

Who Needs Evil?

A review of *Evil Men* by James Dawes

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Jon Catlin

In our culture, “evil” is a loaded word. With four letters, it simultaneously harkens back to theological dogma, global sufferings, and the villains of history, thus confronting us as indefinable in its complexity. And so we might ask, as James Dawes does in *Evil Men*, “Is the concept of evil itself useful?” Especially in the wake of the twentieth and young twenty-first century’s numerous genocides, evil has come to seem like an outdated, abstract, and mystifying term for the real, pressing dangers we must confront. Following Nietzsche, most scholars today are skeptics of evil, more interested in the significance of what we deem to be evil and why, rather than what might actually be evil. In any case, as Susan Neiman has argued, evil is such a prominent concept in the history of the West, and has engaged so many thinkers, that it can be read as “the guiding force of modern thought.”¹

Roughly equating Kant’s notion of “radical evil” with the Holocaust, Hannah Arendt wrote: “All we know is that we can neither punish nor forgive such offenses and that they therefore transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance.” Evil today designates a sphere of action not necessarily supernatural but decidedly beyond any ordinary, empirical explanation. The term points to a dark aspect of our reality: that there is a boundary beyond which we lack control and moral authority. And just as we cannot undo evil, we cannot unthink the way knowledge of it, say of 9/11 or of Sandy Hook, has affected the way we view our world.

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1. Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 5.

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In *Evil Men*, Dawes, an English professor and director of the Human Rights Program at Macalester College, undertakes a multifaceted investigation of evil in which he attempts to demystify the concept into secular terms for the present world. The book is ostensibly an analysis of what evil looks like up close. It brings together dozens of interviews the author conducted with Japanese perpetrators of genocide in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), including the so-called Rape of Nanking, in which more than 300,000 Chinese civilians were raped, tortured, and murdered. But, more accurately, it is one man's struggle for an answer to a question we inevitably pose to the evil men of history: *why did they do it?* While prompted by face-to-face encounters, Dawes seeks answers from the Western traditions of philosophy, literature, and psychology, linking a particular moral catastrophe with a problem that is timeless and universal.

THE INTERVIEWS

Dawes's men hardly waver in their terminology. "I think I was evil," one of them says in an interview. "I think the things we did were really evil." Despite scholars' hesitance about the term, evil still holds weight for the men, moral certainty. Dawes gets to the war criminals when they are in their eighties, frail and far removed from the proud young soldiers they were in the wartime photographs many showed him: "Looking at their younger selves, they told me they saw emptiness; they saw demons." His aim is to embody that gaze, to discover the inner workings of atrocity.



While he
was proving
this a priori,
the ship
foundered.

Dawes's project is motivated by several paradoxes: "We are morally obligated to represent trauma, but we are also morally obligated not to"; "Evil is demonic and other; it is also banal and common to us all"; "We are free and self-determining; we are also the products of circumstance." We can only settle into these paradoxes by employing what the poet John Keats called "negative capability: the capacity to experience uncertainty, mystery, and doubt, and to remain open to them, to resist the impulse to reduce everything to

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familiar terms and categories that we can control.”

From the beginning, Dawes is wary of this tendency in history—the temptation to unwittingly reformulate the past into familiar narratives and thus distort it. The fact that the men Dawes interviews are perpetrators, the “victors” of history, raises further questions: “How can they confess truthfully when memory is frail, self-protective, and self-serving, when history itself is tissue with lies?” Specifically, the men often fit their experiences of the war into narratives of self-pity: “I bore the burden of having to do these things.”

Dawes begins by asking the men the obvious questions, but ones that eventually prove unanswerable: “Why was I able to do those sorts of things? Even I don’t understand that...I’m a farming man after all, I thought—a man from a farming family. I thought that afterwards. That’s how you feel in the end, you know. Ah, I’m not a man who would do something like that.” These men committed terrible crimes, yet, in looking back on their lives from old age, clearly “experienced [their] own crimes as trauma.”

The men Dawes interviewed were formerly members of the Chukiren, a group of Japanese antiwar veterans that drew attention to their country’s war crimes and promoted friendship between Japan and China. After the war, the men experienced “something like a religious conversion” in Chinese prisons for war criminals, where they were educated and treated with respect. They renounced their crimes, their former selves, and especially their country. They “embraced blame, but only as part of a context that exceeded them”: they had the bad luck of reaching adulthood in an ultra-nationalistic Japan and were drafted into its army. Forty-five of the 1,100 men were indicted for war crimes. All were eventually freed without charges.

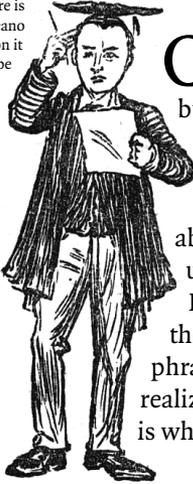
Some of the men offer apologies and seek atonement. Others tell their stories in hopes that such crimes will never be repeated. But, as Dawes begins to observe, “there is always a remainder, something unshareable that endures.” Dawes notices that several men have trouble articulating their thoughts in the first place. In the words of Cathy Caruth, they experience their trauma primarily as “an assault on meaning rather than a kind of meaning.” Dawes recreates

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this difficulty by reproducing the interviews in literal translation from Japanese, complete with stumbles and pauses, and thus often disjointed phrasing.

BANALITY, CONDITIONING, CRUELTY

If there is
a volcano
at Lisbon it
cannot be
elsewhere.



Coming to atrophy from the Western tradition, Dawes invokes Hannah Arendt's portrait of the Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann as "the dominant image or model for helping us think about war criminals today." Arendt wrote in a series of articles in *The New Yorker* on Eichmann's 1961 war crimes trial in Israel that he was, above all, thoughtless—in two senses of the term: "both unthinking of others but also incapable of thinking." He had a certain "remoteness from reality" identifiable through his language: "he spoke in clichés, used stock phrases, seldom varied his words." He simply "never realized what he was doing." As Dawes puts this view, "This is what evil looks like. It is unimaginative, banal."

Three months into the trial, Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram, himself Jewish, began his famous experiments on obedience in order to put Eichmann's repeated claims that he was "only obeying orders" from his "superiors" to the test. Did committing evil actually require malicious intent, as the prosecution seemed to believe, having relentlessly characterized Eichmann as a bloodthirsty anti-Semite? Or could evil action lack evil intention? Milgram devised an experiment in which one subject, deemed the "teacher," was to administer electric shocks to a "learner" (in fact only a voice recording in the next room) whenever the latter incorrectly answered word-game questions, with the shocks increasing in magnitude for each mistake.

Before the experiment, a team of psychiatrists estimated that only one-tenth of one percent of the subjects would fully heed the experimenter's chilling refrain: "the experiment requires that you continue." Horrifically, sixty-two percent of subjects continued to deliver lethal shocks until the bitter end, despite the "learners'" cries of agony and punctuating silence. How did the experts get it so wrong? As Milgram illustrated, they vastly underestimated

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the influence authority has on human action. They put faith in a conception of moral autonomy that proved illusory.

As Milgram mused on his findings, “One can only wonder what government, with its vastly greater authority and prestige, can command of its subjects.” Indeed, nearly all of Dawes’s men invoked the regime’s willingness to take responsibility for their actions, just as Milgram’s experimenter had for the teachers. They also cited codes of obedience: “Your platoon commander’s order was His Majesty the Emperor’s order...If you disobeyed an order on the battlefield, they said you got the death penalty.”

Dawes pushes these responses one step further: in many cases we actually *desire* “to surrender our responsibility for our choices to another, to escape what the existentialist Simone de Beauvoir calls the ‘anguish of freedom.’” He writes, “The mass violence is complex and perplexing, but in most cases it can be traced back to this simple moment, when a man...permitted himself to surrender his agency to another.” “Because I joined the army,” one of the men said, “I lost my humanity.”

From that moment on, Dawes finds a process of gradual conditioning at work, for example in the slaughtering of Chinese civilians in the name of surgical training for Japanese medics: “At first...I felt disgusting—I was timid. The second time...I felt just fine. Around the third time, I took the initiative and planned everything out. One time, completely by my own idea, I trained twenty men this way.” Asked how he felt at the time, the man answered, “It was a feeling like, ‘I did it!’ Yes. I was never really conscious of the wrongness of the fact that I was killing people.”

Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish social theorist Dawes cites, suggests that modernity is “liquid.” The civilizing process has succeeded “in substituting artificial and flexible patterns for natural drives, and hence made possible a scale of inhumanity and destruction which had remained inconceivable as long as natural predispositions guided human action.” In line with Bauman, Dawes quotes Arendt scholar Richard Bernstein: “We may desperately want to believe that there is something about human beings that cannot be transformed,

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something deep about the self, the voice of conscience or sense of responsibility that cannot be obliterated. But after totalitarianism, we can no longer hold onto these beliefs.” Most alarming, Dawes writes, is the suggestion that totalitarian conditions are not even necessary for such a transformation:

Take a group of poorly trained young people, put them in a strange and frightening environment, and give them unclear roles with light or no regulation. Each small hurtful act they commit in the course of making their confused way will make the next act seem more normal. Give them time, and they will eventually shed their moral identities. But not because they are inhuman. They will do it because they are human.

This understanding of evil as fundamentally and universally human has been the dominant one since Arendt. As a shift away from traditional theological explanations of evil, which attribute it to forces outside of us, this position is accompanied by tremendous anxiety. As Neiman writes, “The more responsibility for evil was left to the human, the less worthy the species seemed to take it on.”²

2. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Yet one can just as easily argue the contrary. U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Robert McQuail has shown that, across time and cultures, only around fifteen to twenty men out of a hundred use their weapons at all during any given combat action. “The human resistance to killing other humans is so strong,” he writes, that “in many circumstances soldiers on the battlefield will die before they can overcome it.”

One man recalled how he was trained to kill for the first time: by starting with Chinese civilians tied to trees. “We did not think our first time killing someone would be this scary of an experience. Everyone was trembling with fear. Trembling.” After missing with his bayonet, he says, “I couldn’t do it even once. And, most guys, everybody, they couldn’t stick them with their bayonets.” Cruelty, Dawes learned, must be conditioned. First, “you must methodically humiliate the victims until they seem like they deserve humiliation.” But such acts of cruelty “are not accidents or mistakes or things that somehow get out of hand. They are deliberate parts of the training process.”

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As Dawes concludes, “To make people like this, regimes must exploit the normal human impulses to obedience and conformity—the very same impulses that can generate group altruism and morality—but instead orient them toward violence.” And this reorientation is easier than usual in the strange, foreign circumstances of war; “separated from all the reference groups we have grown to rely upon for moral judgment...there are no reality checks.”

UNDERSTANDING EVIL

Though it appears in many different forms throughout *Evil Men*, Dawes’s underlying question is whether evil is better analyzed and explained or left to its own, better left unique and narrow or universalized to us all.

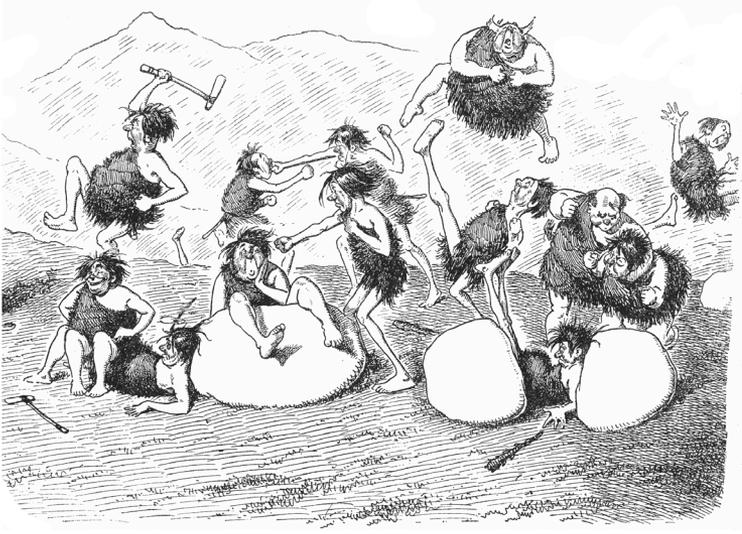
Dawes is clearly ambivalent: “We must and we must not demonize [perpetrators]. We must not demonize them because to demonize is to accept a stance that shares features with the demonic: namely, a dismissal of the other’s full humanity.” Demonizing allegedly evil groups can easily devolve into hate—and what we might call evil in return. Moreover, viewing the men as “demons” not only precludes the possibility of their reconciliation; it also precludes prevention, for how does one educate a monster? A further risk: “If we allow ourselves to imagine that evil is somehow extraordinary, somehow beyond the human, then we can never identify and address the very ordinary situational and organizational features that regularly produce it.”

However, Dawes is also open to the opposing idea, that “when we lose our sense of the otherness of evil, we also lose our hate—and this is a loss...To reject is to clarify and solidify one’s sense of self and one’s moral commitment.” As Dawes acknowledges, the hatred evil calls out in us can, in a way, energize our sense of moral purpose.



Whether
he be, or
he be not,
I want
bread.

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“Nothing in our time has dramatized the risks of demystifying evil more furiously than the controversy surrounding Hannah Arendt’s ‘banality of evil’ thesis,” Dawes writes. “The trouble with Eichmann,” in Arendt’s words, “was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly, terrifyingly normal.”

But “in helping us to understand Eichmann as somebody like us,” Dawes writes, voicing Arendt’s critics, “Arendt had taken something from us.” As Dawes words an objection made by Saul Bellow, “the effort to understand assaults on our moral world can feel like an assault on our moral world.” Dawes entertains these views—which, as he admits, are only feelings—too sympathetically. Arendt exhibited courage in denying us the comfort of moral refuge, however unsettling that may be. But Bellow was right that she took something from us: the fixed status of any one group as “the good guys.”

Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo demonstrated the stakes of Arendt’s argument in his famous 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment, in which a group of students took up the roles of prisoners and guards in a mock prison in the basement of Stanford’s psychology building.

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Mere hours into the experiment, the guards, intoxicated with their power, began subjecting prisoners to terrible conditions and making them perform humiliating acts. After just four days, Zimbardo shut down the experiment out of fear for the students' safety.

As one guard reflected later, "I realized then that I was as much a prisoner as they were. I was just a reaction to their feelings...but we guards had the illusion of freedom. I realized later that we were all slaves to something in this environment." Zimbardo showed, in Dawes's words, that "we are more likely to engage in reckless behavior when we enter a state of 'deindividuation'—that is, a state in which a person loses sense of herself as a separate individual."

Zimbardo concluded from the experiment that the prison situation alone was a *sufficient condition* to produce aberrant, anti-social behavior. That is an astonishing and disturbing conclusion. Milgram's particular enemy was authoritarianism, so as long as we empowered individuals, there was hope for retaining moral control. But Zimbardo radically expanded our understanding as to which conditions foster evil, such that they could be anywhere, and are still present today. He thus identified the potential for evil in each of us. As Dawes puts it, "you're not so much who you are as where you are."

EVIL AND INTENTION

One man reports having felt stripped of autonomy, "like a robot or a slave." "The individual personality was completely killed," he said, such that the soldier became "a person without ideas—without thoughts—that your body would do in a flash what you're told...the body trained by this recruit training would simply jump over one's reason—and then you commit the crime." The man's choice of words is remarkable: one's obedient body *jumping over* the constraints of one's reason. Such powerful psychological, near-physiological conditioning raises major problems for any conception of ethics that assumes a significant degree of freedom of choice.

Since Kant and his notion of "radical evil," philosophers have largely agreed that an act must be the product of a conscious decision in order to be morally evaluated. As Neiman puts it: "Modern evil

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3. Neiman, p. 268. is the product of will.”³ Though we tend to assume this today, it is quite a development in the history of ideas. Just think of Plato, for whom wrong could only occur if one lacked knowledge of what was right; one could not intend to do evil. Kant held that evil could not be accounted for merely by an innate predisposition like original sin (as Rousseau held) or the idea that a benevolent God had willed it so (as Leibniz held). Kant is clear: “the human being alone is its author.”⁴
4. Immanuel Kant, “Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason,” *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Wood and Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 71. But who is to say whether the Japanese men freely willed their actions? Could they have conceivably done otherwise? In most cases, we cannot say. One of the men had actually studied Kant’s ethics before the war. He claimed that he and the other educated men tried to resist but eventually gave in. “If you really thought seriously about the contradictions of daily life, you would have a nervous breakdown.” As Jewish thinker Gillian Rose described the breakdown of Kantian ethics: in modernity “it is possible to mean well, to be caring and kind, loving one’s neighbor as oneself, yet to be complicit in the corruption and violence of social institutions.”⁵ As Dawes quotes Arendt, “The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good.”
5. Gillian Rose, “The Future of Auschwitz,” *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 35. A Chinese instructor tells the men that the Chinese people understand that the Japanese were forced into their positions by their state, but nevertheless hold them accountable: “You were the hand; you all *did* these things.” Similarly for Arendt, despite its banality, Eichmann’s evil was still evil. “Even if eighty million Germans had done as you did,” she wrote, “this would not have been an excuse for you.”⁶ Her moral conclusion does not waver. Arendt ends her book abruptly, addressing Eichmann: “You must hang.”⁷ And he ultimately does, convicted of crimes against the Jewish people.
6. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963; New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 278.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

The way forward, the instructor tells the men, is to confess their crimes in writing, and most of them did. In the process of communal confession, one man realizes from another’s testimony that the blood samples he routinely extracted from Chinese civilians who had died of bacterial infections were in fact used to infect others in so-called germ warfare (which he had initially denied involvement in). The man’s confession seems sincere: “Forgive me. I learned that I too was used in germ warfare. Please forgive me,” he wrote.

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What are we to make of this passive construction, being “used”? The man did not possess the very concept of germ warfare. He had no idea what the consequences of his actions were; he simply passed the blood along to the next cog in the system. This testimony typifies the moral ambiguity Dawes encountered in each interview. Sitting before a man who did not understand what he was doing, who had no intention of committing evil, how could Dawes call him an evil man? Knowing what that man had done, how could he not?

THE ETHICS OF NARRATIVE, OR, WALKING ON EGGHELLS

The above are some of the most important questions about human life that we can ask, and *Evil Men* rightly brings them to the fore. But somewhere in the course of the book they are abandoned, as Dawes gets stuck in the webs of what I’ll call the ethics of narrative.

Unlike the bold thinkers he cites—Arendt and Bauman, Milgram and Zimbardo—Dawes is afraid to make a statement, to lay down even so much as a definition of evil, much less a moral conclusion on it. It almost comes off as scholarly resignation: “I began to believe that the work of collecting perpetrator testimony requires moral myopia, perhaps even arrogance. To me, there seemed to be no other way to make it through the thicket of questions the work poses.”

Evils like the ones Dawes recorded call for intellectual courage. In particular, the idea of serving as a witness to the Chukirens’ experiences is especially compelling, for the subject of Japanese war crimes is still suppressed in Japan and omitted from state-approved textbooks. The pacifist veterans hold a minority view of history, so spreading their message would help to voice an unpopular truth.

But Dawes isn’t so sure of this. He comes to think that that emotional investment in traumatic narratives hogs our sympathy from real people by making us feel morally off the hook, such that “the feeling of suffering becomes more important than actions against suffering.”

Dawes also worries that, once represented, “atrocities get turned

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into something else, something lesser.” But such hesitation about representing trauma has its critics, notably Dominick LaCapra, who “warns that the impulse toward ‘sacrilization’ is also an impulse toward ‘silent awe.’” Rather, LaCapra suggests a process of “working through the past,” which permits genuine inquiry into history without allowing that one can escape the past’s constraints.

Dawes begins to think of the men as performers, eager to talk in order “to make comprehensible stories out of their incomprehensible evils.” He further worries that recording the perpetrators’ confessions may be construed as “a silent promise of forgiveness, a forgiveness you have no right to bestow or deny.”

But Dawes’s actual encounters with the men are so genuinely positive that it’s hard for these theoretical constraints to hold him back. “I must confess that I found myself liking these sweet old men,” he admits. He acknowledges his cliché impression of one ninety-year-old man: “I was surprised he was so normal, so harmless.”

We experience Dawes’s interactions as diary entries from his trip to Japan: “Now I am a tourist at a shrine, now I am asking a dying man to tell me how he learned to torture...I don’t understand how to put these things next to each other.” Dawes tackled this overwhelming deluge of the personal “in the way most professors process new things: I



What a
strange
genealogy!

controlled it by trying to make it scholarly.” But he always fails at some level. He goes so far as to question the very idea of his book: “What does it mean for me to tell you these stories, and for you to listen to them?” In other words, why read about evil men and their crimes in the first place?

Is it really to better understand genocide and prevent future crimes, or is part of it not also morbid fascination? Attention to such questions marks the book as self-aware, but it barely begins to answer them. It looks but does not touch; it is history walking on eggshells.

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And Dawes admits to as much. At a talk he gave on his project, a friend of his “teased me afterward, saying I spent almost all my time apologizing for what I was doing...And then, in what approached neurotic comedy, I spent time apologizing for apologizing.” In its sensitivity to the ethical pitfalls of narrative, *Evil Men* falls short of an answer to its initial question of the importance of the concept of evil and what we should do with it. Luckily, one is waiting in its epigraph.

HERBERT, LEVINAS, AND HISTORY

Teachers in our high schools pound it into us that “historia” is “magistra vitae.” But when history crashed down upon us in all its brutal glory, I understood, in the very real glow of the flames above my home city, that she was a strange teacher. She gave to the people who consciously survived her, and to all who followed her, more material for thought than all the old chronicles put together. A dense and dark material. It will require the work of many consciences to shed light upon it.

— Zbigniew Herbert, “Why the Classics?”

Though Dawes never discusses *Evil Men*’s epigraph, it says a great deal about his work’s intentions and acknowledged limitations. One of the great Polish writers of the twentieth century, Zbigniew Herbert fled his native Lwów as the Soviets invaded in the spring of 1944, for Kraków, where he studied philosophy at the Jagiellonian University. This past summer, I studied Polish history and literature at Herbert’s alma mater, and came to see that the Polish literary mentality is absolutely suffused with history. To give you a sense of the catastrophe Poles of Herbert’s generation lived through, nearly one in five people living in Poland in 1939 were dead by the end of the war, and half were displaced. Nearly all of Poland’s major cities lay in ruins. This was on top of two centuries of foreign occupation, leading the historian Norman Davies to dub Poland “God’s Playground.” All literature is influenced in some way by its author’s particular history, but in Polish literature, history moves the author’s pen.

In teaching me this history, my Polish professors did not want me to feel sadness, or glean packaged lessons, or make analyses that would allow me to rest assured on socio-political explanations of

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what happened and what is to come. They wanted me to engage with history as such, and to understand how quickly it overwhelms and slows down moral judgment, thus stalling the cheap, hasty moral conclusions Americans are taught in seventh-grade history.

In “Why the Classics?” Herbert condemned the despair, apathy, and guilt that preoccupied the writings of so many authors of his generation who had lived through Europe’s brutal twentieth century: “We cannot allow ourselves to stop believing that we can capture this world in words, that we can even be fair to it.”⁸ He goes on: “I don’t turn to history to gain from it a facile lesson of hope, I do it to confront my experience with that of others, to win for myself something I would like to call universal pity, and also responsibility, a feeling of responsibility for the condition of people’s consciences.”

Though Dawes achieves these by his book’s end, he is unable to recognize them as the fruits of an ethical overcoming of history in the way that Herbert, given his past, has. We want to know why our history is so marred by atrocity, and where that puts us. But, in Herbert’s words, making sense of that “dense and dark material” requires not analytical work, but the work of many “consciences.”

Emmanuel Levinas, a Lithuanian-born Jewish philosopher who lived out the war and the Holocaust in prisoner-of-war camps in France and Germany, wrote in his essay, “The Meaning of History”: “Crimes are paid for in history, but one is wrong to expect justice from history...The great moments in history offer no criteria to judgment. They are judged.”⁹ To understand the meaning of history is to be struck by its illogic and realize that it bears within it none of the requisite tools for moral judgment. In considering history, we must always supply these judgments from without.

Levinas is arguing here against the Hegelian notion of dialectical progress in history, which equates history with truth and justifies individual suffering as a means to the fulfilment of history’s end. What Hegel calls the “Absolute Spirit of history” grasps and sublates all objects before it, including the evils of history, into useful, redeeming knowledge. History can thus be mastered, undone, and forgotten. “The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind.”¹⁰

8. Zbigniew Herbert, “Why the Classics?” in *The Poetry of Survival: Post-War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (1967; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), p. 332.

9. Emmanuel Levinas, “The Meaning of History,” *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Séan Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 227.

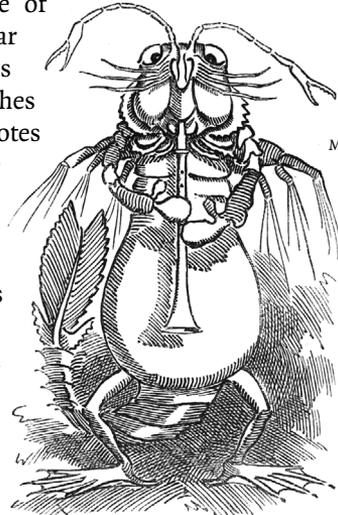
10. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 407.

In contrast to this totalizing system, Levinas writes in his essay “Useless Suffering” that “suffering is...rejection itself: a backwards consciousness, ‘operating’ not as ‘grasp’ but as ‘revulsion.’”¹¹ In refusing the dialectical justification of suffering, Levinas makes way for an encounter with history that preserves each suffering’s particular wounds and records its scars. He concludes that non-useless suffering is suffering oneself for another’s suffering, “which is no longer suffering ‘for nothing’ and straightaway has a meaning.”

11. Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” trans. Richard A. Cohen, *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 163.

Whether brought on by the destruction of one’s hometown, as in Herbert’s case, or compelled by curiosity, as in mine, we must apply our consciences to history despite the fact that, or perhaps even because, we know all along that we will not prevail over it—that amidst its dense, dark layers there is no code waiting to be cracked. In approaching history as Herbert does, knowing our small, impossible role in shedding light upon it, we are granted the ethical freedom to immerse ourselves in it—to trace its questions all the way back to their origins and come to terms with its implications for our own lives. Only after working through the suffering history contains do we find ourselves in a position to reject history’s totalizing, self-justifying logic, to judge it as we must, to call it evil.

Emotional and confused, Dawes’s personal confrontation with atrocity proves too overwhelming to fit such a framework. By the end of his book, we are still unsure of what is at stake for us in these particular atrocities, and the domain of evil remains uncharted territory. What distinguishes Dawes from the great thinkers he quotes is that the latter, precisely in response to the disturbing conclusions of their work, mustered the courage to resist despair in those moments when it seemed about to overtake them. As Herbert writes, “Just as irony is not the same thing as cynicism...so that which seems pessimistic may be a muffled call for goodness, a call to open our consciences, to increase goodness.”¹²



My heart is almost closed to hope.

12. Herbert, p. 163.

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And in narrativizing suffering there is hope for Levinasian empathy. While studies show that people presented with information dissonant with their current understanding tend to reject it, Dawes notes that “stories, by contrast, can short-circuit the mechanisms of cognitive consistency and make us have *experiences*, make us interiorize rather than simply consider the identities of others.”

In her writings on the Eichmann trial, Arendt relays the case of Propst Grüber, a German clergyman who during the war neglected to attempt to dissuade Eichmann from his crimes. Grüber justified his behavior: “deeds are more effective than words.” But Arendt insists that “it had perhaps been the duty of a clergyman to test the ‘uselessness of words.’” Arendt’s challenge, that of protesting one’s history in the making, is one the world demands of us. Used against forces of evil, she concluded, “‘mere words’ would have *been* deeds.”

