

The Good Response to Evil: Envisioning a Way Forward after the Election
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If history can be broken into chapters, we began a new one exactly one month ago today. The result of the election and the challenges of this new and seemingly unrecognizable era have caused me to reflect on the last great break in our history, which we could say began on September 11, 2001.

Like many people of my generation who had never experienced something so extreme, I began thinking about evil as a result of the events of that day. In fact, our response to evil became the moral basis for U.S. foreign policy throughout the last chapter of our history. As we all remember, President Bush used the term “axis of evil” in his [2002 State of the Union address](#) to describe a group of three countries that share little in common other than a threatening stance to American security: North Korea, Iran, and Iraq. Here is what he said:

States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.

I remember the instinctual sense of dread I felt when I heard the word “evil.” Upon hearing the President of the United States and Commander-in-Chief of the most powerful military force ever assembled in human history declare that there is evil in the world, it feels difficult to resist his call for action.

As I would later learn, Western intellectual and religious history has hard-wired us with an instinctual understanding that, in the presence of evil, “the price of indifference would be catastrophic,” as President Bush put it.

The instinct to respond to evil was strong enough to rally this and 47 other countries around a war that is yet to be concluded. But the lesson to be learned from the historical moment of the Iraq War is not that engagement with evil necessarily leads to violence; rather, our conclusion should be that the call to respond to perceived evil in the world is highly motivational and effective—and can be harnessed for the good. In this unprecedented moment following the election as we enter a new and frightening chapter of our history, our engagement with evil can foster unity and moral focus that will bring about real and lasting change to heal our society and lay the foundations for a new movement of non-violent resistance against injustice, state-sponsored violence, and social division. In short, one

powerful cure for the fears that many of us have today is a robust and wise engagement with evil.

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My interest in evil led me to the work of Paul Ricoeur. While not much of a household name in the English-speaking world, Ricoeur is well-known in France as one of the great intellectuals of the 20th century whose philosophical work combined a searing scholarly rigor with an ultimate concern for the mechanisms of genuine human encounter.

At a time like this, I believe it is important to learn from those who have truly seen evil, and Ricoeur's life and thought were shaped by the most tragic events of the last 100 years. Born to Protestant parents in heavily Roman Catholic France in 1913, his mother died soon after his birth, and his father was killed two years later in the First World War. His budding work as a philosopher was interrupted when he was drafted to serve in the French army in 1939. He was captured in the German occupation of France the following year and lived until 1945 as a prisoner of war. After the war, his reputation as an emerging major philosopher led to a position as administrator at the University of Nanterre just outside Paris in 1965. Although Ricoeur was drawn to Nanterre as an institution of educational reform, he himself the object of personal attack in the student uprising of 1968 by the same students for whom he had advocated. This experience left an indelible wound and spurred his intellectual work on reconciliation in the context of action. Seeing no lasting role for himself in his homeland, Ricoeur took a position at the University of Chicago divinity school, which he held from 1970 to 1985. He died in 2005.

Understandably from his personal experience, Ricoeur took an interest in the topic of evil at the beginning of his academic career. In 1960, he published *The Symbolism of Evil*, which, broadly speaking, forms the methodology of his approach to evil for the rest of his intellectual life. In this volume, Ricoeur sets out a theory of myth and symbol, both of which are the vehicles through which we conceive of evil. Myth is a grand narrative in which all people can participate. Myths are not false; rather they express experienced truths about subjects that cannot be explained through reason alone. Myths contain symbols, which mediate our lived experience with that which is beyond us. Ricoeur concludes *The Symbolism of Evil* with the aphorism: the symbol gives rise to thought. "This sentence," he writes, "says two things: the symbol gives, but what it gives is occasion for thought, something to think about." (*S of E*, 348) For Ricoeur, thought on evil does not begin with thought, it begins with the symbol. This is the reason why Ricoeur never gives a definition of evil—rather, he encourages us to look at the symbols of evil contained in our myths and accept from them the gift of thought.

I see confirmation of Ricoeur's theory in our recent history. The "axis of evil" speech articulated the myth of how evil entered our national life. You could say the myth went like this: from within a consortium of inherently evil and far-away nations, one

conspired to send terrorists to attack the good of the United States and all Western societies. The nation that aided the terrorists is the evil opposite of the good of our country, and therefore repeated attacks are imminent until the source or home of evil is destroyed. The most powerful symbols of this myth were terrorism and the menace of the axis (and especially Iraq,) both of which gave rise to much thought and policy about our experience of evil. The creation of this myth was cathartic for us, as myths are. It helped us collectively to make sense of the irrational presence of the unexpected entrance of evil into our lives. It also gave us a clear course of action: to eradicate the source of the evil. This myth, far from being untrue, was the mythical truth that structured American foreign policy for years. This myth created the reality of the death of almost 4,000 American troops and the deaths of an [estimated 460,000 Iraqi soldiers and civilians](#).

If there is a lesson to be learned for us today from this recent history, it is that the myths and symbols of evil have the power to determine the course of world history. They arise spontaneously and are outside the control of any one person. Myths and symbols of evil persist, and their gift is the gift of thought. The task, then, is to interpret them correctly for our own time. We must now look at the myths and symbols of evil that have arisen through and as a result of this election.

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Even as the myths encompassing this election are forming, the first step in this process is to frame the question properly. At the dedication of the [Fonds Ricoeur](#) in 2010, French President Nicolas Sarkozy made a philosophical statement of which Ricoeur himself would be proud and that speaks to our present moment. He said, "[In asking the question, one already draws the scope of the challenge we face personally and collectively and the part that can be yours at the crossroads of all knowledge that concerns humanity most directly and, I would say, most intimately. It is a daunting task.](#)" (my translation). This Ricoeurian thought can form the beginning of our work today. In other words, as we envision a way forward after the Election of 2016, the step that will determine the ultimate effectiveness of the work we will do as individuals and as a society in the years to come is to frame the question properly.

Ricoeur identified the problem of framing the question properly with respect to evil in a 1988 essay called "[The Scandal of Evil.](#)" He looks at one of the classical questions about evil, *unde malum?*, or, from where does evil come?, and asserts that this is the wrong question to ask. When we demand to know the origin of evil, we are demanding to find a source, and once our demand has been fulfilled, we will have a moral obligation to destroy that source in order to prevent the future suffering it will cause. And yet, as thinkers from Augustine to Emmanuel Kant have argued convincingly, knowledge of the origin of evil is beyond the limits of reason. Ricoeur points to the first 12 chapters of the Book of Genesis as an example of a myth of the entrance of evil into the world that never asks from where the evil came. God creates the world and human beings, the serpent appears from seemingly

nowhere bearing evil that causes great suffering, and yet the origin of that evil is never questioned. Even the central prayer of the Christian tradition avoids speculating on the origin of evil and simply asks God to deliver us from it. Thus, is it always a speculative mistake to ask about the source of evil, since the answer is beyond our capacity to know. But more than that, whatever answer we decide (incorrectly) to be true will become the object of violence as we attempt to destroy it.

Seen in this Ricoeurian light, the true mistake of the last chapter in our history—the post-9/11 chapter—was that we framed the question poorly. We asked, from where is this evil?—or at the least, we accepted an answer to this question as the basis for our understanding. We became fixated on what we thought was the source of evil and assumed that if we destroyed that source, the evil will be vanquished, and we will restore good to our land. And yet, the symbols of evil directly related to that conflict persist in the forms of terrorism, violent regimes, and intractable war—this last being a symbol of our own creation.

We must avoid at all costs the same mistake as we begin to frame the question in response to evil now. It is a fool's errand to ask, *unde malum*, because the answers will not only be false, they will lead us down a false path, the end of which is an unending cycle of violence and retribution. False answers would include, but not be limited to:

Donald Trump is evil.

Trump voters are evil.

The Republican Party is evil.

Steven Bannon is evil.

There is an axis of evil parties that have taken control of the country.

These lazy and misguided answers to a poorly-framed question will invariably cause people of good will to misdirect their precious energies in the best case scenario, and in the worst, will accelerate the descent into chaos and violence. These are the answers that lead to pitchforks and torches, which just lead to more and bigger pitchforks and torches. If you are hearing these answers through a left-leaning political filter and are tempted by them, just listen to the following statements, all of which are answers to the same question, from where does evil come?

[Hillary Clinton is running an evil pedophile sex ring out of a pizza parlor in Washington.](#)

[Islam is not a true religion but rather a vicious cancer inhabiting the bodies of 1.7 billion people.](#)

[Hillary Clinton meets in secret with international banks to plan the destruction of global sovereignty in order to enrich these global interest powers, her special interest friends, and donors.](#)

All three statements point to a source of evil, and like the “axis of evil,” lead one to believe that “the price of indifference would be catastrophic.” Of course, all three statements were made by prominent figures in the new government—the first by Michael G. Flynn, who resigned this week from the transition team, the second by Michael T. Flynn, who will become the National Security Advisor, and the last by the president-elect himself. The first has already led to violence; the second two are sure to stimulate even greater acts of violence by those who believe them to be answers to the poorly-framed question, from where does this evil come.

As chillingly dangerous as these misguided thoughts are, Ricoeur teaches us that the response to a poorly framed question cannot be another poorly framed question. So if it is wrong to ask from where evil comes, what is the right question to ask?

Ricoeur says that the question to replace *unde malum*, is *unde malum faciamus*. This is a concern not for evil in and of itself, which cannot be seen, but for the doing of evil, which can. According to Ricoeur, this shift “tips the whole problem of evil over into the sphere of action, of the will, of free will.” (Evil, 46). While this may sound like a subtle distinction, it depends on an important observation: that every evil perpetrated is also an evil suffered. Now, suddenly, an entirely new pathway opens up. We are no longer looking for a solution to evil, but for a response. What will be our response to the *doing* of evil? How can we respond not to evil perpetrated, but to evil *suffered*? These are the proper questions to ask, because they are the only questions that will yield an effective and sustainable answer.

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Yet again, history can be our confirmation that Ricoeur is right. When you think of the great movements of non-violent resistance that have shaped our world for the better, all of them targeted their efforts at evil deeds and not a perceived source of evil. As the leader of the Indian National Congress, Gandhi led efforts to alleviate poverty, expand the rights of women and religious minorities, and overthrow colonial rule. In doing so, he refused to villainize individuals, but rather focused on repairing the evils themselves. Dr. King, who was greatly influenced by Gandhi, did the same in the American civil rights movement. The same was true of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. These movements were successful precisely because they refused to employ the same lazy thinking as their opponents. They understood that while the players may change, the underlying evildoings would persist until they had been driven away. They saw evil in deeds and systems and sought to overcome action through action rather than targeting a perceived source of evil, and in doing so, they brought about good.

So let’s ask the question: from where is evil being done or where do we suspect it will be done, and what will be our response? There is a list of evil doings that have already occurred, seem imminent, or have been hinted at. It is this list that causes us so much concern—Ricoeur bids us to follow them and not to speculate from where

the evil behind them may lay. Many of us in this room have already experienced these deeds or are sensitive to their beginning.

Acts of racial discrimination and hatred.

Acts of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

Intimidation of immigrants or people perceived to be immigrants.

Intimidation of LGBT people, which I personally experienced days after the election in a painful way I never had before.

Scapegoating of political opponents.

Corruption in government practices.

Intentional obscuring of facts.

Selection of officials whose express intent is to destroy the natural environment.

And most frightening to me, a seeming lack of regard for the peaceful order of the world and especially for the doctrines that have prevented nuclear war.

The list goes on. But notice what the list is: it's a list of acts. Not a list of people, political candidates, ideologies, or parties. Those are not acts. Likewise, this is a list of evils suffered or potentially suffered, not evils perpetrated. We can respond to acts with action.

Now see what possibilities this kind of list unlocks. My list in part reflects the perspective of someone looking at the world from a thriving urban setting and with a leftist bent. But that doesn't mean it's a closed list. I could easily add evils I don't usually see or experience, but that someone else probably does.

Take, for one, the scourge of the opioid addiction epidemic. A [study released two weeks ago](#) showed a direct correlation between counties with the highest rates of addiction and counties that voted more heavily for Donald Trump than expected. And yet few opponents of Mr. Trump would ever consider the prescription pill and heroin crisis in those places or anywhere else to be anything but a horrible evil. What if those of us unaffected by this evil were to band together to demand justice for its victims? What if we organized and reached out in a profound act of love to touch the wounds of this tragedy? Would this act of healing not drive away the dark shadows covering us all far more effectively than righteous indignation aimed at one particular person or group of people?

Here, we may be tempted to search for a definition of an evil act. But Ricoeur does not offer a definition of evil. He says simply, "Evil is that which is but should not be, but we cannot say what it is." ("Scandale," 62, my translation.) Certainly, addiction, nuclear war, environmental catastrophe, political violence, and hatred of any kind are all things that should not be. And a myth that incorporated the symbols of all these evils and more would not only be a healing point of catharsis, but a narrative around which all reasonable people could rally for the sake of finding a way forward.

I would like to end with a few thoughts on Ricoeur's own conclusion to his book *Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology*, published in 2004, just before the end of his life. He writes, "In conclusion, I want to emphasize that the problem of evil is not just a speculative problem: it calls for a convergence between thought, action (in the moral and political sense) and a spiritual transformation of one's feelings" (*Evil*, 64). Here Ricoeur gives us the three main elements of our response to evil.

First: thought. Now is a time to think wisely and deeply. We do not have the luxury to act before thinking, because thoughtless action will certainly lead to ruin. For Ricoeur, evil exists in an aporia, which is a gap or a nothingness. Thought fills that gap and delivers us from evil.

We can already see the importance of good thought because it is under assault. The obfuscation of truth with lies we have seen could be followed up by a systematic dismantling of thought. For those of you with teaching vocations and especially teachers in public schools and universities—you are on the front lines of this struggle, and we are all depending on you. Please do not give up.

Remember that the assault on thought is not confined to any one political ideology. When thought is subjugated to the needs of partisans, it is no longer free, but has been incorporated into the machine of the state or of revolutionaries, who will continue its imprisonment once in power.

Second: action, as Ricoeur says, in the moral and political sense. Action to heal any of the evil deeds discussed earlier will face resistance. This resistance can come in two forms: first, repression and apathy. Just yesterday, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives in my home state of Michigan [passed a bill](#) mandating punishment for participants in public demonstrations. Our constitutional rights to assembly must be exercised, or else we may lose them. The same goes for voting and other fundamental political acts, the repression of which will most likely accelerate. Over time, the constant struggle against the headwinds facing meaningful action grinds down even the most dedicated, leading to apathy. This is yet another reason to organize into groups for mutual support and division of labor. The second form of resistance, however, is the temptation to over-action or wrong action. Frustration and anger can easily lead to violence in the name of righteousness, but this form of action simply feeds the symbols of evil and is ultimately counterproductive.

The third and final component of Ricoeur's call for response to evil is what he calls "the spiritual transformation of one's feelings." This election has activated feelings the depth of which many of us never even knew we had. The "spiritualization" of these feelings means incorporating them into a larger web of meaning, placing them in the context of human experience beyond our own. I will never forget how, on the Sunday following the election, there were audible gasps in our congregation as the Jesus' words in Gospel assigned for the day was read aloud: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great

signs from heaven: (Luke 21-10-11). People felt that these words from ancient times expressed our current moment. There is something invaluable in this experience. It is anchoring; it fosters unbreakable bonds of community, and it lifts up the broken hearted even in the most difficult of times.

Look at how the symbols of evil feed on unspiritualized feeling. We have been promised that raw feeling will be translated into public policy. We have seen already how unexamined and unmediated feelings of need for personal validate can lead a president-elect to shred decades of meticulous diplomacy by accepting a congratulatory phone call.

The same raw feeling and emotion can take hold of any person or group of people, and without Ricoeur's concept of spiritualization, this feeling can become unwitting fuel for the symbols of evil. The surest way to take your feelings and transform them into tools in the struggle against evil is to place them in the context of spirit.

Of course, I am biased in this respect. But I have determined that this is not the time to be meek, so let me say: the fate of the world will be determined by our determination to tend to our souls. Now is the time to pray. Now is the time to return to the spiritual tradition of your youth, or if you cannot, to find one where you feel comfortable. Now is the time to enter a spiritual practice with those who are willing to support and love you no matter what. Every successful nonviolent resistance movement was spiritual a spiritual movement, and the leaders of each of these movements was a spiritual leader. History, logic, and the reality of evil are all calling us to the life of the spirit. May that Spirit be with you now and in the days to come.

Thank you.