

inclusive description than sin. However, the suggestion that evil is a broader category than sin can lead to the assumption that sin is intelligible because it is something we have done. Yet Augustine thinks sin and evil equally without explanation.

45. The first-person character of the confession of sin does not mean that the whole church cannot confess our sins as the church. So prayers of confession often use "we." For example, consider the prayer from the *Book of Common Prayer* (p. 79):

Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.

46. I have tried to make a beginning to think through what it might mean to narrate a wrong so wrong there is nothing one can do to make it right in "Why Time Cannot and Should Not Heal the Wounds of History. But Time Has Been and Can Be Redeemed," in *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000), pp. 139–154.

47. Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 1.

48. Augustine, *Confessions* (ed. Pine-Coffin, p. 64), 3, 8.

49. James Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

50. This way of putting the matter is misleading because "loss of common worship" suggests that at one time in the past Christians "got it right." On Augustine's grounds, Christians can never assume they ever get it right, but the past can serve as a spur for the imagination to save us from current alternatives.

51. For my attempt to begin to think through what it would mean for Christians to remember the Holocaust, see my "Remembering as a Moral Task: The Challenge of the Holocaust," in my *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), pp. 61–90.

Chapter 3

Ruth W. Grant

The Rousseauan Revolution and the Problem of Evil

The starting point for these reflections is the observation that evil is permeantly with us. Consider *Candide*. In Voltaire's improbable tale, the characters experience every possible form of evil: rape, slavery, religious persecution, torture, and on and on. It is fiction, of course. Yet the device of this fiction resembles the device of soap opera. All of these things do happen; there is nothing improbable about them. The improbable fiction is only that all of these things are unlikely to happen to the same three or four people in a single lifetime or a single television episode. Most of the events in Voltaire's story are real and documented.¹ And, of course, all of these things are still happening. Considering the history of the world, there is very little reason to believe that there could come a time when no woman is ever raped, no child ever abused, no person ever tortured or murdered for political reasons.

Yet the permanence of evil is a difficult notion to accept, particularly for those who were raised in the immediate postwar period in the United States. Many at that time were optimistic that a new and better world would emerge from the ashes of World War Two. "Never again" did not have the hollow ring that it has today after Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda, to name only a few.² It seemed then that the progress of history would surely include moral progress.³ Today, such a perspective seems dreamy; it has been called "the great illusion of the twentieth century."⁴ The degree, variety, and constancy of political evil and its presence across the globe in the years since the defeat of Hitler should provoke, at the very least, a deep skepticism about the possibility of moral progress.

This skepticism elicits the following question: what is it that you have to believe about evil—about what it is and where it comes from—in order to believe that it is the sort of thing that could be eradicated or overcome? Clearly, you could not believe, as Leibniz and Pope did, that evil is part of the divine plan, a necessary element of an ordered world that contributes to the goodness of the whole, however inexplicably.⁵ Similarly, belief in original sin is inseparable from the idea of the permanence of evil in the world as we know it. Any system of beliefs that locates the source of evil in the human passions or in human nature (Freudianism, for example) also supports skepticism about moral progress. In short, the belief that evil can be eradicated entails the idea that the source of evil is something that is subject to change.

One possibility, then, for those who see evil as contingent and eliminable is to conceive of evil as the product of systemic forces. Evil comes about as human beings react and adapt to particular cultural and institutional conditions. Consider, for example, the famous Stanford prison experiments.⁶ College students were arbitrarily assigned to roles as either prisoners or guards in a mock prison. After a very short time, the behavior of the guards became sufficiently brutal that the experiment had to be prematurely terminated. The implication of the experiment was that assigned roles determined behavior. This implication is perfectly compatible, of course, with the idea that there are permanent natural human passions that tend toward evil, which are enabled by certain systemic conditions. The pessimistic conclusion is that each and every one of us is capable of perpetrating the worst evils under the "right" circumstances. A more hopeful conclusion would be that well-structured institutions could contain and direct our worst impulses, though it would always be an uphill battle. The most optimistic interpretation of the Stanford experiments would be that, given the right systems, all of us are capable of leading our lives in accordance with the good. The optimistic alternative couples the idea that evil is systemic with the idea that human beings are naturally good or at least, not naturally evil. According to this view, it is *only* our social relationships that corrupt us, and, in principle, these are subject to change. Evil results from the historical development of social institutions that have led humanity astray and perverted our natural goodness.

This is the view that originated with Rousseau.⁷ It might be seen as the reverse of the well-known Kantian view that, with the proper institutional structure, a nation of devils can be well governed.⁸ In a Rousseauian world, even a nation of angels will be badly governed, given the institutional systems of inequality and oppression that have developed historically. Men

born angels will not long remain so in corrupted societies. Rousseau's view has had a powerful impact on modern thinking about the character of evil and particularly about moral responsibility. Rousseau opens up the possibility that there is sometimes evil in the world without evil people; without individual agents who are responsible for it. His view is reflected in the ease with which we speak of "oppression," "exploitation" or "injustice," rather than speaking of "evil." The former are conceived as systemic, often impersonal, forces, whereas the language of "evil" immediately implicates individual "evildoers." If the problem is identified as one of "injustice" or "exploitation," we are not necessarily called upon to hate or to punish particular individuals as perpetrators. One can indulge righteous anger against the system without the bad conscience that might accompany hatred and vengeance toward real people. Or, put positively, one can work to correct evils while holding out a hand to those who otherwise might be dismissed as enemies when evils are understood to be systemic.

Rousseau joins the idea of systems as a determining source of behavior with the idea of natural goodness. He does not, however, take the final step and join these ideas to the idea of progress. In Rousseau's view, once human beings have been corrupted, there is no going back.⁹ But Robespierre took this final step. If people are good and evil is systemic, revolutionary change can produce a new world purged of evil; a Republic of Virtue. Paradoxically, the Terror was the evil that was justified by these very ideas about the possibility of eliminating evil.¹⁰ This is one of the reasons that the French Revolution is often deemed the first modern revolution, despite the fact that the American Revolution preceded it: the purge is characteristic for modern revolutionary movements, particularly Communist ones.¹¹

In this respect, the Communists ought to be distinguished from the Nazis. Each represents a different view of the nature and sources of evil, which justifies different responses to it. The Communists embrace a version of the idea that evil is systemic. As a result, in addition to the revolutionary overthrow of the system and the elimination of its supporters, forced reeducation appears as a reasonable approach to counter the corrupting effects of the system. For the Nazis, reeducation of the Jews would have been senseless. The Nazis were driven by a kind of Manichean vision. They themselves represented all that was noble and good, while evil was personified in the Jewish people and other non-Aryan peoples and could be eradicated only by their physical elimination. The label "totalitarian" conflates this distinction between the Nazi's Manicheanism and the Communist understanding of evil as systemic.

Each of these modern movements represents an alternative set of beliefs about evil that includes the belief that evil can be eradicated. And this belief itself drives a considerable amount of evil in the world. As Isaiah Berlin wrote:

One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals . . . This is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution.¹²

If Berlin is right, the importance of understanding the answer to my initial question is evident: what do you have to believe about evil to conceive of it as something that could be eliminated? Both Manicheanism and the systemic view can fuel the impulse to seek a final solution.

Interestingly, these were the alternative views that divided reactions in the United States to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The poles are represented by a headline in a Tennessee newspaper announcing "Bush Vows to Eliminate Evil,"¹³ on the one hand, and the frequently repeated phrase, "We have to understand where they are coming from," on the other. For some, the very act of calling the suicide bombers "evil" was a critically important part of the proper moral response to the attack. Others, while condemning the bombing, could not bring themselves to use that word in speaking of the bombers, in part for fear of the evils that might be prompted by a Manichean response. But the systemic view, though it seems immeasurably "softer" and more sophisticated in its understanding of evil, certainly is no guarantee against political violence employed in the name of eradicating evil; witness the examples of the French Revolution and of Communist revolutions. Under the right circumstances, the systemic view too can be used to justify evil. It is this horn of the dilemma that is the subject of this essay.

My aim is to explore one modern "logic of evil": the combination of the belief in the goodness of man, the systemic nature of evil, and the possibility of progress. I return to Rousseau and the French Revolution and develop the contrast with the American Revolution in order to explore both the ways in which responsibility is reconceived and the consequences of that reconceptualization for politics where this "logic of evil" has been accepted. The investigation bears on the question of how so much evil can be perpetrated in the name of the good. It is an opportunity to investigate how ideas about evil can themselves contribute to justifying certain sorts of evil. Given that my starting point is

the premise of the permanence of evil, the investigation raises two central questions. First, how can we recognize the importance of ideas about evil for the actual practice of evil in the world without succumbing to the fantasy that getting the ideas right could ever put an end to evil? And second, how can we give their due to the truths contained in the proposition that evil is systemic without generating the false hope that a change in systems would be sufficient to overcome it?

Rousseau and the Problem of Evil

Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of nature; everything degenerates in the hands of men.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*¹⁴

Rousseau is clear that we cannot look to God as the source of the evils in the world. In his famous exchange with Voltaire in the wake of the devastating earthquake at Lisbon, Rousseau laid out his position: God is omnipotent and God is good. There must be another source of the evils man suffers, and that can only be man himself.

"You must acknowledge," Rousseau declared, "that it was not nature that piled up there [Lisbon] twenty thousand houses of six or seven floors each; and that if the inhabitants of this great city had been spread out more evenly . . . the destruction would have been a lot less, and perhaps insignificant. . . . How many poor creatures died in this disaster because one wanted to go back for his clothes, another for his papers, a third for his money?"¹⁵

Evil, in this case, was the result of human corruption but not of malicious will: Rousseau does not imply that anyone intended to murder the residents of Lisbon. While the evil of the Lisbon disaster was manmade, it was not made by evil men.

Rousseau faces what looks like a particularly knotty problem in trying to explain the sources of evil. God is not its source: "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of nature." But "everything" includes man: the natural goodness of man is the unifying premise of Rousseau's work.¹⁶ Rousseau emphatically rejects the doctrine of original sin. If neither God nor man is the source of evil, where does it come from? Rousseau insists that men are good by nature *and* that evil is manmade. How can men be responsible for evil when they are naturally good? This

is the "anthropodicy" problem that replaces the theodicy problem in Rousseau's work.

Rousseau's response to this problem is a complex story of human corruption. Evil arises through the interaction between accidental changes in man's natural circumstances, the historical development of the species, and individual human psychology. We become evil as we come to inhabit the artificial world of human society. This is the process Rousseau describes in the *Second Discourse* with respect to the species. In the *Confessions*, he tells a similar tale of the corruption of a single individual: himself.¹⁷ Both works leave the reader with a great deal of sympathy for human beings as victims of external social and historical forces beyond their control; forces that make them vicious but also miserable. Masters as well as slaves, history's winners as well as its losers, they are all to be pitied as they lose both their natural purity and the possibility of happiness.

The *Second Discourse* traces the development of corruption and misery as the effects of inequality.¹⁸ Corruption is born of inequality because inequality produces a system of personal dependence, and dependence, in turn, produces vice. Rousseau describes the moral impact of economic dependence:

[B]ehold man, due to a multitude of new needs, subjected so to speak to all of nature and especially to his fellow men, whose slave he becomes in a sense even in becoming their master: rich, he needs their services; poor, he needs their help; and mediocrity cannot enable him to do without them. He must therefore incessantly seek to interest them in his fate, and to make them find their own profit, in fact or in appearance, in working for his. This makes him deceitful and sly with some, imperious and harsh with others. . . . Finally, consuming ambition, the fervor to raise one's relative fortune less out of true need than in order to place oneself above others, inspires in all men a base inclination to harm each other, a secret jealousy all the more dangerous because, in order to strike its blow in greater safety, it often assumes the mask of benevolence.¹⁹

Social, economic, and political inequalities that develop historically transform man's passions and inclinations. Human beings are naturally independent and self-sufficient, and their only sentiment toward others is a kind of primitive pity. The development of dependency relationships replaces that sentiment "in all men" with "a base inclination to harm each other."²⁰

The key psychological factor in this transformation is *amour-propre*; the desire to be preferred or the desire for distinction. It is, in a sense, a

desire for inequality and particularly for the recognition of inequality. The satisfaction of this desire thus depends both on the existence of a hierarchy of value and on the opinion of others. *Amour-propre* can take a variety of forms including ambition, envy, jealousy, vengeance, vanity, and pride. It is this passion that explains why people often react more strongly to insult than to injury. As we saw, systems of unequal relationships inflame *amour-propre*. At the same time, this desire sustains systems of inequality:

[C]itizens let themselves be oppressed only insofar as they are carried away by blind ambition; and looking more below than above them, domination becomes dearer to them than independence, and they consent to wear chains in order to give them to others in turn.²¹

Unequal and unjust relations of dependence develop over time as the human species progresses technologically and culturally. This dependence corrupts the human soul. Finally, dependence and the passions it produces come to reinforce one another. Structural or systemic inequality, with its attendant *amour-propre*, is the root of all evil; "it is the spirit of society alone and the inequality it engenders, which thus change and alter all our natural inclinations."²² In reference to his letter to Voltaire, Rousseau wrote, "I proved to him that out of all [the evils of human life], there was not one from which providence was not exculpated, and which did not have its source more in the *abuse* that man has made of his faculties than in nature itself."²³ Rousseau thus solves his "anthropodicy" problem.

According to Rousseau, none of the motivating emotions associated with *amour-propre* (envy, ambition, jealousy, and so forth) are natural in human beings in the sense that they are not part of what human beings are originally, if for no other reason than that Rousseau depicts man as originally living in isolation, and these are necessarily social passions. Yet, *amour-propre* seems to arise inescapably once human beings are brought into sustained contact with their fellows, particularly because *amour-propre* is tied to sexual preference (though not to sexuality simply). Once a person comes to prefer a particular sexual partner, that person wishes to be preferred in turn. This is the context in which *amour-propre* first appears in Rousseau's story of the development of the species, and it is very early in the story.²⁴ In the case of an individual living in society, its appearance cannot be delayed beyond the onset of adolescence.²⁵ It seems that, while Rousseau insists that *amour-propre* is not natural, it might as well be. The species cannot

return to the original condition of individual isolation even if that were desirable, and *amour-propre* will inevitably appear even in the most primitive social conditions. The passions that lead men to wish to harm others will always be with us.

At this point, it might seem that in Rousseau's account *amour-propre* is simply a functional equivalent of original sin. Human beings have fallen from an original state of innocence, and henceforth each of us carries in our soul a predisposition to sin or evil-doing. But I think this view is mistaken, first, because *amour-propre* can be the source of the best in men, as well as of great evils, and second, because it becomes predominantly destructive only under certain historical conditions that are not inevitable. *Amour-propre* is inseparable from conjugal love, for example, which Rousseau calls one of "the sweetest sentiments known to men."²⁶ Rousseau describes the primitive stage of human society where people live in groups of self-sufficient family units as the "happiest and most durable epoch" even though *amour-propre* has become a feature of human psychology by this time.²⁷ It is only after a series of accidents that lead to the discovery of metallurgy, the development of agriculture, the division of labor, and finally the institution of unequal property that *amour-propre* produces far more evils than it does good for human beings. Moreover, Rousseau's ideal egalitarian communities seek to satisfy the desire for distinction by awarding honors according to merit. Under these conditions, where there is no personal dependence and status inequalities are both limited and justified by merit, *amour-propre* supports virtue, for example, civic spirit and excellence in public service.²⁸ In short, despite the psychological dimension of Rousseau's account of the origins of evil, the structure of social institutions, which are not natural but arise historically, remains the critical determining factor. Consequently, we are led to view corrupted humanity with sympathy; perpetrators of evils to be sure, but only because we are all also victims of our circumstances.

This view emerges also from an analysis of Rousseau's depiction of his own corruption in the *Confessions*. Rousseau portrays himself in many ways as a victim of circumstances, and while he has much to confess, he views himself as corrupted in a qualified sense. He does bad things, but he retains a purity of sentiment. In almost every case, Rousseau explains his transgressions in such a way that it is easy for him to forgive himself and to lead the reader to do the same. Most of the other people in the book are treated in similar fashion. People do bad things largely out of errors of judgment and weakness of will; very rarely out of true wickedness or malicious will. And only the latter is considered truly evil by

Rousseau. Purity of intention can even excuse Rousseau's decision to abandon his children at birth to a founding home. Again, while evil is manmade, most of it is not made by evil men.

Rousseau's first experience of injustice can serve as an example. As a child, Rousseau was falsely accused of breaking a comb. All appearances indicated that only he could have been the culprit. Consequently his protestations of innocence were treated as barefaced lies. He was punished along with his cousin who had also been unjustly accused of a serious transgression. This incident marks a turning point in Rousseau's development; it is the equivalent of the Fall.

There was the end of the serenity of my childlike life. From that moment, I ceased to enjoy a pure happiness. . . . We remained at Bossey for several months. We were there as the first man is represented to us in the terrestrial paradise, but we had ceased to enjoy it. . . . Attachment, respect, intimacy, confidence no longer tied the students to their guides; we no longer regarded them as Gods who read in our hearts: we were less ashamed of doing wrong; and more fearful of being accused: we began to hide ourselves, to mutiny, to lie. All the vices of our age corrupted our innocence and disfigured our games. . . . We ceased to cultivate our little gardens, our herbs, our flowers. . . .²⁹

What is the cause of the vices? Unjust treatment at the hands of others. And are those others evil? On the contrary, they are well-meaning adults who are merely mistaken in their judgment. What is the source of their error? They are misled by the evidence of their senses and their misplaced faith in reason: it seemed that only Rousseau had the opportunity to break the comb. They would have done better had they trusted the judgment of their hearts, saying, "We know Jean-Jacques. He would never have done such a thing."

Errors of judgment coupled with pure intentions account for the immoral behavior of Mme de Warens as well: "[A]ll her faults came to her from her errors, never from her passions." "[S]he could do evil while deceiving herself, but she could not want anything that was evil." She had been led into error and self-deception by her "philosophy teacher," and "the principles he gave her were the ones he needed to seduce her."³⁰ She too was misled by a misplaced faith in reason. Both examples demonstrate that while errors of judgment cause many of the evils in the world, enlightenment rationalism is hardly the solution to this problem.

Weakness of will is a second major source of evil. Rousseau affirms a practical maxim of morality in response to this problem.

[A]void situations that put our duties in opposition with our interests, and which show us our good in the harm of someone else; certain that whatever love of virtue one brings to such situations, sooner or later one weakens without being aware of it, and one becomes unjust and bad in fact, without having ceased to be just and good in the soul.³¹

The structure of society puts men in situations where interest and duty conflict. The only way to remain pure would be to remove oneself from society. Otherwise, one becomes bad "without being aware of it"; "bad in fact," while remaining "good in the soul." It is striking how little culpability Rousseau attaches to weakness of will and how the soul can remain pure despite bad actions in his view.

Rousseau "confesses" his own weakness of will, illustrating these attitudes with an important example. When he was young and employed in a large household, he stole a fancy ribbon intending to give it to a servant girl. When he was caught, he swore that it was the servant girl who had stolen it. Rousseau refers to this false and unjust accusation as a "heinous crime" and one for which he has suffered the greatest remorse. He knows the seriousness of the consequences for a servant girl who is dismissed from her position for stealing. Yet, after making this confession, Rousseau immediately turns to examine his "internal inclinations" and finds that "never has wickedness been farther from me than in that cruel moment." It was only fear of the shame of a public confession (a form of *amour-propre*) that led him to lie, not any hostility towards the girl. Had he been given the opportunity to confess in private, he surely would have. Instead, "they only intimidated me when it was necessary to give me courage." Finally, "in youth, genuinely heinous acts are even more criminal than in maturity; but what is only weakness is much less so, and at bottom my fault was hardly anything else."³²

"Genuinely heinous acts," or "wickedness," are motivated by the desire to do harm to others or to use them to aggrandize oneself. It is beginning to appear that a great deal of harm in the world is done without wickedness. Most people are not consciously cruel, callous, and manipulative. There are some, of course, and M. Grimm is the model for this type in the *Confessions*. He is a man of letters who is vain (he uses cosmetics) and proud, and he succeeds because others are too good or too innocent to see his true nature. To try to deal with him fairly and gently only makes matters worse: "the hatred of the wicked . . . becomes further envenomed by the impossibility of finding anything to base it on, and the feeling of their own injustice is only an additional grievance against the person

who is its object."³³ The wicked few are fully responsible for the evils that they commit and entirely undeserving of sympathy. But these are the rare exceptions. Most of the evils in the world are caused by people who, with good hearts and pure souls, have been led astray by errors of judgment or weakness of will.

Rousseau offers a new perspective on the problem of evil in contrast both to the Christian doctrine of original sin and the Enlightenment philosophes' analysis of evil as the result of ignorance and superstition. People are naturally innocent and pure, and morality is more a matter of the heart than the head. In fact, the development of the rational faculties is certainly no proof against wickedness (e.g., Grimm); reason becomes rationalization more often than not (e.g., the case of Mme de Warens); and errors of judgment can follow from an excessive reliance on empirical evidence and a distrust of sentiment (e.g., the "fall" at Bossey). Rousseau's new alternative position is illustrated in the *Letter to D'Alembert* where he argues against instituting a theater in Geneva. With the Calvinist ministers of that town, he sees this project, supported by Voltaire and Diderot, as exemplary of the cultural sophistication that breeds corruption of various kinds. But distinguishing himself from the ministers' austerity, he recommends alternative healthy forms of public pleasures: simple, egalitarian festivals directed toward cultivating sentiments of brotherhood in the community and purified of negative competitive rivalries.

In Rousseau's account, purity of feeling is the key to moral goodness; it seems to excuse almost anything. And such feeling is very difficult to preserve in people who live within institutionalized structures of inequality and dependence where *amour-propre* is fully operative. Rousseau was extremely pessimistic as to the practical possibilities for establishing communities like his idealized depiction of Geneva, but the depictions were meant to be moving and inspiring. Robespierre was among those inspired. Rousseau had explained how evil could arise in human communities without emanating either from God or from the nature of man. Artificial institutional systems of inequality, often arising in response to historical accidents, transform people. Some become outright wicked. Many others do bad things as a result of the injustices they suffer, of mistakes, or of weakness in the face of conflicts created by the system in which they live. But they remain good at heart. Rousseau combines the principle of natural goodness with the principle of systemic evil. It remains to be seen how these principles operated in the justification of the Terror.

Rousseau and the French Revolution

The first thing the legislator must know is that the people is good.

Robespierre³⁴

That Rousseau had a profound influence on the revolution of 1789 is well established. What the Revolutionaries found in Rousseau was both a model of virtue and a compelling indictment of society as the source of the degradation of mankind. He was admired at least as much for his persona as for his writings, and of his writings, the *Confessions* was more influential than the *Social Contract*. Rousseau was admired for preserving his integrity in spite of the injustices he suffered. He was a primary source for the language of virtue, corruption, and purity that permeated revolutionary discourse. In short, his analysis of the origins of evil, what I have been calling the systemic approach, had a powerful effect on the Revolution.³⁵

There is a puzzle here. In Rousseau's own work, as we have seen, his analysis tends to be exculpatory. Individuals are rarely to blame for the evils of the world; even the masters are portrayed as victims of the system; purity of intention is sufficient to justify forgiveness. How, then, does the analysis of evil as systemic become transformed in the hands of the Revolutionaries into a justification for the brutality of the Terror? I concentrate here on three components of the Revolutionaries' analysis, only the first two of which are Rousseauan: (1) the premise of natural goodness; (2) the claim that systemic hierarchies are corrupting; and (3) the belief in the possibility of a complete break with the old regime.³⁶ I might have included the Rousseauan concepts of the unity of the people's will and of compassion, which were also important in Revolutionary discourse.³⁷ But my purpose is not to give a complete accounting of Rousseau's influence on the French Revolution. It is to show how the understanding of evil as systemic and eradicable can itself become a justification for evil.

It was axiomatic for the Revolutionaries that the people is always good.³⁸ This meant that whenever popular counterrevolutionary activity took place, an explanation had to be found that was compatible with the axiom. There were two possibilities: either the people had been contaminated by some external influence or these particular people had to be excluded from "the people." The first logic was applied to peasant and worker revolts outside of Paris in the Vendée and elsewhere. France's foreign enemies were blamed for corrupting the people and turning them

against the fatherland.³⁹ The second logic was applied to mobs of poor Parisians who responded to food shortages with riots and looting. "What is there in common between the people of Paris and a mob of women, led by valets of the aristocracy" Robespierre asked.⁴⁰ "The people" could remain pure as an abstraction whose will was always good and was represented by the leadership of the Revolution, while actual people in revolt against that leadership could be demonized as foreign enemies or internal enemies of "the people." The premise of natural goodness is transformed into a Manichean dichotomy of good and evil forces justifying extreme measures against the latter.

The premise of the natural goodness of man played a role in the justification of the purges as well. We have seen how, in Rousseau's thought, the idea that essentially good people are corrupted by the pressures of the system in which they live leads to the view that purity of intention is the crucial factor in moral goodness. And contrariwise, the only real crime is a corrupted heart. Trials during the Terror were not examinations of evidence of criminal activity. They were judgments by a patriotic jury of the purity of sentiment of the accused. The only real question was, "Is the accused an enemy of the people?" This is the vision of justice explicitly codified in the law of 22 Prairial.⁴¹ Purity of intention as a moral principle operated in other ways to enable the Terror as well. The perpetrators of the Terror, fully conscious of the purity of their own intentions, could compliment themselves for their willingness to be cruel for the sake of the Revolution. Devotion to the Revolution, that is, purity of intention, becomes the only moral desideratum. And lastly, the imperative of preserving the purity of the Revolution itself as the expression of the unified will of a people who is always good justifies crushing dissent.⁴²

The idea of evil as systemic also shaped the ideal of Revolutionary justice. It too tended to eliminate the importance of evidence of individual guilt for particular criminal deeds. This is nowhere more evident than in Saint Juste's speeches to the Convention advocating death for Louis XVI. His position was not that the king had ruled badly or abused his power; such considerations were utterly irrelevant. Louis XVI was guilty of being a king. Just as the people are virtuous because of their position in the system, Louis XVI was guilty because of his.⁴³ In Rousseau's hands, the idea of systemic evil leads to a general sympathy for people on the top as well as on the bottom of the social hierarchy. Occupying positions of dependence in an unnatural hierarchical system deforms all souls and creates universal misery. In the hands of the Revolutionaries, the same basic thought justifies an automatic determination of guilt or innocence on the basis of

social position. This is a logic that has justified, not only the decapitation of a French king, but the attempt to eliminate whole classes of people in the name of revolutionary justice in many places around the globe.

The final factor in the development of this fatal revolutionary logic is the belief in the possibility of a thoroughly radical break with the past. The old system, the ancien régime, had caused the degeneration of mankind. The Revolution would destroy it and begin anew by instituting a new system that would create a new man. Both destruction and renovation rest on the notion that it is governmental systems that form the people. The Revolutionary project thus joined the Terror with reeducation proposals and festivals for cultural renewal.⁴⁴ The "Great Terror" that resulted in the deaths of about 1,300 purported aristocrats began just a few days after the Festival of the Supreme Being. The attempt to eradicate the old and replace it with a new order was not simply an attempt to redirect the course of history. It was an attempt to overcome history itself. It should not be forgotten that the Revolutionaries instituted a new calendar beginning with the year one. Henceforth, history would no longer be a process of degeneration and decay. François Furet wrote: "No sentiment was more intense at that moment than the feeling that a breach had opened up in time . . . The past was the ancien régime, the epoch of man corrupted by society, and in destroying it the Revolution opened up the way to regeneration."⁴⁵ The Revolutionaries seemed to believe that evil itself could become a thing of the past. To purify society once and for all is a powerful justification for destruction.

Rousseau argued that naturally good men are corrupted by unjust institutionalized systems of power relations that arise historically. This systemic explanation for the origins of evil appears in his work as benign, particularly in comparison to Manichean visions that identify good and evil as powerful competing forces. But it now appears that the systemic view can become effectively indistinguishable from Manicheanism when coupled with the idea that social systems can be radically altered so as to recover natural goodness. This is what the example of the French Revolution demonstrates. The idea of systemic evil generated dichotomies between the good people on the one hand and the evil mob, or foreign elements, or ruling class on the other. It generated dichotomies between pure patriots and traitors, virtuous citizens and vicious enemies of the people. And it generated the dichotomy between everything evil associated with the old regime and the purity of the new, revolutionary order. The systemic understanding of evil, along with the idea that evil could be eradicated, permitted and encouraged immense injustices and cruelties in just these surprisingly Manichean terms.

There are alternatives to the systemic view and the Manichean view. One of them is exemplified in the public rhetoric of the American Revolution. The understanding of evil deployed during that period has two important distinguishing aspects: that evil is permanently with us and that its source is not something external to each of us, but rather internal to each individual human being. In these particular respects, it resembles the doctrine of original sin. This view dominates the logic of justification during the period of the American Revolution, to which I now turn.⁴⁶

The Idea of Evil in the American Revolution

The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man; and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society.

The Federalist Papers, no. 10

Among the Americans of the founding period, the language of evil follows an entirely different logic than the Rousseauian logic just described.⁴⁷ Interestingly, there is plenty of talk of virtue, vice, and corruption, but, of purity, none at all. Passions with malignant possibilities are part of the human constitution. People are dangerous to one another unless their passions are regulated, internally and externally. The most politically important of these passions are ambition and acquisitiveness, which are often described as predominating more in the elite ranks of society than among "the middling classes."⁴⁸ Self-interestedness, however, is found in every social class. The preference for oneself is both natural and ubiquitous, and it necessarily produces partiality. Partiality or bias is not only unjust in itself but also the source of political conflict and of the domination of one part of the society over another.⁴⁹

To the extent that partiality is the source of evil, reasonableness is the antidote. To act reasonably is to consider a question impartially, judge accordingly, and guide one's action by that judgment.⁵⁰ Each of us can be held responsible for the extent to which our conduct is reasonable in this sense. When the consequences of our conduct are manifestly unfair or unjust, there can be no appeal to purity of intention or a core of natural goodness. Both the passions that give rise to evil and the rational faculty that can control them are inherent internal capacities. Hence, responsibility lies with each individual.

Nonetheless, institutional systems and social circumstances vary in the extent to which they either enable or constrain the negative consequences of the passions and appetites of individuals. Madison famously argues that "[a]mbition must be made to counteract ambition"⁵¹ and that such a goal can be achieved through institutional design. But even institutions well designed to constrain the passions can never do so permanently.⁵² Ambition and partiality are a constant threat. In contrast to the Rousseauian view according to which good people are corrupted by bad institutions, Madison and Jefferson fear that good institutions will be corrupted by bad people.

This understanding of the relation between the sources of evils and social systems contains within itself both conservative and revolutionary tendencies. It is conservative in that it would condemn any project as hopeless that aimed at eradicating evil and creating the conditions for the regeneration of humanity. On the other hand, it contains a logic that justifies the overthrow of systems that institutionalize partiality and privilege, such as monarchy and aristocracy. And since corruption and factional conflict constantly threaten, vigilance on the part of the public is always called for. The people must be jealous guardians of their rights, ready to take up arms to defend them if need be.

But this sort of revolution is unlikely to produce a terror. It is resistant to the Manichean transformation to which the systemic view of evil is so susceptible. The absence of moral purity as a possibility, the centrality of the notion of personal responsibility, and the absence of messianic hopes provide some protection against those sorts of revolutionary excesses. In the United States, political opponents were not conceived as the personification of evil and subjected to a cataclysmic extermination meant to usher in a new historical era.

This is not to say that the dominant understanding of evil in the American case cannot and has not been used to justify enormous evils; on the contrary. By classifying groups of people as incapable of the internal constraint of reason, their subjection to external domination could be justified. Those thought to be lacking full rationality were classified as childlike or subhuman, and their oppression was characteristically blended with paternalism and institutionalized.⁵³ The point is that different understandings of what evil is and where it comes from facilitate the practice of evil in different ways.

It would be hard to imagine a set of ideas about evil that could not be employed as justifications for it. Moreover, there are many evils in every society that are perpetrated in spite of and not because of the dominant

ideas of the time. These observations in themselves provide some confirmation of the view according to which evil finds its source in permanent human characteristics.

Conclusions

This analysis has focused on what I have called the "systemic view" of evil: a cluster of concepts including the premise of man's natural goodness and the claim that corruption is caused by impersonal structural forces and social relations, formal and informal, that develop historically. I have juxtaposed this view, first, with "Manicheanism," according to which pure forces of good and evil with independent sources contend with one another in the world, and, finally, with an alternative view that maintains that the source of evil resides in each and every one of us and always will.

At first glance, the systemic view and Manicheanism confront one another as opposing alternatives in responding to evil. The Manichean searches for the evildoers and seeks to eliminate them. The advocates of a systemic view focus, not on individual perpetrators, but on the general conditions producing injustice and oppression. In doing so, they believe that they are combating the dangers of Manicheanism; that their approach will produce a more humane politics. Yet, I have tried to show that these two views are not as opposed as they first appear. The systemic view can generate the same sorts of dichotomies as Manicheanism does. The crucial element that the two views share is the idea of evil as the result of external forces; in other words, they both hold out the possibility of the purity of the self. One points to the pure and innocent victims of the forces of evil at loose in the world while the other points to the pure and innocent victims of historical circumstances. But history has shown that this idea of purity, along with the idea that evil can be overcome or eradicated, is potent and dangerous. The dangers are those long recognized as the dangers of self-righteousness.⁵⁴

Unlike the systemic and Manichean views, the third alternative, illustrated here by the American Revolution, entails an inherent suspicion of self-righteousness. Its tendencies are toward bad conscience and permanent vigilance. Self-righteousness is limited by the consciousness of sinfulness, or malevolent passions, or selfish appetites within ourselves. Vigilance is required because those forces can never be entirely overcome, only contained. This view produces a concern with limits.

The separation of powers is a perfect expression of these sensibilities in the American case. And similarly, it is not accidental that the idea of the purity of the people in France was coupled with the idea of an unfettered state as the instrument of the people's will. Moreover, the idea that evil is permanently with us, like the idea that its sources are internal, is a moderating idea as well because it is incompatible with utopian attempts to overcome evil and usher in a new and purified age. While avoiding this Scylla, the Charybdis to fear here is complacency or complicity; these would be the characteristic pitfalls of this perspective. Finally, this perspective encourages introspection and self-examination. In place of the conviction of one's own purity is the conviction that none of us are above reproach. This is a powerful impetus toward self-correction. For these reasons, and in spite of the ways in which it too has been used to justify evil, on balance, it is to be preferred to the alternatives.

But is it not only less dangerous, but also more true than the systemic view? Let us return to my central example and compare Edmund Burke's approach to explaining the French Revolution with Alexis de Tocqueville's. In Burke's view, "History consists for the greater part in the miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites."⁵⁵ He puts great emphasis on the kind of men selected for the National Assembly, saying that, after he had read the list of representatives, "Nothing that they afterwards did could appear astonishing."⁵⁶ By contrast, Tocqueville, in the *Ancien Régime*, traces the development of political institutions, social relations, economic systems and so forth, sometimes back to the Middle Ages, in order to show how the old order had already been significantly undermined by the time the Revolution took place. Tocqueville's systemic analysis has great explanatory force. While Burke has a point, to explain historical and political events on a large scale, whether or not those events are characterized as "evils," we cannot rely on individual psychology alone.

Moreover, Rousseau's systemic explanation draws attention to the fact that many of the evil deeds in the world are done by people who are not wicked. This is an insight that rings true. Without some explanation for this phenomenon, it would be very difficult to explain the prevalence of evil. Surely one part of the explanation is to be found in the effects of the set of relationships within which individuals find themselves such that the results of their well-intentioned actions may be inadvertently harmful or the pressures of their situation may either lead them to rationalize behavior they know is wrong or thoroughly corrupt their moral sense,

and so forth. To return to the Stanford prison experiments, there is strong evidence that systemic power relationships do affect morality and behavior.⁵⁷

The systemic perspective must be given its due, but now grounded in and made compatible with a non-Rousseauian premise. The bedrock premise would be, not the natural goodness of man, but rather the recognition of ineradicable destructive human passions that are constitutive of our being. In this view, there is no possibility of an escape from personal responsibility, no possibility of attributing moral purity to any individual or group, and no possibility of moral progress of the sort that would make evil a thing of the past. Such a view would avoid the Rousseauian dangers.

But it would not and could not avoid all dangers. All moral ideas are dangerous ideas—just not to the same degree or in the same way. Different ideas about what evil is and where it comes from lead people to commit different evils in the name of the good. It follows that getting the ideas right about evil is enormously important for moral progress. But "getting the ideas right" cannot eliminate evil. In fact, the idea that evil can be eliminated is itself one of those dangerous ideas that lead people to commit evils. This is our paradoxical situation. It matters a great deal how we speak about evil, but it bears emphasizing that we cannot eliminate evil by finally understanding it correctly.

NOTES

1. Voltaire, *Candide and Related Writings*, trans. and with an intro. by David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), pp.viii–ix.
2. Not to mention the persistence in the modern world of virulent forms of anti-Semitism that date back to medieval times.
3. For a theoretical statement of this sort of optimism, see Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent" in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. by Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983), pp. 29–40.
4. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Moral Purity and Persecution in History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 133.
5. Gottfried Leibniz, "Metaphysics Summarized," and Alexander Pope, "Essay on Man," in Voltaire, *Candide and Related Writings*.
6. Craig Haney, Curtis Banks, and Philip Zimbardo, "Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison," *International Journal of Criminology and Penology* 1 (1973): 69–97.
7. It is encapsulated in Jacques's remark in *Candide*: "It must be the case . . . that human beings have corrupted the natural order of things somewhat, for they are not born wolves, and they have become wolves." Voltaire, *Candide and Related Writings*, pp. 9–10.
8. Kant, "To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," in *Perpetual Peace*, pp. 107–43.
9. But see Bernard Manin, in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1969), s.v. "Rousseau," "Emile lent credibility to the idea of radical change." According to

Manin, the idea that "it is possible to reject custom, break with convention, and construct a new order more truly in harmony with nature" is also part of Rousseau's legacy.

10. I do not say "caused by." The question of the causes of the Terror is far more complex. I am interested here in the self-understanding of the Revolutionaries. The question of the causal relation between Enlightenment ideas and the French Revolution is a contentious one. For a discussion of various approaches, see Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1995), chapter 6. Darnton's position is that illegal "low" forms of literature were more important than the works of the philosophers in undermining the legitimacy of the regime. But what he finds in this material has been characterized as a "Rousseauian critique" and a "watered down Enlightenment." See David A. Bell, "Why Books Caused a Revolution: A Reading of Robert Darnton," and Jeremy D. Popkin, "Robert Darnton's alternative (to the) Enlightenment," in *The Darnton Debate: Books and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Haydn T. Mason (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998), pp. 121, 186.
11. Arthur Koestler draws the parallel between the French Terror and Stalin's purges in *Darkness at Noon*, trans. by Daphne Hardy (New York: Modern Library, 1941). Hannah Arendt distinguishes them in *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1963, 1965), p. 100.
12. "Two Concepts of liberty," in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997) p. 237.
13. Note also the title of David Frum and Richard Perle's book, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (New York: Balantine Books, 2004).
14. This is the opening line of the work, *Emile*, trans. by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979).
15. Voltaire, *Candide and Related Works*, pp. 110–111.
16. Arthur Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
17. *Emile* is the counterpoint to the *Confessions*. In that work, Rousseau imagines how a child might be raised apart from the influences of society in a manner that preserves his natural goodness from the forces of corruption.
18. See Nannerl O. Keohane, "Inequality and the Problem of Evil," in this volume.
19. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, Roger D. Masters ed., *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality (Second Discourse)* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), p. 156.
20. In *Emile*, the child must not experience his dependence on the will of another human being. It would cripple and distort the child's exercise of his own will (p. 66). Dependence on things does not have the same corrupting effect.
21. Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 173.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
23. Emphasis added. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence Including the Letters to Malesherbes*, ed. Christopher Kelly, Roger D. Masters, and Peter G. Stillman, trans. by Christopher Kelly (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995), p. 361.
24. Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, pp. 134–35, 148–49. For extended discussions of *amour-propre*, see Laurence D. Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature and the Problem of the Good Life* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); and Ruth W. Grant, *Hypocrisy and Integrity: Machiavelli, Rousseau and the Ethics of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 155–161.
25. See Rousseau, *Emile*, 213–15.
26. Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, pp. 146–147.
27. Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 151.
28. See, for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Government of Poland*, trans. Willmoore Kendall (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1972), chap. 13.
29. Rousseau, *Confessions*, p. 18.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 167.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 47. See n. 30.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 71–73.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 396. See pp. 390–97.
34. Quoted in Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 159. Robespierre wrote that he learned this from Rousseau. See Manin, "Rousseau," p. 840.
35. See Blum, *Republic of Virtue*; and François Furet, "Rousseau and the French Revolution," in *The Legacy of Rousseau*, ed. Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarrow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). See also Manin, "Rousseau," for an excellent treatment of the complexities of the question of Rousseau's influence.
36. Moore, *Moral Purity*, p. 77. On the third component, see n. 9.
37. See Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 76–90.
38. Blum, *Republic of Virtue*, pp. 159, 164.
39. Blum, *Republic of Virtue*, pp. 217, 223.
40. Quoted in Blum, *Republic of Virtue*, p. 198. See also pp. 187, 196–98, 249.
41. Blum, *Republic of Virtue*, pp. 180, 255.
42. Moore, *Moral Purity*, chap. 3, traces the idea of purity as it functioned in the French Revolution. His discussion of the speeches of Hébert, Robespierre, and Saint Just provides considerable supporting evidence for the claims made here. His analytic focus is the secularization of the politics of purity during the Revolution.
43. Moore, *Moral Purity*, p. 166 and chap. 9.
44. See Mona Ozouf, in *Critical Dictionary*, s.v. "Regeneration."
45. Furet, "Rousseau and the French Revolution," pp. 179–181. See also Carla Hesse, "Precedent and Invention: The Problem of the Past in Revolutionary Politics," unpublished paper delivered at the National Humanities Center, Research Triangle Park, NC, November 1, 2002. On the connection between the Terror and civic education, see Blum, *Republic of Virtue*, chap. 10.
46. See Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), chap. 2. Delbanco describes the tensions in this period between emerging Enlightenment rationalism and traditional Christian teachings concerning sin.
47. It should be noted that "evil" could mean any kind of pain or suffering. The term was not restricted to cruelty, nor did it connote extreme immorality, as it often does today. I am indebted to David Wootton for this point and for other illuminating comments on this paper. See also Delbanco, *Death of Satan*, p. 76.
48. See, for example, the speeches of Melancton Smith in the New York ratifying convention. Herbert J. Storing, ed., *The Anti-Federalist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 1985), 331ff.
49. This is not to say that there are not also natural sentiments that support sociability.
50. See Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: New American Library, 1961), *The Federalist*, no. 1; and John Locke, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding in Some Thoughts Concerning Education and Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, ed. Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarrow (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996).
51. *Federalist*, no. 51.
52. This is why the question of perpetuation of institutions and the longevity of the regime is so important.
53. In this particular respect, there is a similarity in the rhetoric justifying injustices towards women and blacks in America.
54. See George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," in *A Collection of Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1954); Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958). See also David Wong, "Evil and the Morality of Conviction," in this volume.

55. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), p. 162.
56. Burke, *Reflections*, p. 46.
57. See Philip G. Zimbardo, "A Situationist Perspective on the Psychology of Evil: Understanding How Good People Are Transformed into Perpetrators," in *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil: Understanding Our Capacity for Kindness and Cruelty*, ed. Arthur Miller (New York: Guilford, 2004).

Chapter 4

Nannerl O. Keohane

Inequality and the Problem of Evil

Many contemporary moral philosophers are reluctant to use the term "evil." They are made uncomfortable by its religious overtones, and this discomfort is heightened by the loose usage of the word in popular discourse. Yet as Andrew Delbanco notes, "despite the shriveling of old words and concepts, we cannot do without some conceptual means for thinking about the sorts of experiences that used to go under the term evil."¹ There are times, after all, when saying "That's very bad behavior" is as far off the mark as calling Yosemite Valley "a pretty landscape." We need words to name things that elicit awe or horror, not merely routine pleasure or distaste.

Inequality, unlike evil, is discussed frequently by philosophers these days. In this paper, I shall argue that inequality is closely connected with evil. I hope to suggest a pathway for considering the phenomenon of evil in human life that is especially appropriate for contemporary moral philosophy. To make this case, I will rely principally on a writer who was crucial in shaping a secular understanding of evil, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.²

In the context of radical evils such as the Holocaust and genocide, an emphasis on inequality may seem an odd choice. Is it not more plausible to say, as Claudia Card does in a recent study of atrocity: "inequalities are not themselves evils" but "tend to accompany the evils of exploitation and oppression"?³ Rousseau presents the case for seeing inequality not just as an occasional accompaniment of evil but as the primary source and cause of the evils human beings experience in our lives.