movement, the opposition to the war in Vietnam, the demands for women’s equality. While many left-wing activists were taken up with identity politics, many left-wing academics were caught up in arguments about postcolonial concepts. The arguments that not only right and justice, but the self and the world are constructed by interest and power, were too abstruse to bother many people outside the academy, but they took up no end of the energy of those within. As the right was completing its study of the classics, the left was facing conceptual collapse. The end of the Cold War gave the East access to goods its citizens wanted, and the West information it did not: that the dreams of socialism had transmuted into nightmare. The crisis that was growing through the seventies as the new left failed to produce a better revolution than the old left came to a head with the revelations of how awful the old one had really been. The end of the Soviet Union revealed an empire that only the most stubborn could deny had been just what Ronald Reagan had called it. What else could the arbitrary, cold-blooded murder of millions of men and women be, if not evil? Even those inclined to cling to the old saw that you can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs had to acknowledge that the results were revolting. From Berlin to Beijing, millions of people who had lived under a system subscribing to principles meant to liberate them were now rejecting decades of slavery.

Arbitrary imprisonment, famine, and murder were not new, though the scale seen in the twentieth century was. What was devastating about Soviet crimes was that they were committed in the name of principles most of us hold dear. The rebuttal to this is easy enough: Theoretically speaking, Stalin's gulags no more undermined the legitimacy of socialist ideals than the Inquisition undermined Christian ones. But after all was said and argued, what was left at the end of the century was less the inclination to discard particular principles than the very idea of acting on principle itself. Stalinist terror killed off its bravest citizens; what survived in the East was a bleak, bitter culture wracked with cynicism and envy. If *that* was the outcome of struggle for the ideals of freedom and justice, wouldn't the world be better off if we sat on our hands? Though never stated explicitly, this was the only reasonable conclusion to draw after reading popular political authors whose proud pessimism left little room for movement in any direction.

Those whose business it is to think about morality have been remiss in other ways. Philosophers certainly examine moral concepts, but their language is often inscrutable, cut off from daily concerns. Recent philosophy has produced superb work in ethics, none better than that of John Rawls, who was not only a brilliant theorist, but a man whose personal integrity was renowned. He fiercely condemned, for example, American use of atomic weapons, without ever mentioning that as a member of the U.S. Infantry slated to invade Japan before Hiroshima, his was probably one American life the bomb saved. Yet his own work remained abstract enough to stand for all the ages, nearly devoid of historical specificity. Though he knew – and cared – an immense amount about the concrete moral cataclysms of the twentieth century, he kept them out of his texts and his classrooms. Years after I had the good fortune to be his student, I ventured to ask why he'd never spoken directly about matters like the Holocaust. 'Oh,' said Rawls, in the warm southern drawl the Ivy League never dented, 'I don't understand them well enough to do that.'

This sounds like the stance that Irish poet W. B. Yeats described long ago: ‘The best lack all conviction / while the worst are full of passionate intensity.’ Now Rawls, like others, had deep convictions about many things, but he was trapped by his own humility. Faced with dauntingly urgent moral problems the everyday world presents, what many honest philosophers feel is not lack of interest but inadequacy. But behind admirable attempts to avoid sanctimony and self-righteousness, there often lurks a fear of expressing moral judgments in particular cases. The noninterference pact that leads philosophers to refrain from talking about history, and historians from talking about morality, pretty much insures that few people with professional competence will jump into the fray – except in discussions too qualified to interest anyone but other specialists.

Qualifications reflect scruples, and awareness of how complex moral judgments can be. But complexity can paralyze. Sometimes, as Wittgenstein warned, scruples are misunderstandings. What arose in humility and moral refinement led to attitudes that make moral judgments themselves look misguided – a hypocritical attempt to assert arbitrary power over those with whom you disagree. The relativism that holds all moral values to be created equal is a short step from the nihilism that holds all talk of values to be superfluous. Truly equal values cancel each other out. And the vistas thereby opened are so bleak that many shut the door on moral reflection altogether, and turn to the simplest moral messages in their neighborhood. William Bennett, and even Bill O’Reilly, reach millions of readers desperate for some talk of values, for nobody else is making an offer. Not the positions their books defend, but the fact that questions of goodness and justice and character are being discussed with apparent seriousness, without jargon, sends most readers to these books – and thereafter to the polls. Not everyone in Kansas may be reading Plato, but lots of them are reading writers who have, and are not ashamed to embrace ideas that sound like his.

Words like *realistic* and *idealistic* are thrown around so glibly in current political discussions that philosophers are likelier to wince

and groan than to take them seriously. But the fact that a use is careless doesn't make it insignificant. The casual use of ideas with which philosophers have wrestled for millennia affects our political landscape. Examining them is not a question of political philosophy, but of a metaphysics strong enough to support a moral standpoint – in particular, the fact that we act, and want to see ourselves as acting, on moral grounds.

Is morality driven by faith? Many people, religious and secular, assume that it is. The belief is so common that Abraham's stand at Sodom attracts very little attention. His plea for the unknown Sodomites is far less familiar than his silence before the Lord's command to kill his own son. The binding of Isaac sustains orthodoxies of every kind. When a voice calls you to take your son, your only son whom you love, and journey to a distant height that will be indicated later, you saddle up your ass and do it, secure in the faith that the Lord will solve whatever problems arise on the way. For Christians, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son foreshadows God's willingness to sacrifice His. For Muslims, that willingness is so fundamental that Ishmael, the forebear of Islam, rather than Isaac, is portrayed as the intended victim. Medieval Jews facing murderous crusaders took courage from the story and slaughtered themselves and their children to escape forced conversion. However long Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians struggle to find multiple meanings in the text, the dominant one is this: Abraham's unquestioning readiness to heed God's command to sacrifice the thing he loves most is the act that qualifies him to father what are still called the Abrahamic faiths.

Pagans practiced human sacrifice from Mesopotamia to Mexico, and as Greek tragedy reminds us, even slaughtering one's child wasn't out of the question. For the ancient world, the most striking part of the story was God's commandment to stop the sacrifice. For our purposes, what's important is that the command comes from on high. The same man who just challenged God to spare the lives of innocent strangers waits quietly for an order to save his own son.

This makes the story central for most of tradition. For orthodox religious thinkers, faith is authoritarian. As some Christians put it, real faith is willing to crucify the intellect, to believe in a view just because it's absurd. For such believers, the Abraham of Mount Moriah is an icon. If he trusted in his heavenly father on a matter of such moment, the rest of us should be able to take lesser leaps of faith.

Now I have no qualms about being partisan. The Abraham who risked God's wrath to argue for the lives of unknown innocents is the kind of man who would face down injustice anywhere. He is deeply human in the best of all senses, afraid and imperfect, but neither his fear nor his frailty stand in the way of his own reason. He is reverent but not deferential, for his faith is based on his moral backbone, not the other way around. He is, in short, what I'll call an Enlightenment hero. As Kierkegaard taught us, the Abraham who takes his son to Mount Moriah has left ethics and enlightenment behind. Kant's comment on that passage was no less unequivocal: Abraham should have reflected, and concluded that anyone who asked him to do *that* could not be God. You can tell which side he's on.

Still, I'd be cheating if I tried to argue that the Abraham of Sodom and Gomorrah is the most genuine one. The Old Testament itself is magnificently equivocal. And though religious thinkers will fight fiercely to show their standpoint to be the one that religion really sanctions, each religion has signposts pointing both ways. One insists on faith as submission, underscoring the need to obey laws whose reasons we need not understand. Fundamentalists like to claim that the moral code that flows from their faith needs no intellect to follow. What the Lord wants you to do is easy to read in the Good Book. But while they may preach that the word of God is transparent, fundamentalists need interpretation as much as anyone else. Their interpretations focus on passages and practices that emphasize obedience and external authority, whether the authority of the Lord Himself, or that of His deputies in the clergy. Common

study of the Bible or the Koran is often part of fundamentalist culture, but the zeal there is for individual witness, not individual analysis. In the end, fundamentalist authorities deny that unadorned human reason can decide questions of right or justice or truth.

But instructions are rarely self-evident, and holy books are written in codes that must be deciphered like any others. This is not a matter of applying ancient principles that once were obvious to modern situations that are not. No law applies itself, ever. Much of ancient scholarship itself began in the need to work out which moral judgments followed from which moral claims. Thus each of the three Western religious traditions has a rationalist strain, opposed to a fundamentalist one, stretching back to the ancient religious academies where the modern notion of scholarship was shaped. The dialectical thinking practiced in the yeshivot of Babylon and Jerusalem after the Temple's destruction was the basis for the Talmud, but it influenced legal reasoning in every tradition. The fine distinctions teased out under the gothic vaults of the Sorbonne were attempts to work out church doctrines of salvation; they affected not only our concepts of essence and accident, but of philosophical thinking to the present day. The koranic studies still practiced in the archways of the al-Azhar University in Cairo recall the early medieval times when the Moors brought science to southern Europe. All these houses of learning arose in devotion, from those engaged in the task of making daily sense of what followed from the texts they held sacred.

Far from viewing our capacity to reason as threatening our capacity to obey God, this tradition sees thinking as its very fulfillment. (Some Jewish parables show God laughing with pleasure when His children defeat Him with a particularly good argument.) If reason is God's gift, He meant us to use it, and on this tradition our ability to make sense of the world is just one more proof of God's goodness, and hence of His glory. Remembering these facts should stop us from dividing the world along religious and secular lines. For many rationalist religious thinkers have more in common

with secular Social Democrats than with fellow believers; many a fundamentalist is closer to postmodern nihilism than he knows. Belief in a worldview *because* it's absurd makes equal sense for both. Far less important than your belief that God exists, or that He doesn't, is what you think your belief entails. Does it direct your behavior by rules and commandments that are set out before you, or does it require you to think them through yourself? Does it require you to try to make sense of the world, or does it give up on sense itself?

The difference between the two moral paradigms is far more important than whether you call yourself religious or secular. Those paradigms could be described in drier terms, without mentioning Abraham, or God, at all. But the greatness of the Bible – even if you're not sure what it means to call it divine – is that it sets out the choices so starkly that nothing since has come close to being as clear. So let's call the first paradigm that of Abraham at Sodom, who refuses to rest in the humility of resignation and demands that his world make sense. Those who subscribe to this paradigm hold fast to the principle that there must be reasons for everything that happens, and that those reasons are up to us to find. This is the fundamental law to which everyone, including God, must answer, and it leads us to seek not only justice but transparent justice. The second paradigm is that of Abraham at Mount Moriah, who doesn't ask anything at all. To do so, he thinks, would be an act of superstition, even violence. Does trust mean asking no questions? Does love mean never having to say you're sorry? This man of faith is certain: The demand to find reason after reason is at odds with a grateful acceptance of creation, and arrogant at that.

The two Abraham stories are pages apart in the Bible, and worlds apart in their message. One urges us to submit to God's orders; however outrageous they appear to be, they'll lead us right in the end. The other urges us to question, for even a message that comes in God's voice may need to be reconsidered. (Those who insist that God is never wrong argue that He was just testing

Abraham's compassion at Sodom. On this reading the pupil is not God, of course, but Abraham, who passed the test with flying colors. But whoever is the teacher, the idea that ethics must be learned through reflection remains the central point.) Both stories are deeply part of our repertoire, anchored firmly in the very first book of the Bible on which so many others depend. More than one contemporary Jewish theologian has claimed that the two Abrahams are compatible parts of a single soul, but their arguments show that even those who believe in biblical authority won't find it decisive here. They have to decide how the book should be read.

Any serious reading of it will raise the question: Are things good because God loves them, or does God love them because they're good? As readers of Plato will remember, this question isn't confined to monotheism. Socrates was executed for alleged impiety. His crime wasn't atheism – he really did worship the local gods – but insisting that reason be put before them. Goodness isn't arbitrary. Things must be good in themselves, which is what makes the gods love them; the gods' choice cannot make something good that is evil just because they are gods.

For fundamentalists this sort of view is not just an expression of pride. It's the first step down a path in which God Himself, if subject to any limits, including the limits of reason, is no longer really God. It's an interesting argument, but I don't want to get stuck in theological debates, since I don't think they are really responsible for the tenacity of the assumption that we need religion to maintain ethics. It's the assumption behind the old adage that if God didn't exist we would have to invent Him, and many believers and unbelievers still think that it's true. Traditional religion paints a nightmare of anarchy and violence that erupts whenever divine authority is missing, and there are people who claim that they would up and kill their neighbors without religious prohibitions on murder.

We know they do not. Virtuous atheists have been around, and been noticed, for centuries, but most of them now suspect the language of virtue. Though they don't accept the idea that moral

values are empty without religious ones, they accept no alternative framework. Worse than that: They've seen too many frameworks abused. Rules conceived as universal values have too often been used as sugarcoated ways of forcing one people's will on another. As a result, the rebuke *Don't be judgmental* is now firmly embedded in secular, liberal jargon. Though it began in good conscience – to express the discovery that many of our judgments were based on assumptions the whole world does not share – it has ended by stifling conscience altogether. The resolve not to impose your moral worldview by force often ends with the resolve to make no judgments at all. For those who live without divine sanctions, judgments of good, and especially of evil, are off-limits.

Both Abraham and Socrates offer another perspective. Whether the tradition is monotheist or pagan, it has central sources for denying that we need religious authority to maintain morality. The Abraham of Sodom and Gomorrah certainly didn't; it was he who risked his life to give God lessons in ethics – and this story comes at the start of monotheistic tradition. This gives lie to the claim that religion obviates the need for thinking, a claim often held by fundamentalists and atheists alike. For the fundamentalists Abraham's message is clear: however close you may be to the Lord's word, you are responsible for thinking it through on your own. For their opponents, the lesson is just as important, since hostility to religion often begins with the assumption that religion insists on moral immaturity, making secularism grown-up in a way no religion can ever be. The story of Sodom shows us that real ethics and real religion demand moral maturity. This is true because religion is an expression of morality – not, as so often assumed, the other way around. Any ethics that depends on religious commandment is bad ethics; any religion that claims we can't behave without it is bad religion. Of course there are plenty of both around, a practical question that must be dealt with practically. But first we must see that neither genuine religious nor genuine moral impulses are ever expressed in standpoints that tie the two essentially together.

Those who view religion as necessary for morality reduce us to the moral level of four-year-olds. *If you follow these commandments you'll go to heaven, and if you don't you'll burn in hell* is just a spectacular version of the carrots and sticks with which we raise our children: *If you clean up your room you'll get the cookie, and if you don't you'll stay inside*. Those of us who have raised them, however, know that even if we rely on bribes and threats in the short term, the moral behavior we seek to instill requires us to get beyond them. We want to prepare our kids to be responsible and generous and straightforward even when rewards are not forthcoming, as they often are not in the parts of the world we don't control. Serious believers, on the other hand, despise the sort of faith that springs up in foxholes. The religious feeling they cherish is not about a being who can be bribed: *I'll do whatever you say if only you'll save me*. They hold this attitude to be no better than that of a pagan who thinks the gods will protect him if only he serves up a particularly tasty bit of entrail. True faith, they think, is not a matter of bargaining, but of gratitude – certainly for creation, and possibly for salvation as well.

If you acknowledge that serious religion and serious ethics are thus separate matters, you must believe things are good or evil independent of divine authority. At this point in the argument many people turn to self-interest. Moderation, argued the Greek philosopher Epicurus, is a virtue because gluttony and drunkenness are bad for your health. Enlightened self-interest, therefore, is all you need to be temperate. Keeping promises, said the Prussian philosopher Kant, is an expression of honesty, but even he knew that it also builds strong communities. Or would you choose to live in a world where you could not take people at their word? Today evolutionary biologists argue that altruism has adaptive advantage; generous behavior will be selected because it increases the species' chances of survival. Richard Dawkins argues that you needn't focus on the survival of the fittest species; altruistic behavior is already rewarded at the level of the gene pool. But he concedes that biological self-interest

cannot account for the kinds of sacrifice we hold central to moral experience. At such points, many secular thinkers retreat to the view that the basis of morality is political, a system of law constructed – more or less nefariously – to maintain civil order.

All such arguments depend on the view that if religion doesn't tell us to be moral, something else has to do so; self-interest and order look like the sort of hard-nosed bases to which unsentimental souls can appeal. And it is certainly true that much – perhaps most – moral behavior is to our own and our communities' advantage. Honesty is often the best policy, kindness is often reciprocated; even observing traffic rules creates a measure of order and safety that benefits us all. Hence a great many rules that are both ethical and useful have been shared, and internalized, throughout different times and cultures, so that we are socialized – perhaps hardwired – to do the right thing with astonishing frequency.

Yet sometimes morality and self-interest part company, and when they do, such arguments leave us helpless. For though they seemed sober and scientific, they implicitly rely on a notion of preestablished harmony that is both ancient and suspect. What a marvelous system that keeps our needs and the world so finely calibrated that self-interest and morality run on parallel tracks! Bishop Joseph Butler, the eighteenth-century founder of Natural Theology in England, didn't know from gene pools, but he considered it self-evident that *it is in our constitution* to condemn falsehood, violence, and injustice. In his day it was called providence: the assumption that virtue and happiness are perfectly balanced by an invisible guiding hand. Even Job knew enough to question that.

If morality is settled neither by the claims of religion nor the claims of self-interest, must we believe there's an otherworldly standard of goodness, fixed and eternal in a transcendent world? Plato seemed to think so, and his metaphysics provided centuries of fuel for postmodernist fires. (Not all postmodernist claims are recent.) What was attacked was more fairy tale than Plato's own views; it's unlikely that he pictured ideas as ghostly objects in the

heavens beaming down at the shadows below. Still, he did believe that things are good, or true, or beautiful because they participate in ideas far above and beyond them. What all these views have in common is the thought that morality must be commanded – if not by God then by nature; if not by nature then by a supernatural metaphysics with the features of both. This will pose problems for anyone who rejects a particular source of commandment. Perhaps even more important: What about those who believe that being moral is not a matter of following orders, whether natural or supernatural, but about the dignity of freely choosing to do right?

With consequences too unhappy to be ironic, most of the voices willing to speak in universal moral terms at all now consider themselves conservative. And this is what's true in the claim that the left has trouble with values, a claim that can, understandably, make its targets' blood boil. What's at issue here is not private goodness: Corrupt, decent, or generous people can be found on any political scale. When revelations of corruption underscore that those who preach about moral values may be furthest from practicing them, some people are tempted to dismiss talk of values altogether – understandably enough, in the wake of the mind-boggling corruption of the Bush administration, or the way its discussion of moral values was restricted to matters like who gets married rather than who gets tortured. But to dismiss the right wing's appeal to values as phony is to forget what it offers. However shabbily its partisans may behave in private, they offer a public conception of goodness the left no longer knows how to defend. Right-wing talk of moral clarity and honor and heroism is often empty, but that is not the same as being meaningless. Empty concepts remain concepts, in search of an application. The left, by contrast, has deflated the concepts themselves. What the left lacks isn't values, but a standpoint from which all those values make sense – and a language with which to defend them. Several decades of conservative work in that direction has made possible the situation the American political theorist Michael Walzer has described so well: 'No one on the left

has succeeded in telling a story that brings together the different values to which we are committed and connects them to some general picture of what the modern world is like and what our country should be like. The right, by contrast, has a general picture.'

They also lack something that may be even more important than what they have. They lack embarrassment. They may abuse words like *evil* and *hero*, but they aren't ashamed to take them in their mouths. Wary of simplification, and even more afraid of sounding sappy, the left tends to reject not only words like *true* and *noble*, but even words like *legitimate* and *progress*, which were meant to replace them. If used at all, such words are subject to quotation marks – sometimes called scare quotes – that express the speaker's discomfort in the ultimate postmodern gesture, fingers wiggling beside ears in a little dance that says: *I can use it, but I don't go so far as to mean it, and it all matters so little anyway I can make myself look silly to boot*. What matters is putting distance between you and your beliefs.

This book aims to reclaim moral concepts that the left no longer uses with full voice. Reclaiming them from the right isn't a matter of packaging but of the conviction that without them we will lose our souls – whatever we take our souls to be. We will also lose our footing, and our young. The language of the left has been called the language of suspicion, but it's also one of disappointment, the determination not to get fooled again, having seen through sham before. Such language will never win hearts, nor very good minds, either.

Re: very good minds: The sources I use to assemble the framework that's needed are resolutely eclectic, and often old. If the following pages turn from Genesis to Plato, from *The Critique of Pure Reason* to modern songwriters, it's because we need all the help we can get. (Undoubtedly we in the West need help from non-Western sources as well, and my scant use of them is just the result of my own scant knowledge.) It should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway: The authors I cite deserve, and have elsewhere been given, a more

exhaustive discussion than will be offered here. My goal is not to provide definitive readings or criticisms of any one of them, but to draw on the voices of many to construct a view we can use. Turning to great classic texts will reveal unexpected agreement. The voices struggling with one another in the books I'll discuss suggest a universalism of uncertainty in wrestling with similar questions. The same author gave us both Abrahams – perhaps. The same author created Achilles and Odysseus – perhaps. Where dissonant voices grapple with basic decisions, readers are often inclined to solve the problem by positing different authors for different standpoints. There may have been no Homer who wrote both our first novels; the Bible's contradictions may be explained by the sort of committee bickering that produces incoherent texts. These are matters for scholars to explore. It's just as likely that the greatest authors remained inconclusive, for the questions at issue are not the kind to resolve once and for all.

Looking back at traditional uses of moral concepts is not a search for foundations. I believe most of the interesting things philosophy can say about that search were already said by Immanuel Kant, who argued that the validity of our concepts cannot possibly be proved from outside experience, since they shape the possibility of experience itself. Not even this much can be said of moral concepts, since Kant held they were not about truth at all: Truth tells us how the world is; morality tells us how it ought to be. Those who were dissatisfied with his answer spawned a small but tenacious industry devoted to proving our concepts are legitimate, the dominant business of twentieth-century philosophy. It may be possible to continue examining the problems with foundationalism or the nature of relativism forever. But for anyone more likely to be moved by Dylan than Descartes, the hour is getting late.

This book will question your sense of the inevitable. It will not offer proposals for changing policies, or specific political platforms, though it will often use contemporary situations to illustrate general claims about good and evil. And though it is critical of positions in

every political tradition, it is certainly committed to some. How best to describe them, when we know that traditional political categories are hopelessly out of date? While the end of the Cold War made terms like *right* and *left* seem outmoded, the intervening years rendered them almost useless. Traditionally, for example, the right has underlined the notion of responsibility, while the left has stressed the importance of rights. To say we have both rights and responsibilities sounds bland and banal. Is that enough reason to suppose they conflict? Here both make claims to values I cherish, but real existing conservatives and real existing leftists have failed so often in recent decades that their very language is depleted. Refusing to recycle the words *right* and *left* need not, however, conclude in soulless centrism. For in the end neither word is a position, but an accident. (In the Paris parliament, clergy and nobility were seated on the right, while the commoners took their place on the left.) Two centuries after the French Revolution it seems pointless to base our political discourse on the seating arrangements at the Estates-General.

What are the alternatives? In part that depends on where you are: *Left* and *right* are different in London and Vienna, different again in Chicago and Shanghai. Despite occasional attempts to revive it, the very word *liberal* is insipid and confusing; what is characterized as slightly left of center in the U.S. is nothing but the commitment to free markets in most of Europe. For years, *progressive* has been used more from caution than conviction, a timid search for a cost-free way of avoiding the controversy words like *left* (or in the U.S., even *liberal*) can provoke. Perhaps even worse, it's a word often used by those whose beliefs imply that progress itself is impossible. Unlike *left* or *right*, however, *progressive* implies a view: that the world as it is can be moved closer to what it should be through the concerted actions of men and women working together. One way of putting power behind the word *progressive* was shown by Abraham at Sodom. For all those who take risks by challenging power to seek justice for innocents they do not know, he stands as a model.

As legal scholar Kingman Brewster put it, ‘The presumption of innocence is not just a legal concept. In common sense terms, it depends on that generosity of spirit which sees the best, not the worst, in every stranger.’ Such generosity is demanded in a world that connects millions of strangers by mouseclick every microsecond of the day. *Progressive* retains this residual commitment to universalism. It’s also a word that expresses impatience at the way the world falls short of what it could be – and determination to decrease that gap wherever it’s possible.

Yet all the available labels carry historical baggage I’d like to jettison. None of them seems likely to contribute to moral clarity, and any of them can prove a hindrance to it. Rather than ponder which political terms best fit them, let us turn to the moral positions themselves. This book will offer a twenty-first-century framework for an Enlightenment standpoint that no twentieth-century political direction succeeded in making its own.

I’ve divided the book into three parts. ‘Ideal and Real’ lays out the broadest philosophical questions that shadow contemporary political debates. I discuss the roots of concepts like idealism and realism, and show that neither the right nor the left has a coherent picture of either. Without a clear picture, we have few resources to understand terrorism or jingoism or most major problems that face us. ‘Enlightenment Values’ argues that the eighteenth century is the best place to look for those resources. Why turn to the much-maligned Enlightenment? It’s no accident that rejections of the Enlightenment result in premodern nostalgia or postmodern suspicion; where Enlightenment is at issue, modernity is at stake. A defense of the Enlightenment is a defense of the modern world, along with all its possibilities for self-criticism and transformation. If you think such a defense is a cause long lost, you’re invited to look again – at an Enlightenment whose values are not just the pale outspent ones of tolerance and fairness, but the unflagging demands for happiness, reason, reverence, and hope. ‘Good and Evil’ examines those virtues in action. What kinds of heroes are modern heroes? How do we

talk about evil without slinging curses and mud? Learn to make moral judgments without clear instructions? Where does optimism end, and hope begin? Part One is focused on the present, providing the philosophical background that's needed to make sense of current policy debates. Part Two moves from contemporary questions to timeless ones, while Part Three returns to show how classic moral concepts can be used to meet the challenges we face now.

The inevitability of cynicism often looks like the twentieth-century legacy, but one goal of philosophy is to enlarge our ideas of what is possible. This is philosophy's practical force, for you will not oppose what you think is absolutely necessary, nor try something you are certain is bound to fail. Totalitarian governments may have been the first to exploit these facts, but democratic ones have been quick to seize on them, too. How many elections were won because the media projected a particular victory as inescapable? You may hum the tune on Broadway, but dreaming impossible dreams is the sort of thing you're likely to leave to Don Quixote – who was created as an object of gentle mockery five hundred years ago.

The possibility of principle will take us back to concepts that have been abandoned to the right: *good* and *evil*, *hero* and *dignity* and *nobility*. These concepts are part of an ethical vocabulary we need to use if we are to reclaim the ground we've lost. To express the hope that their usefulness can be manifest is not to subscribe to a pragmatist theory of truth, but to refuse to enter that debate. No set of arguments or stories will convince all its readers; ideas are not proofs. Convincing every would-be fanatic is not a reasonable goal. This doesn't mean our choices are blind: We can describe the virtues sustained by each position, the lives led by those who choose one path rather than another. It would be enough to offer a set of ideas we can defend – and pass on to our uncertain children, in ways that could make them proud.