The God of Reason:
The Enlightenment Revolution
And the Justification of Violence

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The paradox of the Twentieth Century is the paradox of the nuclear bomb. The century of unprecedented achievement and progress in terms of technology was the most violent in our recorded memory. Yet we remain surprisingly optimistic; the human spirit seems resilient as ever, and we are far more willing to accept the risk of violence than give up our technology and the advances which human reason has attained. The monsters in our fairy tales are not fire-breathing dragons bringing violence, but rather such impersonal entities that seek to withhold our freedom as Big Brother of Orwell’s 1984, the robots of Asimov’s I, Robot, or the computer programs in The Matrix. Human beings remain unsatisfied with the Leviathan’s answer to violence and inequity, and we seek to find our own way to live peaceably with one another without sacrificing the freedoms we hold dear. This is not the place for a serious study of folklore, but one wonders whether the dragon has disappeared from our stories because today the danger comes not from without, but from within our society and within ourselves. The dragon, then, has not disappeared, but resides, with the unseen lethal power of a dormant volcano, in the risky bonds of human community.

For what leads the human family to such internal strife? The answer to this question remains as varied perhaps as its instances, but if we do ask, “What allows for the human person to strike at his brother or sister?,” we find a commonality that offers itself as wisdom. And that answer is this: that the human person is allowed to attack brother and sister, not for lack of some external constraint as Hobbes would have it, but for a failure to perceive brother and sister as such. As much wisdom as can be found in the
dictum, Love Thy Neighbor, so much evil is also possible when our human brother or sister is not our neighbor. The lurid tale of systematic violence refutes the child’s rhyme which fears “sticks and stones” above “words.” “Christians,” “Infidels,” “Jews,” “Puritans,” “Cockroaches,” “aliens,” and the long list of labels used to dehumanize certain groups of people and relegate them to the realm of Other manifest not only the power of words, but also the necessity of dehumanization as a prerequisite for violence. I may not kill my brother or sister, but I may kill the Other, the monster, the mearcstapa,¹ and indeed I perhaps have to duty to do so in order to protect the community. And because of the availability of technological power, the human person today has a duty to himself and to the community to safeguard all his brothers and sisters, and to stamp out any attempts to dehumanize any people through language, for this is one of the steps to systematic violence.²

But if we both fear constraints on our freedom and have the potential to destroy life when we are unconstrained, to what utopia do we look forward with such optimism? That is, why should we speak of clean energy, of medical cure, and of economic equality in the face of such obvious tendencies toward destructive energy, biological warfare, and improper use of power? Perhaps we believe in this possibility because we do have on a micro-level this kind of cooperative work for the common good in families, associations, and small communities. Then our question is that faced by Hobbes, Montesquieu, Locke, Rousseau, Mill, and the other thinkers who sought to discover and articulate a legitimation for government of peoples. How can the social contract both protect the

¹ Old English word used to describe Grendel in Beowulf. The word connotes walking the borders between the community and the realm of the Other. Arnold, Thomas, trans. Beowulf (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1876), line 103.
² Stanton, Gregory. “The 8 Stages of Genocide,” Genocide Watch,
integrity of the person and the safety of the community? On the one extreme, a monarchy needs but one man to fail in respect for human life and Mill’s “tyranny of the ” will ensue, while on the other extreme, majority rule similarly allows for unjust laws to be instated in the “tyranny of the ”. The apparent middle way, that of constitutional democracy (democracy plus rules) seems to offer an answer, but here again, who shall write the constitution and upon what principles and anthropology shall it be written? For in the constitutional democracy, the question must be “Is this action or measure constitutional?” or “Is it in keeping with the thought of the Founding Fathers?” Even the constitutions must have (if we may be permitted to give it a title) the Law of Human Dignity - what Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the moral law or the law of God” - expressly written into the man-made code.

We must emphatically defend this moral law in the public square and in every other forum if we will have any hope for the future. However, such a position demands justification in this post-Enlightenment epoch, when the “sacred” and the “truth” have been identified with the “factual” and the “scientifically observable.” For the Law of Human Dignity necessarily rests upon a religious assumption, and the scientific method will brook none but the barest of epistemological assumptions about our sensory perceptions. Unfortunately, sensory perceptions of themselves yield only fact, not meaning or truth, and the universe is therein reduced to mere activity. Yet the human person demands meaning; the idea of nihilism jars our very core, nor does our experience of meaning within our relationships allow us to accept true nihilism. Nearly every philosophy and religious worldview recognizes this, and even searches for and attempts to define it. We are not chiefly concerned with nihilism, however, for if Nietzsche was

correct and “God is dead,” the human community is reduced to a Hobbesean State of Nature or a hedonistic frenzy; such results are impossible due to the human desire for meaning, but also they do not yield systematic violence, which is only possible in a “system” which accepts meaning of some form or another. What we are concerned with is the intellectual malaise that is too complacent to challenge its own logic: the fantasy that the scientific reductionism can in fact give meaning and support the Law of Human Dignity. Again, this reductionist paradigm can only support such a law by either assuming a God (for there to be a “law of God”) or the law itself (simply accepting human dignity as an unassailable truth). But the fantasy of meaning offered by scientific reductionism claims human dignity without such an assumption. The reductionist upholds declarations of human rights on a certain level, but never admits that those rights are assumed, and in fact believes that the rights are derived from pure rational inquiry. If only the reductionist would admit the assumption and defend it, or if not admit, at least uphold it in constancy, there would be no reason for concern. But the reductionist, believing the Law of Human Dignity to be derived from scientific reason, is particularly vulnerable to rational offers of utopia which involve as a means subordinating human dignity to achieve the utopian end. Camus warned us, “[A]s soon as crime reasons about itself, it multiplies like reason itself and assumes all the aspects of the syllogism.”

This syllogism of crime is the systematic violence which is part of the paradox of the Twentieth Century. No violence is desirable, but the violence of the bully is not as frightening in aspect as systematic violence because one is never deceived into perceiving the bully as a doctor. The systematic violence of the rational utopia has the mocking sneer of holy war in the name of God, in that murder is perceived as a good. Again,

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Camus, though an atheist, accepted the Law of Human Dignity as an assumption (or at least the inadmissibility of murder, which is only the negative of the Law); he examines this fearful aspect of holy war in the name of Reason: “In more ingenuous times, when the tyrant razed cities for his own greater glory, when the slave chained to the conqueror’s chariot was dragged through the rejoicing streets, when enemies were thrown to the wild beasts in front of the assembled people, the mind did not reel before such unabashed crimes, and judgment remained unclouded. But slave camps under the flag of freedom, massacres justified by philanthropy or by a taste for the superhuman, in one sense cripple judgment.”

Judgment is crippled because the reductionist allows for no comparison of value beyond what is empirically measurable. Thus the computer monsters of modern fairy tales are particularly frightening in that they permit injustice to some in a calculus of total lives preserved. Massacres justified by philanthropy evade the scales of justice, because those scales are weighted by values uncounted in empirical reductionism.

Today, in the public square of the most prominent (in terms of empirical values) nation-states the protocol is dominated (though not entirely defined) by the illusion of reductionist morality. Unspoken almost out of an assumption of universal apparency, this illusion consists in a belief that human beings and society in general is gradually emerging from the shadows of ignorance, which was the principle cause of evil, into the light of knowledge, which provides the basis for the rights of the human person. This model is not wholly off the mark, in that humankind clearly has advanced in its recognition and respect for human dignity, and that such perception does indeed remove the possibility for a right-thinking individual to harm his brother or sister. But the illusory paradigm, failing to perceive its own assumption, is vulnerable to dangerous promises of

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4 Ibid., 3-4.
ending human suffering and inequality through murder, for by perceiving rights as ordered to the end of a peaceful utopia, this paradigm will accept the utopia over those rights when the two conflict.

This, then, is the predicament of the Twenty-first Century. Are we to respond to the hope visible in the human heart, even in the face of such heavy obstacles, by taking a “leap of faith” in the “law of God”? Or shall we rather carry on the legacy of the previous century, subordinating the human person to ends noble and ignoble, from *lebensraum* to a Great Leap Forward to population control and even to happiness? What shall be the paradox of the Twenty-first Century? Hopefully, it will be that, when given the sword, by following the “law of God” we will turn swords into ploughshares.

In order to act, we must first know where we stand, and what is the nature of our predicament. It is the aim of this thesis to argue that our predicament is a political worldview begun in the Enlightenment. This worldview is so ubiquitous and so deeply ingrained in our time that we scarcely perceive it as a worldview. This is the work of the Enlightenment which brought about a revolution in perception, from a worldview in which truth was ultimately found in God to one in which people could discover it themselves through empirical investigation and rational analysis. The secularizing trend in the Enlightenment has often been pointed out, but we shall look at that specifically, not simply as a reduction of the power of the institutions of the Church and the monarchy as revealers of truth, but as the creation of an entirely different value structure oriented toward rational inquiry as the measure of truth. We will thus first explore this phenomenon in the Enlightenment, drawing on several historians who looked broadly at the period, such as Gay, Cassirer, Habermas, Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as the
writings of certain philosophes (Kant, for his reflection on the period, and Rousseau for his connection to the Revolution) in order to see not so much the individual philosophies as the underlying framework with which people came to determine progress, truth, and morality.

We shall then engage the French Revolution, that conjunction of political, philosophical, religious and indeed all the energetic forces of humanity. The French Revolution, now seen in a distinct historical bracket, in fact occurred contemporaneously with the Enlightenment revolution, and therefore offers itself as one of the first laboratories of the new framework of truth. Again, we shall not look for connections between specific philosophies of the Enlightenment and beliefs or actions of the revolutionaries, but rather we will examine how the political violence of the Jacobin terror came to be justified within a worldview created by the Enlightenment.

This worldview still holds today, and thus we will return to our own time in the third chapter, and engage with a number of commentators on twentieth century violence (Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin, Gregory Stanton, and Karol Wojtyla) whose analysis offers some important insights on the workings of systematic violence. Drawing upon these commentaries, we hope to provide an argument for how we may approach the twenty-first century and avoid systematic murder without sacrificing the many positive contributions of the Enlightenment. This is the vital question of our time, and we argue that we cannot adequately answer it without recognizing the metaphysical framework with which our political systems work were founded in the Enlightenment.

Camus adamantly supported the position of the Rebel, who neither gave into totalitarian justification of murder, nor submitted to the idea of meaningless in the
universe. Indeed, for Camus, rebellion was almost an ontological category (surprisingly not unlike the ecclesial reality of Communion in the early Christian Church): “I rebel - therefore we exist.”\(^5\) In any case, how can or ought the human person to address his time today? He and she must rebel against the reductionist protocol and take, over any constitution or declaration of rights, the Law of Human Dignity as his fundamental foundation: when one is committed to loving one’s neighbor, ascribing rights (which are in this view ways to respect the dignity of each human person, rather than empirical data or means to attaining a utopia) to people and shunning violence are the rational steps. He and she must insist that constitutions - “man-made codes” - be based firmly on the natural law, not merely on empirical observation. But to do all this, the person must understand the nature of this illusion, which we previously identified somehow as a post-Enlightenment phenomenon (i.e., the rational holy war).

To this end we inspect the Enlightenment as a revolution of perception; a change, not only in renewed and innovative (classical and modern) emphasis on the power of human reason, but also in the way in which that reason could be used. The former change has been well-documented since the Eighteenth Century, and indeed has been unjustly (and perhaps narrow-mindedly) blamed for the godless evils which have afflicted the human family in the last two hundred years. But such a charge is both simplistic and unfair. The Enlightenment comprised such an eclectic collection of philosophies that it is almost laughable to attribute the total wars of nationalism, pan-Germanism, Nazism, Communism, revolutionary violence, and terrorism to soulless mechanical tautology. Besides, the Enlightenment was neither soulless nor a tautology (can one seriously hold this view and read Rousseau?). Furthermore, the technological progress encouraged and

\(^5\) Ibid., 22.
enabled by the Enlightenment has greatly improved living standards around the world and been used to oppose and depose evil regimes, as well as stoke the optimism which was an important inspiration to this whole question.

No, we must view the Enlightenment as a revolution in perception: the new emphasis on reason (which produced so many goods) was in part attributable (and probably contributed to as well) to a new perception on the uses and boundaries of reason. Here we shall argue that in the Enlightenment, for the first time Reason was not only a useful tool (to learn about the universe and about God as in previous centuries) but an end in itself: a goal to attain, which might of itself divulge moral norms or “truth value” as well as factual values. We shall look at this Enlightenment proposal (the illusion), and then at the Terror (which, if it was an excess, was nevertheless allowed by reason) as a first example of rational holy war, the first crusade of the god called Reason.
Chapter 1

The Enlightenment Revolution

“Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage” said Kant in 1784 in his famed essay ‘What is Enlightenment?.’ It is difficult to speak of the Age of Enlightenment in any but the broadest possible terms, and some historians have even doubted whether it is meaningful to do so, given the enormous span of space, time, history, philosophy, politics and economics, wars and revolutions that all fall under that title. The list reads like a modern social studies curriculum. However, historians cannot help but see in that long eighteenth century a certain something, or an uncertain everything, that occurred in a tectonic scale and that has left its detectable marks upon Europe and the rest of the world to this day. Indeed the shape of societies today can be attributed to conditions and movements in the eighteenth century almost as the shape of the universe today is traced to conditions and temperatures in its early form.6 The United States of America, the United Nations, the democratic governments of European countries and the constitutions of many nations in the world today can trace their origins to the Enlightenment and to Enlightenment principles, and still other forms of government whose principles are different were only possible in a post-Enlightenment world. The principle mark of the Enlightenment that is pertinent to our overarching question of modern systematic violence is the worldview that perceives truth as that which is rational.

If Kant was answering the question, ’What is enlightenment?’, we today are

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trying to answer the question, ‘What was the Enlightenment?’ Kant himself noted that his was an “age of enlightenment,” and historians, whilst perhaps agreeing that the name is still meaningful and worth keeping, now argue about which qualities are to be attached to the name. In this question Peter Gay provides a sound articulation of the problem: how to avoid “sacrificing unity to variety” (and by implication sacrificing the order which historians study to chaos) while still respecting the variety. Gay has no use for “interpretations that treat the Enlightenment as a compact body of doctrine” and notes insightfully that “unity did not mean unanimity,” a statement which is surely reflective of that age. The philosophes may have generally banded together, but they were not of one “anima”--one soul or mind. And it is the philosophes we are chiefly interested in here in this argument. Indeed this argument in a large way stems out of an understanding that action follows from thought, individually and corporately, even given the effects of environmental influences. Thus in inquiring into any historical action, we would look for the primary “why” in the thought of the actors, even when their thought was responding to outside forces. In this aspect of the Enlightenment, the “unity” of which Gay spoke becomes important--not as a unity of doctrine surely, for the men of the Enlightenment included Deists, Atheists, and even Christians. We speak here rather of a unity of “value,” a common importance, so to speak, that marked the philosophes even in their differences. As Gay puts it, “behind their tactical alliances and personal fellowship there stood a common experience from which they constructed a coherent philosophy,” with the common experience being an interest in antiquity, a clash with Christianity, and progress toward modernity, and the coherent philosophy being what Gay calls “Modern

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Whether one agrees with Gay’s determination--and he argues compellingly for “paganism” as a meaningful and accurate name--we are here concerned with the common value which gave the philosophy (or philosophies) of the Enlightenment its coherence.

The common value of the Enlightenment was, simply put, enlightenment--freeing oneself from the “self-incurred tutelage.” If this statement seems at first redundant or barren, we must think a little deeper and longer upon its implications. We are taking the philosophes at their own word (perhaps a dangerous thing for historians): we are endorsing the century’s self-bestowed title of Enlightenment as its chief marker. As distinct from pursuing the best economic system, the most honest metaphysical system, or the fairest political system, the common value of that age was the pursuit of enlightenment itself. Economic, philosophical, and political systems would reveal themselves to be “good” or “bad” precisely in whether or not they were “enlightened.”

The image to envision here is the famous metaphor of the Cave from Plato’s The Republic. Enlightenment is the person escaping the fetters, seeing the fire and the shapes causing the shadows on the wall, climbing out of the Cave, seeing the reflection of the form and then finally the form itself in the true light of day. There was no compact body of doctrine held by the philosophes, no common idea of what the true form was, but each of them insisted that his or her own particular doctrine was good because it was the way to “get out of the cave”.

This was a profound revolution. The educated elite of this century wanted more than anything to scatter the shadows of ignorance and (especially) superstition in order to

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8 Gay, X & 4, respectively.
9 Gay, 8.
grasp the truth about the world and about human nature. As Newton had done in the world of physics, they sought to illuminate human nature. Pope’s witticism, “God said, ‘let Newton be,’ and all was light” was the hope concerning the dealings of the human person, in the varied and opposing thoughts of the philosophes. Ernst Cassirer, a towering figure in histories of the Enlightenment, writes that eighteenth-century philosophy was “not content to look upon analysis as the great intellectual tool of mathematico-physical knowledge; [it saw] analysis rather as the necessary and indispensable instrument of all thinking in general.”

Even in their disunity, this common hope gave coherence to the philosophes. Thus Rousseau argued that only democracy could be just for people, while to Kant limited civic freedom was necessary to extend personal enlightenment. But to each the goal was personal freedom through breaking the shackles of enslavement of thought. The goal of freedom itself was not revolutionary perhaps. The traditional message of both Protestant and Catholic Christianity was personal salvation, freedom from sin, etc. But ultimate freedom is not here on earth in Christian thought: eternal life, at least in its fullness, is found after death in heaven. Freedom through enlightenment, however, is more akin to classical Greek philosophy. While most of the philosophes believed in God, he was a Deist sort of “supreme being,” the ultimate Truth sought by Newton in his studies of physics and alchemy, the uncaused cause whose existence Descartes had attempted to prove. As Socrates and Plato had moved from the idea of gods who were themselves subject to the petty vices of mankind to a concept of spiritual perfection, so the thought of the philosophes moved from the idea of a Trinity of persons to the divinity of Reason itself. In the context of this extension of the Lutheran critique,

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the nuanced dogmas and doctrines of Christian belief, particularly in Catholic France, became more and more removed from “the real.” As Luther had attacked the clerical hierarchy as an unnecessary block between God and the human person, the philosophes increasingly questioned the necessity of organized religion in the human person’s approach to Reason. Enlightenment is a change in an individual mind, which is endowed by the creator with the power of rational thought--Homo Sapiens, “thinking” or “rational” human, was the term applied by Carl Von Linne to distinguish human beings among the animal kingdom in his *System of Nature*. The philosophes did not all attack religion or the clergy--Kant accepts that a clergyman will preach and teach--but the clerics themselves must be enlightened, and the idea of going to a priest to have one’s sins forgiven was surely the outgrowth of superstition and ignorance.

The depth of this revolution is clear: in the old Catholic worldview, Dante is guided by Reason in the form of Virgil the classical poet in order to get to God, but in the Feast of the Supreme Being during the French Revolution, Reason is God. The world of antiquity was useful in helping to enlighten men to that fact, but man’s salvation was to be found in the pursuit of Reason.

In order to better understand the nature of this new worldview, we benefit from extremely helpful argument by Neil Postman, a twentieth- and eighteenth-century commentator. His insight is in fact vital to comprehending the reality of the illusion unintentionally created by the philosophes Postman makes use of an insightful and radical paradigm for analyzing social groups: insightful, because it is startlingly honest, and radical because it applies old language to new ideas and constructs. In the beginning of his book, *The End of Education*, Postman enters the topic of education by addressing

381-383 (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 381.
how not only schools but all elements of a society are fundamentally oriented toward a particular end or goal. How many schools and programs begin with an orientation, how many businesses place so much stress upon their mission statements, how many nations and courts toil over the principles upon which their constitutions and laws are founded. This sense of purpose is vital to human beings, and therefore to human institutions, because humans have such an innate desire for meaning in a way that is truly unique. Human beings not only feel pleasure, but joy because their pleasure is somehow connected to their identity. Human beings not only feel pain, but they suffer because their pain is connected to their consciousness, and their suffering is worst when it is apparently meaningless. A person can accept suffering for a cause, can give up life to save others, but the seemingly careless suffering of a medical mutation, natural catastrophe, or meaningless murder…this suffering is truly and even ontologically intense, the kind that shudders the core of a person, because it attacks that basic notion of meaning. The strongest argument for atheism continues to be the problem of suffering. All this is to say: whether there really is meaning in life and a connectedness between our own experiences and the universe, humans desperately need meaning in order to function.\textsuperscript{11} Radically, Postman uses the term “god” to describe this sort of meaning. A society needs a “god” in order to function. Postman defines this god as “a transcendent spiritual idea that gives purpose and clarity” and also “a great narrative, one that has sufficient credibility, complexity, and symbolic power to enable one to organize one’s life around it.”\textsuperscript{12} The word “god” is perhaps a little surprising in academic work today (not unlike Gay’s terming the philosophes “pagans”); it carries the baggage of superstition and lacks the

\textsuperscript{11} Postman notes that “the idea that there is order to the universe…is a fundamental assumption of all important narratives” (9).
intellectual rigorism of science, except perhaps in a study of cultural anthropology. But Postman purposely chooses “god” over “narrative,” “end,” and other such terms to describe this transcendental purpose in order to point out that even secular narratives such as communism require “faith and dogma.” In this is Postman’s radicalism, for to suggest that contemporary post-enlightenment societies rely on dogmas is, to use the old expression, going out on a limb.

Indeed, Postman’s argument has particular importance to our own discussion, for in looking at the Enlightenment, we are particularly focused on the common value (or “god”) of the philosophes. When the old critics and reformers from Martin Luther to Pierre Bayle to Locke, Voltaire, and Holbach attacked the dogmatism of religion, they attacked it as a hindrance or a shadow that prevented people from learning the truth (of the universe, of human nature, etc). But these very attacks rested on the assumption that “truth” was to be found in scientific facts, which was a belief certainly not shared by the episcopate. This consistency among their critiques points to a common “god,” though the variety of the philosophes merits deeper study, which we shall soon engage.

A final important assertion by Postman is this: A society has a god whether it knows it or not. As examples of this point, he notes the phenomena of Communism, science, and technology. The communist narrative certainly rejected an idea of God, but its understanding of politics, economics and society became in itself a god toward which all aspects of social and government life were ordered. The gods of science and technology are, similarly, often unconscious. Scientific and technological advances seem to have nothing at all to do with faith or religious beliefs, but for that very reason people

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12 Postman, 5 and 6, respectively.
13 Ibid.
can turn to science for larger metaphysical answers. The purpose of life is progress: learning how the world works, how to improve human standards of living, etc., are “obviously” part of the road to progress. But that progress itself therefore is the god; in this narrative, what is censored is questioning the “where” of progress: progress towards what?

Aided by Postman’s paradigm, we shall look at the common value of the philosophes in light of this idea of a god, which can ultimately be understood as a basis and source of moral values. That is, what a person understands to be morally permissible (or morally obligatory) depends upon his or her god. Thus the radical religious believer can kill in the name of God, the radical social reformer can kill in the name of society, and the organized crime thug can kill in the name of the family. In this manner, the person does not deny the action or seek to demonstrate why this particular case is an exception to the moral rule, but rather holds it as a good in the service of the god. Slavoj Zizek, in his essay ‘Robespierre, or the “Divine Violence” of Terror,’ notes that in the revolutionary logic, the necessary violence or terror must be “fully endorsed” Maximilien Robespierre articulated this idea famously in his speech to the Convention, the purpose of which was, tellingly, to delineate the moral principles that should guide the government. In that speech he declared that terror is justice; it is “an emanation of virtue.”

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14 This was the major critique of Albert Camus in the twentieth century: that any system which concedes murder has already nullified itself. He thus saw the only alternative to the religious murder and godless murder to be the embracing of “the absurd.” See The Rebel, Chapter 1.
And here we truly come to the crux of the matter: the question of morality, which may be outside the scope or expertise of history. But we must at least outline the fundamental questions, and how they are important today by showing how they were important yesterday. And the fundamental questions of morality may often be simplified to a question of whether there is a fundamental moral law, or set of moral principles, which are abstract and applicable in all places and times (what Zizek described as “a virtual point of reference”), or whether the ideas of moral rules are merely the results of the evolution of social groups and their need for compromising self-preservation and group-preservation. Robespierre certainly appealed often to moral principles, a notion consistent with his belief in the Supreme Being. But the reason this question of normative ethics must enter our historical discussion is that of course if history is to inform our thinking presumably there should be a reason for it doing so. And in this case in discussing the workings of the intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment we hope to draw meaning from them. For we do not mean here to trace the ideological origins of terror--or presume that all evil comes from a single ideology--but we do want to think about what makes a society susceptible to terror, particularly from the inside. A state of moral anarchy is more or less a state of Nature, the ruthless arena of sinew, tooth, and claw that Golding was working with in *Lord of the Flies*. But that is not the world of the philosophes. The Enlightenment is often simplistically described as a movement toward moral relativism, a reaction against the Thomistic and Scholastic tradition of objective truth, but the philosophes in fact mostly believed in a Deity that would be un-phased by the miniscule caprices of human civilization. Hobbes may have believed morality was relative to each state, but by and large thinkers like Locke, Hume, Diderot, Voltaire, and

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17 Zizek, xviii.
Rousseau, even if they disagreed with one another and with traditional Christian thought on what was moral behavior, held a concept of objective “inalienable” or “imprescriptible” (a term used by Robespierre) rights and moral elements. However, the way one came to know such rights (i.e. the difference between a right and a claim) was through rational analysis (as opposed to, say, scripture or royal decree).

Thus this common value of the philosophes, this god of Reason if we may, was one of rational morality, not the meaningless nihilism of later philosophers such as Nietzsche. In keeping with the value of enlightenment, of getting out of the cave to be able to see the truth, there was a true form of morality to be found. Though the Church and establishment may have burned their books and found their ideas of permissible sexual behavior to be perverse and dangerous, it is clearly inaccurate to denounce the Enlightenment philosophes as unholy enemies of the Almighty and of moral society. Unholy they may have been, and critiques of moral norms and teachings of the Church as well, but generally they were theists (with exceptions like Holbach) and believers in morality. Gay firmly forbids such oversimplification; though the philosophes may have attacked religion and longed for secularism (generally) we cannot ignore their moral and theistic beliefs. Such simplistic interpretations Gay calls “definition by larceny[:]…to strip the Enlightenment of its wealth and then complain about its poverty.”¹⁸ Indeed the philosophes often had very abstract humanitarian values, quite out of place in political context of the wars of their time: “[the philosophe] would often exalt the interest of mankind above the interest of country or clan.”¹⁹

The very fundamental principle of enlightenment, of personal intellectual (and

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¹⁸ Gay, x.
¹⁹ Gay, 13.
perhaps spiritual) freedom pre-assumed a moral value: that it is “good” for men and women to be free. Kant of course, in ‘What is Enlightenment,’ accepts that the clergy themselves may be vehicles of truth to the people, so long as the cleric remain true to his “inner religion.”\(^{20}\) Rousseau begins his *Contrat Social* lamenting that “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains”\(^{21}\); many philosophes in fact saw human beings in thralldom of some kind—like Kant’s “tutelage” or even Robespierre’s “habit”—and in need of liberation.\(^{22}\) Thus the reaction against the Church in the Enlightenment may have been irreligious, perhaps even immoral, but it was not amoral.

If the Enlightenment was not, after all, a clash between belief and unbelief, between theism and atheism (as Robespierre suggested in some of his speeches\(^{23}\)), how does the question of morality fit into our discussion at present? To begin with, we must be clear again that while the philosophes believed in morality and differed from the moral code of the Church, they did not offer a unified opposing moral code, though they all

\(^{20}\) Kant, 56. Kant’s very reference to some sort of “inner religion” (we may perhaps interpret this phrase as the conscience of an enlightened individual) points to an idea of a truth “outside,” which religion seeks in degrees to uncover and conveys through “symbol.” That he thought religion mere symbol is not so very important to us here as the fact that he accepts a reality for which there can be symbols.


\(^{22}\) Rousseau, Diderot, and others voiced a common idea of the corruption of Man, though they differed as to which reasons the corruption was attributable. Rousseau certainly fears the oppression of absolute rationality devoid of the phenomena of passion, sentiment, and emotion, and he has been understood by some such as Gregory Dart to be a source for the Romantics. Diderot was more likely to attribute corruption to the ideas of superstitious religions. But whatever the cause, it is supremely remarkable that the philosophes found themselves repeating Augustine’s concept of fallen nature, given their concern over the Church keeping the common people in submissive obedience. Q

\(^{23}\) Robespierre attacked atheists as enemies of the people (as with most of his opponents), saying “I do not speak…as a systematic philosopher but as a representative of the people. Atheism is aristocratic. The conception of a great Being…is democratic.” Scurr, Ruth, *Fatal Purity*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2006), 294.
perhaps believed that they were referring to the same universal Reason as a means of discovering morality. For instance, in the *Supplement*, Diderot effectively counsels people to follow their instincts: his fictional Tahitian character says to the Catholic priest, “Would you like to know what’s good and what’s bad in all times and places? Stick to the nature of things and of actions….”

24 Bentham, Kant, and others offer different (also rational) means of discerning moral actions. The Church had also placed importance on human reason in matters of morality, but the Church’s moral theologians were working with an understanding of human nature as related in its scriptures and tradition (as opposed to an understanding gained through pure rational analysis) and, as we shall see, differing viewpoints on human nature lead to vastly different moral programs. Indeed, a people’s understanding of human nature is very much related to the “god” it serves. To Hegel the state is god; to Hegel the human person is the servant of the state. To the gospel-writer John God is Love; the human person is a beloved child of God. As we can see, this distinction is cardinal to any moral program. And therefore the reason the moral question is important is that, whether there is an objective morality which the human person is capable of attaining or not, the understanding thereof which a person or community of persons has will influence his or its praxis of action. In other words, ethicists and philosophers may argue over whether we may pass moral judgment on other cultures, but for our purposes here, any picture of a society (especially of a political program within a society) must be informed by the understanding of morality of that culture in terms of its god and its understanding of the purpose and place of the human

person.25

In the historical picture of the eighteenth century western elite, the philosophes did not argue that there was no such thing as objective morality or that it cannot be known, but that they had already discovered it: Reason is god, and therefore Reason determines moral standards. Few if any philosophes26 argued for complete moral relativity. It was far more typical for them to decry the evils of their age and proclaim they had discovered diagnosis of society’s ills.

So the philosophes had found their god, and had found that their god’s dogmas and commandments taught men and women how to eliminate the evils of society. If there were yet some ills that seemed beyond the skill of man, these could conceivably be solved if only more intensive study and thought were applied. It was the Church that was hindering the innoculations against smallpox in Paris;27 the cure to this disease was found not in faith in God but through practical rational experiment. The same methods, employed by the American philosophe Benjamin Franklin, soundly demonstrated the difference between spurious mesmerism and experimental electricity and magnetism. Even churchmen such as John Toland and Bishop Butler, amongst whom their was much disagreement, sought to look at the scriptures through the lens of rational skepticism.

That the philosophes chose Reason for a god may be interesting, but is it so very

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25 Here, for instance, we argue that the historical analysis of Marx is flawed in not taking into account the moral dimension. This is not to say that his philosophy or his economic theory was wrong because it was materialistic and atheistic, but rather that his understanding of history did not use all the data. Whether morality is objective or relative, historical analysis must include societal ideas on morality. A paradigm of class warfare is missing the moral dimension of the classes, the god each serves and the willingness of each to subordinate the human person to the good of the class. To reiterate, this is not a question of philosophy, but of historical understanding; indeed, it is to say that philosophy is important in the historical picture just as is class inequity, social movements, the arts, etc. (This is not a particularly bold claim, but yet a necessary rule nonetheless: thought precedes action).

26 Perhaps Hobbes came closest in *Leviathan*, though even there it is debatable whether he was a complete relativist, as he claimed moral authority in the sovereign.
revolutionary? Was it not part of the great march of progress of humanity from ignorance to knowledge? A great many philosophes seemed to believe in this idea of progress. Was the Age of the Enlightenment not just another step in mankind’s evolution, or if one takes a less optimistic view of human history and doubts progress, was it not simply another religious narrative? Using language such as Postman’s “god” surely seems to suggest such a notion. But the claim of Reason as god was truly different in a wholly new, earth-shaking way. In polytheistic cultures the gods are often fickle, and fight with one another, and it is up to men and women like Odysseus and Brynhildr to take sides as with a petty warlord. Often with the non-personal cosmic gods of eastern traditions, a pure transcendent truth is the ultimate goal, and a good life is ordered toward achieving that cosmic union. In the great monotheistic religions like Islam and Judaism, the goal of life is to serve and praise God, perhaps with the hope of life after death in blissful paradise. In the theology of Christianity, the dominant belief system in Europe at the time of the Enlightenment, the full life was one participating in the life of the Church and in service of God and the community.\(^2^7\) The god of Reason was a radical break from each of these. Where a Moslem, a Jew, or even an unscrupulous, amoral Italian prince knew why he acted and what was his ultimate goal (serving Allah or ruling the city-state), the servant of Reason knew only how he was supposed to act, not why. An astrologer and an astronomer both probe the depths of the heavens and ponder their meaning, yet only the astronomer could be an honest philosophe, free from the constraints of superstition and swelling the library of human knowledge. Indeed, for the realm of science, this approach produced wonders in the Scientific Revolution from which the philosophes of the

\(^{2^7}\) Gay, 15-17.

\(^{2^8}\) Obviously the beliefs and actions of individual Christians and even larger elements
eighteenth century were benefiting, as well as in recent advances in medicine through the use of experimentation. Ernst Cassirer comments, “However much individual thinkers and schools differ in their results, they agree in this epistemological premise. Voltaire’s *Treatise on Metaphysics*, d’Alembert’s *Preliminary Discourse*, and Kant’s *Inquiry concerning the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality* all concur on this point. All these works represent the true method of metaphysics as in fundamental agreement with the method which Newton, with such fruitful results, introduced into natural science.”

Thus this god did indeed seem to be delivering into the hands of enlightened persons not only miracles, but the power to work them.

But again, this power did not come attached to moral imperatives and prohibitions, but relied on the already-held notions of its new recipients. In this way, this new power was not different in kind but only in degree from all earlier advances in civilization, from the development of strong metals to advances in mathematics to achievements in engineering and architecture. It can even be useful to view historical movements through the lens of technology, in that many conquests (military or otherwise)--from the Hittite civilization in Sumeria to the more recent colonization of the New World by the European powers--hinged upon technological advantages. Now, however, the method--or rather the methodology--of improvement was hailed as god. In the great sixteenth century clashes between Catholic Europe and the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean, the wars provided great impetus for improvements in military and nautical technology, from the better rifles of the janissaries to the table-turning Venetian galleons of Lepanto. But throughout the long unrelenting wars of that century in that

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within the Church at the time were not in accord with its professed theology.

29 Cassirer, 381.
theater, such improvements were received by each force and each emperor as a new tool in the service of their gods.30 Neither the Moslem nor the Christian would ever confuse the power to advance with God himself, whose kingdom each was apparently in the business of expanding. But the philosophe’s crusade was expanding the kingdom of enlightenment.31 The new emphasis on rational analysis raised it from “a means to an end” to “an end” in itself.

Like the aforementioned technological lens, the rational paradigm also offered an apparently comprehensive scheme of history. Human beings of every culture have moved slowly toward enlightenment, in a progress which is natural according to Kant: “If only freedom is granted, enlightenment is almost sure to follow.”32 Religious beliefs were but a primitive attempt at explaining the world, but which nevertheless bore the mark of the human person’s innate notion of and desire for the perfection ultimately attained through rational inquiry. And now, in this self-proclaimed Age of Philosophy, Reason, and Enlightenment, humanity was finally throwing off the vestiges of the primitive explanations. This vein of thought was especially pronounced in the more radical atheists such as Holbach and Hume, but even the Christian philosophes found themselves defending Christianity, not as the means to salvation, but as a rational worldview. This had of course been carried out in earlier ages by Aquinas, Anselm, Augustine, Ambrose, etc., but they had sought to show that the attacks upon their faith were unfounded.

30 Those gods may or may not have been Allah/God; political and financial power seem to have also been of interest to the Sultan and the Holy Roman Emperor. Roger Crowley’s Empires of the Sea offers not only a riveting story but an educational look at the relevance of technological advances in the Islamic/Christian contest, a premodern war strikingly similar to modern total wars ordinarily thought to have begun with Napoleon.

31 Gay notes that in Kant’s vision of a “revolt against superstition” we see the belief of those crusaders of light: they “were sure they were the men who were bringing light to others; with sublime self-satisfaction...they praised their age as an Age of Philosophy” (Gay, 21).

32 Kant, 55.
whereas the Christian philosophes of the eighteenth century (among whom were varied thinkers such as Locke, Bishop Butler, Bayle, Toland, and even perhaps Newton) meant to clean up a wrinkled old orthodoxy and present it as a viable option for the enlightened person. Consider here Thomas Jefferson’s translation of the New Testament in which he removed any references to the miraculous. This sort of sentiment found more welcome in Protestant thought (indeed it truly sprang from a uniquely Protestant paradigm through the types of criticism offered by Luther, Bayle, Toland and others)\(^33\) than in the Catholic faith, which still held the mysteries of the Trinity, transubstantiation, and others as central to the faith (a stance which obviously could not be wholly comfortable with Toland’s *Christianity Not Mysterious*). The reasonableness of God was more important than any other attributes.

Thus to the philosophes, even to the apparently\(^34\) Christian philosophes, explaining the world was most important, and there was no room for mystery and miracle. Hume’s writings on miracles are typical of the philosophes’ mindset, in that nothing has miraculous origin; if phenomena appear to be miraculous, “philosophers … ought to search for the causes whence it might be derived,”\(^35\) and so scientifically learn the true nature of the phenomenon. We can thus see that rational thought carries with it its own moral values, or rather its derivation does: it is preferable to be rational than to be irrational. Again, there is no great shift in that preference, but if Reason is god, then there


\(^{34}\) While there is room for doctrinal argument within Christian groups, to be included in ‘Christian groups’ one must at least profess to be a follower of Christ. Thus even without taking any one particular set of Christian beliefs, we can fairly confidently state that certain thinkers like Newton or Descartes were more intent on proving God’s existence than on loving him; neither Newton or Descartes wrote poetry about God.

\(^{35}\) Gay, 146 [from Hume’s “Essay on Miracles”].
are no other moral standards (discernable through rational inquiry alone). The revolution of the Enlightenment was not a new penchant for rational thought, but a dispensation of attachments to other values. That is the revolution.

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The historical debates about the Enlightenment and its legacy have in large part been concerned either with it as unified body of doctrine whose flaws led to the radical “excesses” of the Terror and even of later totalitarian horrors, or as a disconnected collection of eclectic thinkers with varying goals, or else as an unfinished and misunderstood project. We are particularly concerned with this last view, offered by Jurgen Habermas in that last century, because it seems to have most hold in our present civilization, and we shall engage it more thoroughly in chapter V. The Marxist historical picture, being materialistic in its philosophical grounding, focused less on the importance of the intellectual “roots” of the Revolution that reached deep into the Enlightenment and beyond. Marx and what became known as the “leftist” (another tribute to the Revolution itself) historians were more focused on “the facts,” as Timothy Tackett, a more recent American contributor to the debate writes in his chapter entitled “A Revolution of the Mind?” Tackett himself, whose work represents an in-depth exploration of the personal

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36 Jurgen Habermas, in “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,” in The Enlightenment: A Sourcebook and Reader, edited by Paul Hyland, Olga Gomez, and Francesca Greensides (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), argues how it was in fact through the discourses in the public sphere made possible during the eighteenth century that ordinary illiterate people developed a sense of autonomy and other human values, and, in fact, “in a word, humanity” (389).

37 In terms of our present civilization, we speak here along the lines of the current “taste” described by Zizek as “the name for a basic ideological disposition” Whether or not most people (or even most political leaders) have studied the Enlightenment and come to their own conclusions, the “rules of the game” in the public square in most democratic countries have consciously or unconsciously adopted the “Enlightenment value” as the rational means of escaping religious, absolutist limits on personal freedom.

writings left by the deputies themselves, suggests that philosophical leanings were not very good predictors of revolutionary (and specifically violent) behavior. Nevertheless, philosophy played an important role, as we shall discuss (Indeed, the very fact that disciples of particular philosophes ended up in opposing factions is one of the results of choosing Reason as god), since it was not the particular philosophy or theory of metaphysics that shaped the culture and the political structure, but the notion that reason was the assurance of truth, and this was a “revolution of mind.”

Since our present argument will investigate the Terror as a result of the Enlightenment Revolution, it may be supposed that we should side with Furet’s description of the discourses of the Enlightenment, or with Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s mathematical dialectic paradigm, both of which posit the strict logic which produced the Terror. However, the view of the Enlightenment as a varied collection of thinkers bound loosely by the value of “getting out of the cave” is what we work with here. To describe the Enlightenment as a strict logic is to fall prey to the simplistic explanations Gay warned us of. To see it as an unfinished project is to fall prey to the mistaken vision of the philosophes themselves (but we shall arrive there in due time).

In the “strict logic” view, terror is seen as the unavoidable result of ideological roots in the Enlightenment. Beginning soon after the oft-invoked “excesses” of the Terror, thinkers on what became the Right linked the new absolutism of the Jacobins, not with the old absolutism of the Monarchs, but with the liberal-minded philosophes who had so undermined the intellectual and spiritual foundations for “l’Estate c’est moi”. Edmund Burke was perhaps the first to articulate these ideas, and the legacy of the Jacobin administration or regime has been contested ground ever since, the ebb and flow
of the battle lines reflecting changing political climes in which historians wrote. Thus under the counterpart “excesses” of the Industrial Revolution, the age of the Robber Barons and mass labor, the interpretations steered away from Burke and were a little more willing to believe Marx’s depiction of class revolution over the injustices of inequality. Such Left-leaning interpretations were not ameliorated by the horrific blow Europe suffered in its First World War, when millions perished for such paltry motivations--“lions led by lambs” “even for an eggshell.” After the ghastly, yet systematic experiences of the Second World War (and possibly on the brink of a Third) Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer moved back to a vision of the totalitarian logic of a single enlightenment ideology. For the atrocities of this war had been ruthless and calculated, not mindless and blind as in 1915. Now Adorno and Horkheimer described enlightenment, not as illuminating the darkness of ignorance, but as “mathematical procedure.” To them, the philosophes saw truth as information, and wisdom as information processing (one also notes the historical context of psychology and early computers that brought along Alan Turing’s philosophical questioning of the human mind as a computer): enlightenment “turns thought into a thing, and instrument - which is its own term for it… [T]hought becomes mere tautology.” In the succeeding years, the world struggled in an East-West paradigm in which both sides seemed to be moving inexorably toward an end they both feared. In such a context of super-militarization, Peter Gay published in 1969 a renewed picture of the philosophes (one which would perhaps have pleased them most) as “modern pagans,” thinkers who valued human rights above ideology and were cosmopolitan citizens of the world. They were willing to both

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enter non-Western perspectives and defend non-Western rights. More recent historians have returned again to study of the popular and official terror, and in a post-September 11th world, observers such as Slavoj Zizek return to the terror of the French Revolution to try and make sense of the current picture in light of the past.

The above interpretations are not to be glossed over as historical and political thermometers, however, for they do raise important questions. Hopefully our present conception of a common value (getting out of the cave) without a single body of dogma can provide a connecting thread through the commentaries that neither sacrifices unity to variety nor succumbs to definition by larceny. Thus we should not dismiss Adorno and Horkheimer as mere “polemic,” as did Porter, because they take too great liberties with the beliefs of the philosophes. Their criticism depicts the world of the philosophe as an amoral world, a world without right or wrong but rather correctly calculated or incorrectly calculated. (Here remember Hume’s reasoning for not believing in miracles: not [if we take him at his word] through emotional distaste for religion, but through careful weighing of probabilities). Thus if Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s blanket argument fails to do justice to the beliefs of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Diderot, they still posit a stern and immovable truth that applies to the common value of enlightenment: if one believes that moral truth is found through human rational thinking, one risks conflating “truth” with “fact” and subordinating other human values to the value of enlightenment. This is indeed the central problem with the god of Reason.

Comments on other interpretations. Cassirer “analysis” as the “necessary and

Francesca Greensides (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 385.

40 See Jean-Clement Martin, Violence and Revolution: an Essay on the Birth of a National Myth, (Paris: Editions du Seui, 2006), who shows “that popular violence was considerably more brutal than is usually thought and that the political elite’s relation to it was considerably more compromised and opportunistic,”
indispensable instrument of all thinking” - philosophers redefining thinking. Good/bad?

Now, if we cannot hold that the Enlightenment was a body of values which lead to dystopia, should we not then turn to the liberal Habermasian view that “enlightenment” is a value toward which we must still work, but which was in fact ignored by the dictators of the past two centuries. After all, was Stalin “enlightened”? One certainly cannot pin his horrific programs of mass murder and mass terror to the Enlightenment thinkers. And as Roy Porter wrote, “the Nazis loathed the philosophes.”

Had the philosophes not decried such madness, as had Montesquieu, Voltaire, and other satirists? The contemporary thinker Slavoj Zizek offers an adamant rebuttal to this platform of such “sensitive liberals” in his essay *Robespierre, or, the ‘Divine Violence’ of Terror*, in which he defends the radical Left. But as Zizek’s argument deals intensively with moral values (particularly those of Robespierre) and we are not yet concerned with specific moral values, we must wait to engage with him until we begin the case study of the Terror as a result of serving the blind god Reason. For now we shall merely engage Habermas’s unfinished project question.

We do not necessarily need to agree with Habermas’s value judgment on enlightenment, while still distancing ourselves from the simplistic approach. This is because, viewing the philosophes as a body of thinkers with varied goals, we see the true (and most important) character of accepting *ratio dominum est*. Michel Foucault, who, like Porter, does not like to be “‘for’ or ‘against’ the Enlightenment,” insightfully remarked that the value of enlightenment “is not faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but

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42 Zizek, vii.
rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude.” However, while Foucault identifies that attitude as a “permanent critique” of society, we must agree with Gay (and others) that the philosophes were not merely destructive, but were also seeking to create a uniquely modern and uniquely true society, in the sense that it be founded on verified truths rather than on unverified traditions. Constant self-examination is of course essential, but it is not the end in this scheme, only a means. But we may agree with Foucault that the common value of enlightenment did not in fact unite the philosophes in a common understanding of morality. The dictum to keep going forward with one’s eyes open did not entail that all need be walking in the same direction.

Thus, while Habermas offers important constructive counsel to use a more comprehensive spectrum of historical study in terms of social context, his “unfinished project” idea falls prey to the same flaws as the original Enlightenment Revolution. Nietzsche remarked “he who has a why to live can bear with almost any how,” but in “enlightenment cave paradigm” we forget Nietzsche’s “why,” and get caught up in the “how” of living. Most importantly its surface-level anthropology is still “homo sapiens” - - that is, the human person is a rational entity (rather than, say, a relational being). This surface-level anthropology can be harnessed to many competing philosophies for good or ill, from Hegel’s to Marx’s to Ghandi’s. For if the human person is viewed in terms of rationality, quality-of-life categorization immediately comes into play, the basis for the mathematical murder that Camus warned against. As we noted above [note 26], this anthropology is the modus operandi of mainstream social and political philosophy today; the legitimacy for law is accepted to be its rational justifiability (whether followed in practice or not). as witnessed by the importance placed upon secular measures and
policies that are born out of the idea of a “neutral” secular moral system. Thus we have returned to Postman’s “god.”

Reason is a unique choice for a god, in that so many of its followers could have such contradictory beliefs. This is different from differing schools of theology within Islam, Christianity, or Judaism, because each school has a different understanding of who God is or of who the human person is. But the philosophes all understood what reason was, and even more, they understood in common what was required to serve reason. The problem here was that reason itself could serve different ends. This is in fact the crux of the matter, the reason the Enlightenment was truly revolutionary. For the first time, men and women placed their faith in something which was not an end in itself to be served. And because of the nature of reason, they did not perceive their own faith. They considered themselves to have “true knowledge” requiring no leaps of faith. What the philosophes in essence had was a faith without dogmas. With belief in rational secularism, there’s no room for dogmas.

We would like to argue that the community of the philosophes held a common god of rational thinking as a means to truth, and therefore had also a illusory notion that they also believed in a common truth. In reality, and as witnessed by their many differing personal philosophies, each had his own conception of what “truth” meant. Consider Hume, or the mechanical philosophers, whose idea of truth was the discovery of the causal mechanics of the universe, or Rousseau, to whom truth was what we might call the virtuous life which individuals should strive for but which was discovered not through mores handed down from frowning clerics but through introspection and embracing the
“the order of nature” and “a well-regarded natural instinct.” Rousseau’s thought is particularly illustrative of this Enlightenment phenomena, as so many of his ideas are so near to traditional Church teaching. Where the Church taught of the person’s inclination to sin as a result of separation from God, Rousseau held that people were everywhere corrupt because of social constructs (Social Contract: “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains”; Emile: “Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.”). While his ideas on moral behaviors were grounded in both observation and his “innate sense of truth or falsehood,” the Church included what it saw as the testimony of scripture in its empirical evidence, and held that the “innate sense” was the indelible mark of a Creator, but that such a sense could be dulled by sin and so create a need for an authority. But in Rousseau’s thought and in the thought of the philosophes natural reason lights the way to an ideal state. However, the vision of the ideal state was unique to each. Thus Reason was only an imagined god.

It may seem paradoxical to use Rousseau as an example of a rational paradigm, and certainly he does not fit the strict computational mathematics of Adorno and Horkheimer. It was Rousseau after all who said of the philosophes, “I found them vain, dogmatical and dictatorial... Ignorant of nothing, yet proving nothing.” It was Rousseau who so doggedly fought against the subtle arguments of rationality and distrusted the philosophe’s good intentions, asking “Where is the philosopher who would not readily deceive mankind, to increase his own reputation?” Nevertheless, though at odds with

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44 Ibid. 17.
46 Ibid. 14.
the philosophes and an opponent of soulless mechanistic philosophy, Rousseau in fact disagreed only in detail with the Rationalist view, and still held to the god of Reason. For to Rousseau, Nature was the great revealer of truth, and what he disdained about the philosophes was inscrutability and distance of their thought from the reality of experience; he faulted them for failing to take into account the experiential data of human passions. In his *Profession of a Savoyard Priest*, after proclaiming that moral rules not based on Nature will come to naught, “how strongly soever prohibited by reason,” he then builds his own system by saying “The love of Truth comprises all my philosophy.”  

His *Profession* reminds one very much of Diderot’s *Supplement*, and taken with his ideas of Nature, education, corruption, and proper government, we see that his thought too takes up the belief that the human person has the wherewithal (“the simple and easy rule of common sense” 48 ) and desire to overcome the ills of life and create an ideal society. And though he separates “reason” from his own natural common sense, he holds the common value of enlightenment: that the application of one’s natural rational faculties will produce a utopia.

We finish this chapter with regard given to Rousseau because he had such a strong impact on the thought of the men and women of the French Revolution, which is often seen as the culminating mark of the Enlightenment. His impact on Robespierre was very marked in terms of political thought in the idea of the Republic of virtue, but also (and perhaps more importantly) in the almost spiritual reverence for the pure, simple virtue of the common people, whom Robespierre adored in the abstract. The illusory god of Reason could lead a thousand persons in a thousand different directions, as in the past

47 Ibid. 3, 18.
48 Ibid. 18.
a thousand local gods had, but now the individuals all thought they were moving in a common direction, toward a common, *true*, modern state.

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What come into play, then, under the god of Reason are anthropologies. Because rational analysis or common sense can lead to different ends, what determines those ends are the notions of the ideal and of human nature which a person brings with him or her into analysis, the premises to which a person applies reason. Thus, given an input with notions of human rights, common sense yields behavior in keeping with such rights. However, in a system like that of Hobbes or Hegel, where morality is essentially determined by the state, human rights and even the human person may subordinated within reason toward the goal of creating a utopia. When such a step happens, the justification of murder becomes possible, which Camus so abhorred: “…as soon as a man, through lack of character, takes refuge in doctrine, as soon as crime reasons about itself, it multiplies like reason itself and assumes all the aspects of the syllogism.”49 This danger which Camus (and many others) so feared must be recognized even today, for it has the potential for major human consequences. To observe these consequences we shall look at the “excess” of the Terror, after which we shall consider the state of the framework of law in the global community today, which is arguably “post-Enlightenment” in identity and values. As rational analysis leaves room for a variety of moral systems (witnessed by the Nuremburg investigations and the founding documents of the UN, which emphasized the need for an accepted basic moral system) current constitutional governments are obliged to consider this reality.

49 Camus, 3.
Chapter 2

Robespierre and Reason

On June 8 (20 Prairial in the Revolutionary Calendar), 1794, the First Republic of France under the National Convention held a revolutionary holy day: the Festival of the Supreme Being, a feast in celebration of a god created in the image and likeness of the revolutionaries. L’être Suprême was a god of Reason, represented in the festival as a classical goddess under the name of Wisdom - the sublime beauty of the feminine form was a more fitting image for pure reason than the rough and wounded body of a Jewish carpenter. In honoring a god fashioned after the taste of the Eighteenth Century, the revolutionaries were ironically almost praising their own enlightenment more than any being outside themselves. Robespierre called that day “fortunate,” because on that day the French people (“the most interesting part of humanity”) gathered to “offer to the Author of Nature the only homage worthy of him.” The Enlightenment critique had come full circle, for the worshippers of Reason now preached as hegemonic a dogma as had ever a religious zealot, if not more so, for by laying claim to the only worthy method of worship Robespierre dismissed all other religious cults of worship practiced by humankind.

Throughout the day, the French people - the “benefactors of mankind” - led by Robespierre celebrated and honored divine Reason. Robespierre was perhaps priestly in that he acted symbolically for the people, burning a statue of atheism to reveal Wisdom in its place, but he was not a priest in the sense of acting on behalf of a fallen or powerless

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50 It would perhaps be thought that the atheistic Cult of Reason of the Hebertists would pose a better example of the moral revolution, but Robespierre’s cult serves just as well if not better, by avoiding painting the secularization of the Revolution in simplistic terms. There was variety in the Revolution, as there had been in the Enlightenment (as Timothy Tackett reveals in Becoming a Revolutionary, Chapter 2),
humanity in pleading to the gods for mercy or good harvests. Here, the human person’s release from self-imposed tutelage was central. If the human person was enlightened by Reason, then the Supreme Being was honored. Thus the new religion was a celebration of human enlightenment, and fittingly the new hymns were to France herself as well as to Reason. Robespierre led the deputies then from Reason to Liberty, as they processed to a manufactured mountain, at the top of which was a Liberty Tree. Two days later, Robespierre led the Committee of Public Safety in passing the infamous Law of 22 Prairial, which ushered in the climax of what has come to be known as the Reign of Terror. In the thirty-seven days following the Festival of the Supreme Being, 1,376 people were sent to the guillotine in Paris alone.

The monumental irony of these events which offer themselves as drama provides a symbolic example of the contradictions of the Terror. To understand Robespierre himself and the means by which he and the Jacobins brought about the Reign of Terror we will look at biographical material (Ruth Scurr) and at Robespierre’s own speeches, as well as the analysis of the Jacobin rational offered by Slavoj Zizek’s and Dan Edelstein’s work on the justifications for terror. It becomes apparent that the contradictions of the Revolution are the contradictions of the Enlightenment revolution, and thus the Reign of Terror offers much clarity to our question of systematic violence.

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June and July of 1794 saw the peak of the violence of the Terror, but as a whole it took rather longer, lasting from late 1793 to July 27, 1794, when Robespierre was arrested. To the economic historian,⁵¹ the Terror was simply another bungled attempt to

and Robespierre himself decried atheism (see Scurr, 293-296, 320-321).
⁵¹ Marx, of course, provides the classic linear historical model in which the tensions of human interaction
solve the economic problems which had plagued Louis XVI: bankruptcy, bad harvests, skyrocketing bread prices. To address popular unrest, Louis had attempted to institute a tax on the nobility, and had then been pressured into calling the Estates-General to decide the issue. Here the nobility were met with a host of young bourgeois professionals, more educated and literate at a higher rate than ever before, and talented at argument and debate through training in the legal courts, the clubs, lodges, and societies, as well as the taverns—venues that formed a strong component of the “public sphere.” The clerical and noble estates proved to be unprepared for such an intellectual onslaught, riding on the momentum of more than a century of reaction to supernatural explanations of any sort and especially to the Divine Right of kings and Divine Revelation. The political unrest of what swiftly became a political revolution only exacerbated the economic turmoil, adding new fear to the mob as the foreign powers arrayed themselves for war to protect the ancien regime. And as the people who were lowest on the economic ladder perceived that a democracy was as impotent as a monarchy when it came to putting bread on the table, the new class of politicians found themselves between the hammer of foreign invasion and the anvil of insurrection. In this climate the radicals such as Danton, Marat, and Robespierre appeared to be the side willing to actually do something to save France, and in their polemics the Jacobins did much to support this picture by presenting their opponents as self-interested. Such self-interest was antithetical to a Republic of Virtue, and therefore France had to be protected from her enemies with decisive force. Robespierre had no thirst for blood, unless it be the blood of the enemies of his vision of

and use of environmental resources moves naturally towards equilibrium: to him, in the Communist state. See also Timothy Tackett, Becoming a Revolutionary, especially Chapter 4.

52 See Jurgen Habermas classic work which examines the role of social phenomena in preparing for the political revolution.
France - as a young lawyer in Artois he had been repulsed by the death penalty even for the guilty. In his mind *he had no choice* but to employ terror to preserve the Republic for the good of the people.

We emphasize that Robespierre saw himself as without choice because it is important to note that he was not choosing between Terror on the one hand and peace on the other. Most famously, he declared, “If the mainspring of popular government in time of peace is virtue, then the mainspring of government in time of war is virtue and terror: terror, without which virtue has no force, and virtue, without which terror is disastrous.” These words are unnerving to the modern ear, which has associated terror and terrorism with evil excesses and crimes against humanity, but to Robespierre terror was a defense against such crimes and excesses. Terror was not merely a more effective way; it was the only way. Given Robespierre’s assumptions - his “faith” so to speak, that the happiness and goal of humanity was to be found in the republic based on virtue (“Virtue produces happiness as the sun produces light”\(^{53}\)) - we can understand how he was able to marry the contradictory beliefs in the Declaration on the one hand and in the use of terror on the other. As a young representative from Arras to the Estates-General, he wrote to the King to encourage him to “to lead men to happiness through virtue, and to virtue by legislation founded on eternal principles of justice and so framed as to restore human nature to all its rights and all its dignity.” More importantly, he noted that this task could be achieved by “by removing all the causes of oppression.”\(^{54}\) Although he probably did not yet have revolution in mind as a means of removing such causes (in Arras he had written that “it is

\(^{53}\) Scurr, 47.

\(^{54}\) Scurr, 57.
dangerous to look for the remedy for a specific ill in a general revolution”\textsuperscript{55} he did believe that laws based on eternal principles could form virtue, and that therefore those laws were the primary function and goal of government.

Here the Enlightenment Revolution’s influence made itself felt. There was no set of Enlightenment principles (save perhaps that of “being enlightened” - that is, thinking for oneself, and basing one’s decisions on rational analysis); but there \textit{was} an idea that Reason would lead to such principles. With no agreed-upon moral laws, the course of the nation was left to the competing interests of the representatives in the Convention. This revolution left, in effect, a kind of power vacuum, in that the guiding principles of a state would now be those of the sovereign: \textit{Cuius regio, eius religio}.\textsuperscript{56} As the legislators in power were the Jacobins, it was their primary beliefs which became the guiding beliefs. A parallel situation in fact occurred politically in the French Revolution in that the various legislative bodies which succeeded the Monarchy all feared an executive power becoming another absolute tyrant, and so never legislated specifically for powers executive. In this power vacuum, a strong Committee or a strong, driven personality could effectively take that power.

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Historians have often approached the Terror in one of two ways: we must either view Robespierre as a mad fanatic (and perhaps the first modern dictator) who hijacked the language of reason, rights, and revolution in order to pursue his own ideological ends, or we must take Robespierre at his word and view the Terror as, in fact, an application of natural reason. We here argue for the second view: whether or not Robespierre departed

\textsuperscript{55} Scurr, 47.
\textsuperscript{56} ‘Whose realm, his religion’ The rule of the Peace of Augsburg, deciding which German states would
from the moral norms expressed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and in the thought of the philosophes (even that of Rousseau, who most influenced Robespierre), he was pursuing a rational program designed to protect the people by producing a Republic of Virtue. In fact, we may indeed say that Robespierre was certainly striving to attain his own ideological ends, but he was doing so in a rational legal way, through law and due process, with the approval of the legislat ing representatives of the people.

From the beginning, Maximilien Robespierre pursued specific ideals in his career, so that, while he recognized his own ambition, he was a uniquely sincere man, well-deserving of his epithet “the Incorruptible.” He was ambitious, but for ideological rather than selfish ends. As a lawyer in his small hometown of Arras, he took the side of the poor and weak parties and upheld rational principles over privilege, probably in part due to his own suffering on account of his father’s delinquency and his wish to be judged in his own merit rather than in the shadow of his father. His sister Charlotte later remembered him saying, “To defend the oppressed against their oppressors, to plead the cause of the weak against the strong who exploit and crush them, this is the duty of all hearts that have not been spoiled by egoism and corruption.” This aversion to corruption (and its association with self-interest) would be present throughout his political career.

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57 Furet and Baker Scurr, 40.
58 The purity of his own ambition was a strength of Robespierre’s, for he could and did attack his opponents as being “devoured by passions and ambition,” as in his defense of the political clubs in September of 1791 (Virtue and Terror, 25), whereas his own ambition was ambition for the success of the revolution. If he ultimately needed power to defend that success, it was only as a humble servant thereof, and his ethic and commitment attested to this. See Scurr, Fatal Purity, (335-337), for the extent to which opponents had to go to try to paint Robespierre as a corrupt politician bent on personal power.
59 Scurr, 41
He was ever devoted to his vision of a moral state of things, and he so identified himself with the attainment of that vision that his own enemies were always oppressors, conspirators against the moral state, and he came also to perceive himself as a victimized martyr for the cause. This perception is apparent in a poem he wrote early in his career:

The just man’s torment, at his final hour,
The only pang he feels--and I shall feel--
Is the dark breath of calumny and blame
Breathed by a grimmer ghost than death himself:
The hate of those for whom he gives his life.

Again, it is important to note that Robespierre equates his political ideal with justice and virtue: he is a “just man,” giving his life up for the people. This sense takes on a semi-religious meaning: one is reminded of the Hebrew scriptural theme of the “just man” of the Book of Wisdom, whose suffering is incomprehensible to those who don’t follow the law of the Lord; and the “suffering servant” of Isaiah, who suffers for following the laws of God rather than the wickedness of men. One also recalls the ideal philosopher-king of Plato, the follower of truth who is ultimately killed by the ignorant people who cannot accept that truth. Robespierre takes such a mantle of moral righteousness, at least in his own perception. Very interesting on this note is Robespierre’s literary tribute to the poet Gresset. In his essay he touched again on the idea of the noble wounded spirit: “I have been so bold as to insist upon his [Gresset’s] virtue, upon his respect for morality, and upon his love of religion. This will undoubtedly expose me to the ridicule of the witty majority; but it will win me two votes which are more than a recompense--that of my

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60 His vision was not necessarily a single unchanging ideal--in a letter to the king from February 1789, he speaks of the responsibility of the king to uphold the rights of the people, and in another letter from before the Revolution, he wrote that “there is no need for us to change the whole system of our legislation; it is dangerous to look for the remedy for a specific ill in a general revolution.” What is key is that his vision was equated with moral truth, not personal gain (Scurr, Fatal Purity, 57,47).

61 Scurr, 39
conscious and that of yours.” His identification with another martyr may come across as pride (and biographer Ruth Scurr draws this connection with his model: “he was--as Rousseau had been--exceptionally self-absorbed”), but most importantly, his conviction is sincere (to the point of death) and righteous (in his eyes).

This conviction of righteousness remained a distinctive part of Robespierre as the political upheaval unfolded in France. In a different age, when his conviction was at odds with the currents, he perhaps would have remained in obscurity or been silenced for his reformist beliefs, but in the French Revolution, Robespierre’s conviction became more and more the conviction of the time: his devotion to the republic became “the order of the day,” as it were. The moral dimension of his conviction meant that he personally was beyond reproach, in terms of the morality of revolution, and of course this advantage added fuel to his ambition in cyclical fashion so that more and more Robespierre’s adamantine vision became conflated with the revolution itself. In the pressures of 1793-4 (the war, counterrevolutionary insurrection, and popular unrest) the necessity of protecting the revolution until it could finish its work became a necessity of protecting Robespierre’s republican vision.

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This vision was, if not connected to any particular moral argument of the Enlightenment, only possible in the world of the Enlightenment, for Robespierre compellingly articulated his republic as a product and goal of natural reason. As the

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62 Scurr, 50
63 Scurr, 53-4
64 See Scurr, especially 101, on how Robespierre came to be identified, and to identify himself, with the Revolution and its outcome. Scurr writes, “In short, he behaved like someone with nothing whatever to lose outside the Revolution itself” His religion, his morality was the revolution. We have no reason to doubt his word that he was a martyr, for his god was the republic.
events that would ultimately earn the name “revolution” began, Robespierre argued in the name of natural reason, which he saw as only leading to the republic of virtue. In his famous speech, Robespierre spoke in his characteristically grandiose terms to the convention, claiming, “In our country we want to substitute morality for egoism, honesty for honor, principles for customs, duties for decorum, the rule of reason for the tyranny of custom…that is to say, all the virtues and all the miracles of the Republic for all the vices and all the absurdities of the monarchy.” To Robespierre, the “rule of reason” and “morality” meant his concept of the Republic, and he continued to support the marginalized poor by means of this natural, reasonable morality. As the Estates-general clashed, he supported Abbe Sieyes’ influential pamphlet, confronting the archbishop of Nimes in an early public speech and challenging the higher clergy to “convert all their superfluous wealth into food for the poor.” After the mob stormed the Bastille, Robespierre defended their questionable vigilantism as a swelling of Rousseauvean general will: “M. Foulon was hanged yesterday by the people’s decree.” This defense reveals an early endorsement of violence for political ends: as Robespierre says “the terror inspired by this national army…determined the Revolution,” he truly justifies terror (in the Pauline sense of the term: “to make just”)--that is, he does not merely excuse the use of violence, but acknowledges its positive moral value as a part of the revolution, an idea he would later aptly articulate as an “emanation of justice.”

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65 Robespierre, 115.
66 From one of Robespierre’s earliest speeches to the Third Estate in Versailles, early in May, 1789, quoted in Scurr, Fatal Purity, 89.
67 Scurr, 94. Interestingly, Robespierre was relatively atypical among the deputies in his support of the vigilantism, as suggested by Timothy Tackett’s readings of the deputy diaries in his Becoming a Revolutionary (1996). As Ruth Scurr notes of Robespierre, he “grasped early, rapidly, intuitively the conflict between ends and means that was destined to blight the Revolution, cause tens of thousands of deaths, and haunt the survivors…. He was vehemently committed to the Revolution and anything it entailed, passing quickly over moral scruples, intellectual incoherence, and political doubts. In short, he
In the immediate aftermath of the Terror, reactionaries on the Right claimed that the Terror was the logical result of revolution, revolutionary philosophy, and even Enlightenment philosophy. The Irish-born member of the English House of Commons, an acclaimed writer and speaker in his time, Edmund Burke offered almost immediate critique in a letter from October 1789, his famous *Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London relative to that Event*. Burke’s response arose out of yet another (very English) perception of what is “natural” for society, “a constitutional policy [by which], working after the pattern of nature, we receive, we hold, we transmit our government and our privileges, in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property and our lifes”: that is, the tradition of inheritance. To Burke, innovations which attacked tradition were inherently flawed because they undermined their own staying power. The revolution destroyed the age of privilege and chivalry, when “ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards” in defense of honor, and to Burke it was only consequential that the reckless innovations should result in disorder and violence.

However, we hardly need to rebut these perspectives, which are among the simplistic answers of the kind Gay wished to avoid in describing the Enlightenment. The Revolution is similarly complex, and while Burke’s pragmatic commentary on the social turbulence of revolutions is well-made, it is at the same time perhaps too universal in its claims and too grounded in the perspective of British Imperialism. To the notion that terror was the unavoidable result of upsetting the “natural” tradition of the age of

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chivalry, we still offer an alternative view: Terror may have been necessary to Robespierre’s ideology, but a republic clearly could conceivably exist without the Terror, to which the almost half millennia of Republican Rome gives evidence. The situation in France seemed to prove the fears of the traditionalists and counterrevolutionaries, but they also played into the fears of the radicals that the enemies of the revolution were inciting counterrevolution. Thus both sides provided fuel for the arguments of the other, without either gaining a real answer to their question. The revolutionary government did indeed resort to violence in order to protect the new order (an order of the rights of citizens), but this did not prove Burke right. Burke prophesied that “the popular leader is obliged to become active in propagating doctrines, and establishing powers, that will afterwards defeat any sober purpose at which he ultimately might have aimed.” Robespierre became such a leader, but not through any competition for personal ambition as Burke assumed, but in pursuit of a pure vision. He was “obliged” by the threat of his enemies, or rather (as he saw them) the enemies of the people. But had those enemies not been there, had the powers of Old Europe not reacted in fear, would the Reign of Terror have been necessary? It is certainly debatable - Furet argues that the Terror emerged in response to other internal pressures rather than the war - but it is clearly not the sound proof of democracy’s flaws that the early founders of conservatism saw it as.

The Enlightenment did not write a program for the Terror; rather it left open the door for those who could write such a program, just as much as it allowed for truly uplifting enterprises which uphold human dignity.

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“The Dust that Speaks to You”

*Human Nature in the Terror*
Looking specifically at the program of the Terror, we can learn specific factors which allowed for sanctioned violence. The three principle architects - Danton, Marat, and Robespierre - to varying degrees were willing to place human life in the category of “dispensable” for the sake of creating the ideal state (or even of simply preserving the Revolution, as an alternative to slipping back into the slavery of a monarchy, until such a time as a constitution could be written). This kind of thought must be sharply distinguished from “Just War” or self-defense arguments, which maintain the value of human life throughout. A person may kill in self-defense as last resort to protect an innocent life from unjustified murder. To the proponents of Terror, human life is subordinated to the good of the work of producing a good society. In such reasoning, violence in support of the Republic of Virtue is not a “necessary evil,” as in the case of self-defense. Rather, terror “is an emanation of virtue.”

This idea of terror as an emanation of virtue is extremely important for theory of legitimate government and constitutionality. Because the historiography has focused on different aspects through the years (no doubt due in part to changing events that made those aspects more interesting at different times), the justice or virtue of terror has been somewhat ignored by those not advocating its use. As we have seen, the Terror has been labeled an excess of an otherwise wholesome philosophy or else mathematical product of the factors of materialist Enlightenment morality. To Marx, it was the clash between great dialectical forces; to Habermas, it was a lapse in true enlightenment growth; to Furet, it was an outcome of discourses competing over political ideas and affected by the war; to Arendt, it was a failed revolution. However, there are a few

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70 Except by thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, who were principally concerned with twentieth-century violence.
authors who have engaged with this separation between morality and rationality, which is cardinal to our present question. To begin with, Camus, as we have already mentioned, saw that philosophy “can be used for any purpose.” Camus makes a resolute argument against totalitarian murder by means of an assumption of the inadmissibility of murder in his articulation of the Absurd, but he does not specifically deal with this idea in terms of the Terror. Slavoj Zizek, the contemporary Slovenian philosopher, takes note of terror and virtue in “Robespierre, or, the “Divine Violence” of Terror”. Zizek, in riveting fashion, discusses the relationship between humanism and terror, working with a matrix that sets up “four variations on this motif: humanism and terror, humanism or terror, each in a ‘positive’ or in a ‘negative’ sense” for comparison. The classic Christian perspective holds “humanism or terror,” calling for humanism as an optimal choice.\textsuperscript{71} To Zizek, totalitarian murderers conflated humanism with Terror (humanism and terror in the ‘positive’ sense). Then there is the ‘negative’ of humanism and terror, in which terror is perceived as the result “of the humanist project itself, of its hubris” - the idea that humanism always leads to violence.

There is, however, a fourth variation, usually left aside: the choice ‘humanism or terror,’ but with terror, not humanism, as a positive term…. In today’s ‘post-deconstructive’ thought…, the term ‘inhuman’ has gained new weight, especially in the work of Agamben and Badiou. The best way to approach it is via Freud’s reluctance to endorse the injunction ‘Love thy neighbour!’-- the temptation to be resisted here is the ethical domestication of the neighbour -- for example, what Emmanuel Levinas did with his notion of the neighbour as the abyssal point from which the call of ethical responsibility emanates. What Levinas thereby obfuscates is the monstrosity of the neighbour, a monstrosity on account of which Lacan applies to the neighbor the term Thing, used

\textsuperscript{71} Zizek places this variation (humanism or terror, humanism being positive) in the camp of “the liberal-humanist project” and the “neo-Habermassians”; we of course would disagree on the grounds of this thesis - that the humanists fail to truly prevent terror by believing themselves to have found “the answer” in some
by Freud to designate the ultimate object of our desires in its unbearable intensity and impenetrability… In proper dialectical paradox, what Levinas, with all his celebration of Otherness, fails to take into account is not some underlying Sameness of all humans but the radically ‘inhuman’ Otherness itself: the Otherness of a human being reduced to inhumanity…

In Zizek’s piercing analysis, Robespierre does not engage in dialogue with the Other, with the people: “he does not claim that he has direct access to the people’s Will which speaks through him.” Robespierre rather sees the necessity of creating or attaining social order in which humanity can flourish: for this work terror is necessary, and Robespierre may undertake it because he has in fact given himself already to the cause. He is a man of “moral integrity and full devotion to the revolutionary cause.” He was driven by a “holy love for humanity” to not only take part in a mere event of revolution (such as the storming of the Bastille or the execution of a king) but to “impose on social reality a new lasting order” in “fidelity’ to the Event.” “This is the properly ‘terrorist’ dimension of every authentic democratic explosion.”

Zizek’s clarity is extremely helpful to our present discussion, for he articulates perfectly (and even defends) the exquisitely lucid ratio in Robespierre’s mission. His was not a cold calculus, but a passionate martyrdom - held to its iron course by its very passion - for the sake of his perception of humanity. “Who am I…?” asks Robespierre, near the end. “a slave of Liberty, a living martyr of the Republic.” Robespierre’s perception of humanity was remarkably important. Zizek notes that Robespierre said “The characteristic of popular

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72 Zizek, xii-xiv
73 Zizek, xvii
74 Zizek, xxxviii
75 Robespierre, Virtue and Terror, 129
76 Zizek, xxxv
77 Robespierre, Virtue and Terror, 131
government is to be trustful toward the people and severe toward itself.” And it is so very striking that the day before his arrest, amidst failing health and a frenetic climate in Paris, Robespierre gave one final, dramatic oration to the Convention in which he alluded to the Festival of the Supreme Being which had taken place just before the climax of the Terror began:

O day forever fortunate! When the French people rose altogether to offer to the Author of Nature the only homage worthy of him, what a touching assemblage was there of all the objects that can fascinate the eyes or attract the hearts of men! O honored old age! O generous and ardent youth! O pure and playful joy of childhood! O delicious tears of maternal fondness! O divine influences of innocence and beauty! O the majesty of a great people, happy in the contemplation and enjoyment of its own strength and glory and virtue! These appeals were certainly not germane to the specific points of his speech that day, yet at the same time they speak eloquently, as though his ideals burst through the details of the speech. Here is the vision of humanity which drove Robespierre to exert himself almost to the point of expiration even if his end had not come prematurely. His idea of the people and of trusting them Zizek calls a “wager that the large majority of the people support these severe measures, see them as their own, and are ready to participate in their enforcement.” The assumptions which Robespierre brought with him into Paris and the Revolution - formed perhaps in his early hardship, in his classical education, in his experiences as a lawyer for the marginalized in Arras - these guided his program when he found himself in the seat of power.

Another very recent work which deals with this rationality in an important way is Dan Edelstein’s *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution*. Edelstein addresses the rationality of the Terror in the light of a particular juridical theory - natural right theory - which arose out of the particular guiding

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78 Zizek, xxxvi
80 Zizek, xxxvii.
philosophy of Robespierre and his radical followers. This is a different aspect from that addressed by Zizek but it also helps to emphasize the capacity for terror within an Enlightenment system, even a system founded on natural human rights. Edelstein pinpoints this philosophical idea of natural right theory as the particular cause of the Reign of Terror: “Jacobin political leaders…drew on natural right to authorize and draft the laws underpinning the terror.” Edelstein’s description of the Terror is insightful, as it goes beyond the perhaps too simplistic “polemic” of Adorno and Horkheimer in pointing to the particular values toward which Robespierre and the radical Jacobins were working. These values were a particular vision of the Republic of Virtue, inspired in an important way by Rousseau and others, that Edelstein terms “natural republicanism.”

Natural republicanism is a combination of the idea of a republic as the best political system with Rousseauvian humanism, with the result that the republic is no longer merely a good or useful construct of society, but the natural end of interpersonal relationship. Thus it is “natural” (that is, the design of the Supreme Being) for people to form a republic based on virtue. Edelstein ties this vision in to the myth of the Golden Age which the revolutionaries began to embrace as a utopian reality: “By the time of the French Revolution, the myth of the golden age no longer appeared to many as a myth; it had become the ideal and natural template on whose basis all of society could be reorganized.” Robespierre again and again appealed to this idea of the “natural” good of the republic, noting that reason produces republican ideals: “it is reason, which will make the republic immortal; where reason reigns, the people are sovereign, and such an empire

81 Edelstein’s analysis is more pragmatic than philosophical; he looks at the juridical foundations for Robespierre’s political action, rather than the metaphysics of his justification.
To Robespierre, well-versed in Rousseauvean thought, the republic was the hope for mankind which was on the verge of realization in the Revolution, and he was the man to help France realize that hope. The thoughts of Rousseau and Robespierre were not identical, however, for while Rousseau argued for the republic on the grounds of its legitimacy as a form of government by the people, Robespierre went a step further and equated the will of the people with the republican utopia itself. Rousseau’s *Contrat Social* holds that “The articles of this contract are…unalterably fixed by the nature of the act…. [O]nce the social pact is violated in any instance, all obligations it created cease….” Clearly, to Rousseau the legitimacy of popular government is grounded in the contract among the participants. Robespierre abandoned the social contract idea, believing that the “spontaneous voice of the people” (which was nebulous enough even in Rousseau) was the civic virtue of the republic. That is, it was outside Robespierre’s concept of “natural” for a person to oppose the republic. It was not a matter of majority rule favoring a republic, but of Nature favoring a republic: thus the opponents of the republic were opponents of Nature, the Supreme Being, and good order. Edelstein argues this very point, noting that the Jacobin vision (which was in some sense a moral claim: to be doing things the “right” way) claimed “that the laws of nature were also the laws of the republic” and that this claim led to “a conflation between nature and nation that had grave consequences for anyone misfortunate enough to break (or to

83 Ibid., 14.
84 Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 295
85 In the purges of the Hebertists and the Dantonists, we see how convinced Robespierre was of his own infallibility: he trusted very few people close to him to hold the pure vision of the Republic. Even other republican revolutionaries had to be removed as enemies to his vision of the Republic. Here we see that Enlightenment revolution at work: “heaven on earth” was no longer a platitude, but a mission statement and a goal that could be achieved through social change.
appear to break) the law.” This was indeed a move away from the legitimacy of social contract to a legitimacy of moral rectitude based on the republican ideal. Rousseau did allow for law enforcement within the contract (“…whoever refuses to obey the general will, shall be compelled to it by the whole body, which is in fact only forcing him to be free”), but this is clearly different from the enemy-of-nature justification. Such a model would never have survived in a Hobbesean worldview, in which the natural state of man is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” However, the revolutionaries embracing the republican utopia had a warmer conception of humans in their natural state, more along the lines of the ideas of Rousseau and Diderot, coming out of the new contact with people in the New World. Edelstein notes that natural republicanism found its way into literature in “works such as Fenelon’s Telemaque and Montesquieu’s Lettres persanes [which] depicted societies … that existed in a revised state of nature, in which individuals were social and equal, no one ruled over anyone else, and virtue came naturally.” Here we have a remarkable paradox: the revolutionaries relied on the “natural goodness” idea to support “natural republicanism” as a good state for society, but they also relied on the natural right juridical theory which was developed as a justification for imperialist action against the “savages” of the New World. Natural Right theory became very central to Robespierre’s logic in the Terror, justifying it as an “emanation of justice.”

The concept of natural rights was largely developed by the Enlightenment thinkers “in direct response to the pressing legal questions raised by European
imperialism in the New World.” Here, again, it cannot be emphasized enough that anthropology is the key distinction in the praxis of any philosophy: how we see the human person determines how we treat people. Edelstein notes that Thomistic philosophers supported what we might today call “human rights” or the innate dignity of the human person. But some philosophers responded with the idea of people who can remove themselves from that natural rights category by opposing themselves to the laws of Nature. Francis Bacon called on nations to “suppress” those who “have utterly degenerated from the laws of nature.” John Locke, one of the great founders of democratic thought, held that one who violates natural law “declares himself to live by another Rule, than that of reason and common Equity…and so he becomes dangerous to Mankind.” In Locke in particular we see the notions of reason and nature combined here: what is natural is reasonable; what is reasonable is good. These Enlightenment jurists produced a body of thought that included the concept of *hostes humanis generis*, or enemies of the human race.

Thus natural right theory played a key role in justifying violent action against people who are perceived to be enemies “outside the law” so to speak -- such came to include the king himself. In this knowledge, if we are to speak of the “excesses” of the Terror, or of the Terror “going off track,” we must be very clear in specifying what

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91 Edelstein, 27.
92 Edelstein, 27.
95 Edelstein, 15-17.
96 Not all used the concept to attack the legitimacy of the monarchy; Jacques Benigne Bossuet went so far as to say that disobedient subjects fit that category: “whoever refuses to obey the king cannot appeal to some other judge, but will be condemned to death without appeal as an enemy of the public peace and of humanity” (Bossuet, “Politique teree des propres paroles de l’Ecriture Sainte,” in *Aspects of Western Civilization*, 55).
moderate good became evil in excess, or from what good track the revolution derailed. Likewise if we are to speak of the totalitarian logic of the Terror, we must be equally clear in specifying which and whose premises produced that conclusion. As we have seen, each of these paradigms has something to offer, but given Robespierre’s moral purity and the centrality of natural right theory, none of these paradigms is precise enough. The Terror was not an excess of Republican virtue, nor was it the republican ideal gone off track. Neither was it inevitable in a post-Enlightenment world. Rather it was the rational means of Robespierre and the Jacobin radicals to produce a free society with a popular government that could be safe from tyrants, foreign attack, and internal conspiracy. And this radical means was determined out of their anthropology: the human person is the virtuous citizen. Any outside of that definition fall under a different category, “enemies of the people.”

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Robespierre said “To punish the oppressors of humanity: that is clemency; to forgive them, that is barbarity. The rigour of tyrants has rigour as its sole principle: that of republican government is based on beneficence.”97 Any system must ensure that human life is never subordinated to another end, even another good end, because it is the human experience, founded in the inner life of the person, which gives the very meaning to life which is the basis for desiring utopia. Pure Reason does not ensure this; it must be accepted as an assumption, rather than a deduction from empirical data. The nature of this assumption must be recognized formally in law in order to not leave the door open to justified killing. The French Revolution, in postponing writing a constitution until the

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97 Robespierre, “On the Principles of Political Morality that should guid the National Convention in the domestic administration of the Republic” (February 5 1794), in Virtue and Terror, 117.
country was safe, left that door open, and the thousands who lost their lives give testimony to that reality. Today, the strongest states have the responsibility to protect people from their own power; in foreign and domestic policy these politically and economically powerful states must insure against the possibility of being driven down the path of systematic destruction of human life, the environment, and the larger human community. The subject of the next chapter will be this necessity in the modern post-Enlightenment state.
Chapter 3

The Politics of Terror

The Revolution of mentality which allowed for the radical Jacobins of the French Revolution to attempt to discover moral principles from natural reason is not a meaningless thing of the past. The post-Enlightenment mentality has affected mass movements in the twentieth century, and still affects our political thinking today. Many millions of persons have been killed in the name of some ideology or other, and yet those peoples most influenced by Enlightenment thinking (Western industrialized democracies) continue to perceive such atrocities as flawed reasoning, rather than misplaced values. The rationalists see such murder as the work of ignorant, rather than depraved, minds, and approach the new challenges of our day such as the use of terrorism by radical religious fundamentalists as stemming from people placing religious beliefs over reason. Indeed, the term “fundamentalist” implies that what is problematic is that beliefs of faith are fundamental - that is, foundational. If only people relied on natural reason, war, violence, and inequality would not occur. Pure secular rationalists pay lip service to religious beliefs, perhaps as a cultural heritage, but ultimately such beliefs must be subordinated to reason.

This mentality is still alive today, especially in the West. Many constitutions in democratic nations are based on the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, a product of the Enlightenment paradigm, and even the charter and vision of the United Nations is related in many ways to the French declaration. Thus as we approach new challenges in the twenty-first century, our question becomes very pertinent. In this chapter, I will bring the connection between the Jacobin Terror and Enlightenment
humanism up to date in twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This connection is not a
moot topic but an important concern of any government and is tied in a basic way to the
legitimacy of law.

The first half of the twentieth century shocked the world. On a single day in 1916,
almost 60,000 men were killed or captured in the Somme region of France, and the rest of
the war “to end all wars” proved equally devastating. In the Ottoman Empire during the
same years, the world suffered one of the early appearances of genocide (a term all too
familiar in twenty-first century ears) as over half a million ethnic Armenians were
“exterminated.” The death tolls continued to rise as the already-stricken suffered the
worst epidemic to date in the Spanish Influenza, food shortages associated with a global
Great Depression, and further civil wars in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as a continuation
of “ethnic cleansing” movements which surfaced around the world throughout the
century. World War II truly saw the world mobilized in warfare, and saw also the fruits
of mankind’s energies turned towards war in fire-bombing of civilian areas, the
devastating power of nuclear weapons, and the numbers of mobilized soldiers as a
sizeable percentage of the world’s population engaged in conflict. Totalitarian dictators
from Hitler to Stalin to Mao to Pol Pot executed social restructuring plans whose costs in
human lives was heavy to the point of being meaningless by the sheer scale of the
numbers. It is said that when Oppenheimer, the director of the development of the atomic
bomb, saw the first successful testing of the bomb, he said, “Now I am become Death,
destroyer of worlds.” Truly, on a global level at least, humanity was forced to see itself in
a new way, and what it saw was of terrible aspect.

Those twentieth-century intellectuals, activists, observers and contemplators of
the human person “become Death” responded in new ways to violence and found (or were forced into) new paradigms with which to attempt to comprehend the “monstrosity of the neighbor,” to use Zizek’s term.98 There were, of course, a variety of responses ranging from cynicism (we think here of Celine’s pseudo-autobiographical Journey to the End of the Night and certain reactions in the world of art to the apparent fatalism of the First World War such as Wilfred Owen and Otto Dix) to a more resolute commitment to understand and oppose the new attack. For our purposes we shall again engage with the thought of a few commentaries in order to analyze certain facts about systematic murder and oppression in order to come to a positive program, not a specific arrangement of society but rather essential principles to guide such arrangements.

In response to this terrible new age of death, a group of scholars from a variety of fields met in a conference at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in March of 1953, to discuss specifically the topic of Totalitarianism. The goal of the scholars was a “clarification of the issues” of totalitarianism, a phenomenon which impressed itself upon the twentieth century as fundamentally new; in his introduction, German American scholar Carl J. Friedrich, an important member of the conference, emphasized that totalitarianism came “unexpected and unannounced.”99 Attending this conference (though she did not submit a paper) was a Jewish immigrant from Germany, a political scientist named Hannah Arendt, whose interest in the topic of totalitarianism would produce a wealth of insight into the nature of society, politics, and the history of twentieth-century Europe, publishing her seminal Origins of Totalitarianism five years later in 1958. Arendt’s work on totalitarianism is extremely important for any study of modern political

98 Zizek, in Virtue and Terror, xiv.
99 Friedrich, Carl J., “The Problem of Totalitarianism - an Introduction,” in Totalitarianism (Cambridge,
philosophy, and especially for our task in the twenty-first century of preventing justifications for murder. Friedrich, drawing upon Aristotle’s high regard for political science, makes an insightful remark on “the impossibility of making any science contribute to the good life without understanding how the community is governed,” placing the mind over the tool. Better minds have pointed out the errors of technocracy, but it may be said that the necessity of responsibly and ethically handling technology directs us to consult Arendt’s analysis of the flaws of totalitarianism in order to avoid them in our own society.

Even at the conference in 1953, Arendt noted that totalitarian rule, while marked certainly by the use of violence, is unique in that it utilizes ethically unsavory tactics “in broad daylight.” Totalitarian regimes established themselves by using conspiratorial methods in the open to attack an alleged conspiracy in the government or society. By acting in “daylight,” agents of totalitarianism break off from the normal state, in which violence belongs “in the dark,” not in the realm of daily life. “The point,” says Arendt, “…is not the use of violence per se, not even on an unprecedented scale, but that “totalitarian indifference” to moral consideration is actually based on an reversal of all our legal and moral concepts…. “

Our normal legal and moral concepts, based on the prohibition to murder, suddenly become ineffective frameworks for analysis. This is perhaps in part why, as a phenomenon, totalitarianism took the world by surprise. Totalitarian rule did not excuse violence with circumstantial evidence to show why,

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100 For instance, Postman in *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*, esp. Chapter 1, or early 20th century journalist and essayist G.K. Chesterton, who in a variety of works questioned the wisdom of blind technological progression and apathy toward history and tradition. See, for instance, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993).

101 Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 77
violence was in this case permissible; in its own legal and moral concepts, there was simply no need to find an excuse. As Arendt notes, “The peculiarity of totalitarian crimes is that they are committed for different reasons and in a different framework which has a “morality” of its own.” The totalitarians were not unenlightened or ignorant; they were working off different assumptions, to a degree without historical precedent (with the possible exception of Machiavelli).\textsuperscript{103} This is a very important point to be made in a secular democracy.

Arendt does note that totalitarian terror seems to kill without reason, but even this seeming irrationality fits into the anti-moral (in the sense of anti-matter, it’s negative or opposite) framework. She writes that while totalitarian terror “punishes” independently of any subjective guilt for “objective” reasons,” nevertheless this punishment is part of the negative morality, a part of “the scientifically forecast course of history itself, according to which certain crimes are necessary and for which therefore “criminals” must be found.”\textsuperscript{104} The word “necessary” is extremely important here. Observers of certain examples of justified murder in the twentieth century can be tempted to call such atrocities “madness” and “irrational,” again linking evil to ignorance or to a social system built upon irrational structures (as did the men of the Enlightenment and as have many post-Enlightenment thinkers ever since). But such commentary is only possible from within the observer’s own moral framework. In other words, the impression or appearance of madness is only perceived from within particular viewpoints or through a particular lens; if the observer viewed the situation through the lens of the totalitarian ideology, he should affirm that the so-called atrocity was perfectly rational and therefore

\textsuperscript{102} Arendt, \textit{Totalitarianism}, 78
\textsuperscript{103} Arendt, \textit{On Revolutions}, 30-2.
perfectly acceptable. We remember here the words of Robespierre: “To punish the oppressors of humanity, that is clemency; to forgive them, that is barbarity.” Working from within an observation point in which opponents of a particular system are in fact enemies of humanity (*hostes humanis generis*), it is indeed barbarity to forgive them. Hence, the phrase “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom-fighter.” One might almost say, the observer can only call the mass murderer or the terrorist mad because of the ignorance his own lens of perspective in a sort of cultural relativism applied to moral actions.

Arendt continues and refines her analysis in *Origins*. In this voluminous study of European politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, she explores more deeply the nature of totalitarian rule’s reversal of the moral and legal concepts of the norm. Totalitarian rationality is not nihilistic chaos or moral relativism, but a new set of moral and legal rules, and indeed a new conception of the relation between morality and legality: “It is the monstrous yet seemingly unanswerable claim of totalitarian rule that, far from being “lawless,” it goes to the sources of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation, that far from being arbitrary it is more obedient to those superhuman forces than any government was before, and that far from wielding its power in the interest of one man, it is quite prepared to sacrifice everybody’s vital immediate interests to the execution of what it assumes to be the law of History or the law of Nature.” The centralized nature of totalitarian rule results in that its inverted rationality is total in its control over society. There is not room for dissent, which is an

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104 Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 79.
irrational (and even immoral) act within the totalitarian framework, because the law of Nature and the law of History (which can become conflated into one concept, as in, say, Marxism, which sees history as a linear evolution) point to a particular end: namely, that touted by the ideology in question. This conflation, along the lines of what Edelstein saw in the Jacobin use of natural republicanism - which made the laws of the republic the laws of nature intended by Divine reason - is a very important element within totalitarian rule and action. In the framework of the norm, “Both moral judgment and legal punishment presuppose this basic consent; the criminal can be judged justly only because he takes part in the *consensus iuris.*” People who are thought to make an oath of agreement share a common set of principles; one who commits an action not in line with those principles is transgressing the law, and the law holds him accountable. But totalitarianism, conflating the principles with totalitarian action, has no need of laws (in the normal sense) because the idea of “legality” *must* change in a system of movement toward some other state. Arendt writes, “‘Totalitarian policy does not replace one set of laws with another, does not establish its own *consensus iuris,* does not create, by one revolution, a new form of legality. Its defiance of all, even its own positive laws implies that it believes it can do without any *consensus iuris* whatever, and still not resign itself to the tyrannical state of lawlessness, arbitrariness, and fear…because it promises to release the fulfillment of law from all action and will of man; and it promises justice on earth because it claims to make mankind itself the embodiment of the law.’”[@Arendt:Origins:461-2, 462]

[@Arendt:Origins:461-2, 462]
moving toward some goal, the ideological utopia, and therefore the “law” becomes human action toward that end.

This new conception of law is fully realized in the application of terror, for which reason it is particularly pertinent to our discussion. Since the law of Nature or of History which totalitarian thinking follows is one of total movement, society in general and the human person in particular must also “move totally” - must ever change toward the ideological utopia. The role of laws formerly in attempting to recreate in human society the natural law or the laws of God are replaced by terror, which is in a similar way “designed to translate into reality the law of movement of history or nature.”108 This new concept of morality and legality as terror of course brings with it new conceptions of old ideas in morality and legality. “Right” and “wrong,” “morally permissible,” “guilty” and “innocent” take on new meanings. Because totalitarian terror is not lawless nor arbitrary, these ideas are not dispensed with. Instead they take on new roles, reflective of the new moral and legal framework. Right and wrong are now based on the direction of movement of humanity; “No free action…can be permitted to interfere with the elimination of the “objective enemy” of History or Nature.”109 Note that right and wrong are still objective notions, but now with relation to the objective movement and the objective enemies. We are no longer necessarily speaking of personal action, of subjective guilt or innocence, but of objective facts: not only those who act against the rule but also those who simply are against it by nature of their not fitting into the ideologically perceived categories of humanity’s movement (i.e. those humans who need to be “weeded out,” inferior races, the weak and vulnerable, “dying classes and decadent

peoples.” As Arendt says, “Guilt and innocence become senseless notions; “guilty” is he who stands in the way of the natural or historical process,” and, in the terror “all concerned are subjectively innocent.” Victims are not killed because of something they have necessarily done, and the murderers do not themselves order their deaths but rather “execute a death sentence pronounced by some higher tribunal”: the law of the ideology.

Totalitarian terror was arguably new; Robespierre’s Reign of Terror was not totalitarian by Arendt’s definitions. Robespierre had written definite laws in the traditional legal sense, as articulations of natural law (republicanism was natural, according to Jacobin thought). His vision of Republican utopia was not linear movement along the lines of evolution, but rather a picture of a state to aim for. Thus Robespierre’s terror was of course politically revolutionary, but it operated within the republican legal framework. Nevertheless, the two are related, because both systems are marked by the subordination of the human person (among all other concerns) to some other end - producing a republic of virtue (in Robespierre’s case) or “the fabrication of mankind” (the goal of the law of History and of Nature). When a philosophy or political system takes this step (the subordination of the human person), it becomes an ideology (“isms which…explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise”). Nothing matters but reaching the end - producing the republic, fabricating mankind - ostensibly in the name of mankind itself. The problem to be noted here is the substitution of the vague and general humanity for the neighbor in the old dictum of the Great Commandment from Leviticus: Love thy neighbor becomes instead, Love humanity.

110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
Arendt, herself raised in the Jewish moral tradition, saw the flaw in this thinking. She made very strong argument against totalitarian rule that it “destroys the space” between individuals, destroys their “plurality” in order to create “One Man of gigantic proportions.” In pursuit of this goal of abstract humanity, terror “eliminates individuals for the sake of the species.”\footnote{Ibid., 465.} The flaw in this substitution of the species for the person is that the genius of the Great Commandment lies in its praxis, in the actual work of respecting another individual person which rises above the level of an emotional feeling or attitude to that of an act of the will for the good of the other. This Dostoevsky articulates perfectly in \textit{The Brothers Karamazov}, with the doctor who loves humanity so much remarking, “The more I love mankind as a whole, the less I love individual people…The more I hate individual people, the more ardent is my general love for mankind.”\footnote{Dostoevsky, \textit{The Brothers Karamazov} (New York: Bantam Dell, 2003) 71-2.} This is not, of course, a rule of logic, but a testament to the distinction between programs that aim at whole societal change and working for the good of people; the former may be necessary for the latter to be achieved, yet if such programs take on preeminence, the systematic subordination of the person becomes dangerously possible. This is true whether the programs be totalitarian or not, and thus this fact figures significantly as a litmus question to be posed across a range of political, economic, and even religious systems.

Another twentieth-century commentary to our interest in understanding the elements of systematic murder is offered by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin. From a philosophical perspective, rather than one of political science, Berlin offers insight into what he describes as “the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical
Berlin offers his own principles to guide political arrangement, which we shall consider in due time, but first we will look into his analysis of the causal errors in thinking, which are related to Hannah Arendt’s points, but articulate in a very specific way the logical progression of those errors. First pointing out the flaws in practical “monism” - the idea that all good human practices (social justice, equality, liberty, happiness) are mutually conducive and cooperative - Berlin points out that certain goods must be sacrificed for the attainment of others. Choosing between these objective and subjective goods is “an inescapable characteristic of the human condition.” However, when an ideology claims that one program of action will eventually provide for all those human desires (i.e. happiness, equality, and personal freedom) it necessarily conflicts with and subordinates those other values. Indeed, argues Berlin, this claim is the cause of the slaughter, “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” (emphasis added).

Supporting democratic values in political arrangement, Berlin notes the centrality of liberty in the democratic system. Liberty is both a prerequisite necessity for and a goal of democracy. However, Berlin posits that there are actually two distinct concepts of Liberty, a “positive” and a “negative” conception, which may be distinguished simply as “freedom from” and “freedom for.” The one notion is connected with a lack of external coercion within an area of motion or action, while positive liberty is the power to control

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115 Berlin, 10.
116 Berlin, 8.
one’s own condition, especially connected with the ability to play a role in government -
the “wish, above all, to be conscious of [one]self as a thinking, willing, active being,
bearing responsibility for [one’s] choices and able to explain them by references to
[one’s] own ideas and purposes.”117 While, infringement on either of these liberties
makes one feel “enslaved” to some degree, Berlin notes that as two separate values, they
are not necessarily mutually cooperative, and on the contrary are in “direct conflict.”

That even such an accepted good as liberty could become the cause and
justification for systematic murder is of great importance to us, particularly because it is a
democratic value (in the famous trio of liberty, equality, and fraternity). Berlin
demonstrates how such a good is transformed into a ideological end with such drastic
consequences. The value of positive liberty in conjunction with the belief that one has
found the rational final solution - the one which therefore all rational people should desire
and which Reason itself desires - can allow for one to construct a system based on his
solution, while any opponents are opposing the rational answer and therefore are acting
out of some ignorance or blindness.

“What gives such plausibility as it has to this kind of language is that we recognize that it is
possible, and at times justifiable, to coerce men in the name of some goal (let us say, justice or
public health) which they would, if they were more enlightened, themselves pursue, but do not,
because they are blind or ignorant or corrupt. This renders it easy for me to conceive of myself as
coercing others for their own sake, in their, not my, interest. I am then claiming that I know what
they truly need better than they know it themselves.”118

This is another side to the “fabricating mankind” justification in totalitarian terror that
Arendt pointed out and to the natural republicanism (along with the notion of hostes
humanis generis) that Edelstein charted in Jacobin radicalism; Berlin here reveals how
one’s assumptions can lead one to believe that one is really acting in the interests - the
true desires, in fact - of even one’s enemies.

117 Berlin, 6.
Again, the importance of assumptions highlight the paramount importance of a person’s or groups anthropology. Berlin sees clearly that “conceptions of freedom directly derive from views of what constitutes a self, a person, a man.” What we see emerging as a common element or formulation in systematic violence is this distortion of the definition of the human person applied in some kind of rational program of social arrangement. Now two clarifying points should be made with this claim. First, non-systematic violence of course is also related to a distorted perception of the human person; our perceptions are a basic factor in any interpersonal relations. Our focus here on systematic murder is chiefly concerned with its justification, which seems to be a common characteristic. Second, there may be objection to any talk of “the definition” of the human person, when our perceptions are inherently subjective. “Human nature” as a concept is prone to utilization in over-simplifications (and a subjective one at that) as substitutes for close analysis. We will address this question in some depth when we come to discerning (if possible) some positive principles to guide political and social relations in order to prevent their abuse of the human person. Coming to such principles will of course necessitate choosing some understanding, and discarding others, and this process must be analyzed and defended. Let us only re-emphasize Berlin’s warning that “Enough manipulation with the definition of man, and freedom can be made to mean whatever the manipulator wishes. Recent history has made it only too clear that the issue is not merely

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118 Berlin, 7.
119 Berlin, 8.
120 The justification of terror (as “an emanation of virtue” [Robespierre] or in “the reversal of our…moral concepts” [Arendt]) is perhaps the most important challenge to us, for it is a metaphysical challenge: it changes our categories of knowledge and language, and thus almost removes the possibility of communication and resolution through dialogue. Thus overcoming this challenge is the most important task for “social cooperation” as the early political philosophers like Hobbes, Mill, and Locke saw.
In her reflections *On Revolution*, Arendt comments that “Theoretically, the most far-reaching consequence of the French Revolution was the birth of the modern concept of history in Hegel’s philosophy.” In Arendt’s analysis, the law of history plays an important role in totalitarian rule in both Nazism and Communism. To our purposes, the key element is the replacement of systems of value which uphold the human person with systems (on either end of the political spectrum) which subordinate the human person to some other end. Connected with Berlin’s diagnosis of the potential misuse of positive liberty in coercing people into the rational arrangement for their own good, “those who, throughout the nineteenth century and deep into the twentieth, followed in the footsteps of the French Revolution, saw themselves not merely as successors of the men of the French Revolution but as agents of history and historical necessity.” That the French Revolution and the Enlightenment have had profound influence upon humanity up to and beyond the twentieth century does not need to be argued here; we only point out that specifically the weight given to rationality as the final measure of things has been a key value in the moral, political, and intellectual heirs of those event, given that, “Historically speaking, both conservative thought and reactionary movements derive not only their most telling points and their *elan* but their very existence from the event of the French Revolution.”

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121 Berlin, 8.
124 Arendt, *On Revolution*, 287. Arendt holds that the Fr Rev departed from values, but clearly they just applied the value of rationality as the measure of truth to different assumptions. Thus it is not quite accurate to speak of a departure of “values,” for although the personal moral beliefs of the revolutionaries differed
personal moral values of the philosophes, inasmuch as it seeks justification in reason -
and so long as this worldview holds, the human person is in danger.

Another term besides “totalitarianism” which came into use in the twentieth
century to describe new phenomena is “genocide,” a word now unfortunately familiar to
us. Coined by Raphael Lemkin in connection with the war crimes tribunal at Nuremburg,
genocide refers to the “destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group.”125 While this is not
the place for an in-depth analysis of that terrible phenomenon, there are some things
gerlane to this discussion that may be learned from it. Gregory Stanton, one of the
foremost students of genocide and the founder of Genocide Watch, an organization aimed
at preventing genocide, published a paper for the U.S. Department of State in 1996 on
preventing and responding to genocide. “The 8 Stages of Genocide” outlines a model of
genocide as a “process” that develops in logical steps. Stanton’s findings are very
revealing in light of Arendt’s and Berlin’s emphasis on the role of anthropologies.
Perceptions of the human person again play a role in the case of genocide: the most
openly violent stage of genocide according to Stanton’s model is the seventh:
Extermination, which “is “extermination” to the killers because they do not believe their
victims to be fully human.”126 Perception of the victim group as outside the category
“human” is indeed a main component right from the earliest stage, which is Classification
of the targeted group in a different class than the perceived majority. This classification
of a group of persons into a subhuman and non-person category is yet another way of
overcoming the ethical Great Command to Love thy neighbor as thyself, in this case by

and perhaps changed (see Tackett, Chapter 2), the value of the Enlightenment, the one which seemed to
provide the basis for liberty, justice, etc., was Reason.
125 Oxford English Dictionary, “Genocide”, cf. Lemkin, Axis Rule in Occupied Europe ix. 79
126 Stanton, The 8 Stages of Genocide.
redefining the enemy as something other than the neighbor. The concept of the “Other” is of course a recurring theme in human interaction, manifested most often in the practice of labeling, and this is another stage in genocide.\textsuperscript{127} The target group, after being classified in a “outside” group, undergoes dehumanization and polarization. Dehumanizing names such as “cockroaches” (as in the case of the term used for Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994) are applied and the victims are actively presented as the polar opposites of the normal, healthy, or moral majority. Most importantly, “dehumanization overcomes the normal human revulsion against murder.”\textsuperscript{128} Along similar lines, M. Hassan Kakar, an observer of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, writes that “For genocide to happen…members of the dominant society must perceive their potential victims as less than fully human.”\textsuperscript{129} The twentieth century encounter with genocide thus reestablishes the centrality of the human person in any moral system; terror and systematic murder when happen when groups fail to recognize the human person as such, and when the human person is therefore subordinated to the pursuit of some other end, whether it be equality or racial “purity.”

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Given the negative warnings of Arendt, Berlin, and Stanton (as well as many other commentators), we know when programs of action are wrong - when they perceive and use persons as objects or enemies - and we know also that the secular liberal

\textsuperscript{127} The Other is also present in various figures in literature, such as Grendel in \textit{Beowulf}, who is called a \textit{mearcstapa} - a “mark-stepper” or being who inhabits the borders of the human world; or Frankenstein’s monster, portrayed hauntingly with a human psychology and inner self, yet ostracized simply for his appearance. The recurring figures of the witch, the monster, Quasimodo, the barbarian outside the polis all point to a mix of fear and fascination with the Other, who has been the object of much analysis for the last several centuries from Hegel to de Beauvoir to Levinas.

\textsuperscript{128} Stanton, \textit{The 8 Stages of Genocide}

“project” of the Enlightenment is not enough alone to avoid the danger. This knowledge is a sort of negative ethics: what not to do. But what positive principles should be adopted? Stanton’s paper is itself a call for positive response, and he calls for governments to have the “political will” to intervene in the process of genocide anywhere in the world. Skirting discussion of national border claims, the idea of “political will” of course goes without saying. The real question is, “who’s” will? Or, which principals shall direct the will, political or otherwise?

Isaiah Berlin does put forward a working principle, that of “negative liberty.” While positive liberty is more apt to be misused for systematic murder, as history has shown, Berlin holds that negative liberty is a workable principle which is naturally opposed to misuse. What we have here is along the lines of Mill’s harm principle, though perhaps expanded to allow for some social benefits, which Berlin seems to deem permissible. “Pluralism,” he writes, “with the measure of “negative” liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of “positive” self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind.”

For many of the same reasons for which Mill argued against suppression of opinion, pluralism has some practical inhibitors against mistaken idealists coercing the people. However, as a practice even pluralism demands a grounding in principle - one needs to value things like equality, justice, and freedom in order for pluralism to work practically. Even those structures of social justice which infringe upon personal negative liberty would need to be justified somehow; without a supporting principle, pluralism can slip into relativism. Even Berlin quotes Joseph Schumpeter in writing, “To realize the relative validity of one’s convictions,” said an admirable writer of our time, “and yet stand for them unflinchingly,

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130 Berlin, 11.
is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian.” To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one’s practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity.” Unfortunately, relative validity is not sure enough ground for principles, indeed counters the very idea of the word “conviction,” and Berlin himself should not have crafted his argument in the first place had he not been convinced of the objective evil of the “slaughter on the altars.” What we approach here is the very crux of the whole matter, the “metaphysical need” which Berlin criticized as dangerous.

The systematic murderers of course do not hold that morality is relative: they work “in a different framework which has a “morality” of its own.” “Right” and “wrong” are orientations toward or away from the end of the ideology. However, it is no very helpful response to deny the objectivity of morality, or our inability to know it objectively. Such denial only offers a Hobbesean State of Nature which is the problem which social cooperation seeks to overcome in the first place. Zizek addresses this problem and the necessity of social cooperation to avoid disaster. For, he argues, without social cooperation we live in a “dream” imagining that we can continue in our “wild expansion,” grasping at both individual freedom and equality. Ironically, he advocates that we take a second look at Robespierre’s claim, in order “to intervene into our pseudo-natural development.” The answer to “the threat of ecological catastrophe” is to turn again to revolutionary “institutionalization” so that people can cooperate to pursue a “path of a contained life of balanced reproduction, focused on cultural refinement,

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132 Berlin, 12.
133 Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 78.
134 Zizek, xxxvii.
Zizek therefore encourages a combination of four “moments” delineated by the philosopher Alain Badiou which support that institutionalization of truth. These four elements are egalitarian justice, terror, voluntarism, and trust in the people. This is ultimately a reliance on social control in order to ensure fidelity to the people.

Here ultimately these tensions between Self and Other, Humanism and Terror make themselves felt as the basis of any social arrangement and even of interpersonal interaction itself. We return to those words of Robespierre which are the quintessence of this “social control” anthropology:

If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, the mainspring of popular government in revolution is both virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is disastrous; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue; it is not so much a specific principle as a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our homeland’s most pressing needs. There is a lyrical beauty to Robespierre’s speeches, even in translation. His parallelisms and contrasts, constructed on monumental and heroic universals, are light and graceful; they almost carry themselves. But the meaning of the poetry is terrible and terrifying. And we must take Robespierre at his frightening word: The “general principle,” the “sole principle,” to which he appeals is Democracy and Republican Government. For Robespierre, Democracy was the god; Providence, or the Supreme Being, might almost be said to be “good” insofar as He endowed men with the Reason to be able to seek Democracy. It seems that to Robespierre oppressing humanity is “wrong” because it is undemocratic; or rather, what he means ultimately by oppression is non-democracy. Oppression in the service of democracy is simply not oppression; it is “justice” and

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135 Zizek, xxxvii.
136 Robespierre, speech before the Convention “On the Principles of Political Morality that should Guide the National Convention in the Domestic Arbitration of the Republic,”
“virtue.” Saint-Just said, “That which produces the general good is always terrible,” but Robespierre does not agree, as can be seen in his dramatic appeals to weeping mothers and playful children in his final speech- there is a vision, somewhere in his mind, of idyllic utopian Republican democracy safe from the conspiring tyrants of the world, a vision of a good unaccompanied by evil. He did not think man evil, as Zizek suggests, but seemed to have held a Rousseauvean notion of inner goodness; like Rousseau, he believed people were corrupted, (indeed, in a way not unlike orthodox Christian teaching on Original Sin) - however for Robespierre corrupted man is almost no longer man. In this Zizek’s argument applies, for the corrupted men, the schemers, the enemies and plotters against the dream-Republic…these were “the Thing,” the “monstrous other” in the Neighbor that we fear and loathe. And because Robespierre’s dream world could never hold people who disagreed with him, it became necessary to seek democracy itself in the present, and destroy those who would stand in the way: “to punish the oppressors of humanity: that is clemency.” How? Does Robespierre simply change the definition of clemency, which meant ever, not treating a man according to his actions, but treating him according to one’s own mercy? No, Robespierre does not really mean to simply change a word’s meaning to assure himself that virtue was on his side. Here, again, we take him at his word. Punishing the oppressors of humanity is indeed mercy, for the oppressors no longer belong to the category of humanity which is “self” but are rather exiled to the realm of the “monstrous” Other.\textsuperscript{137}

\footnote{February 5, 1794, in \textit{Virtue and Terror}, 115. \textsuperscript{137} This kind of reasoning is found, for instance, in certain contemporary ethics theorists such as Judith Thompson, who argues that self-defense or defending the innocent is permissible because the unjust attacker relinquished the right to not be attacked, and therefore may be killed in the defense of the innocent. But of course this idea is frightening in every aspect. One can only not attack a man because he has a right to not be attacked? What does this say about the victim? It does not address whether one ought to attack...}
Zizek’s suggestion, especially in the “trust in the people” part - “the wager that the large majority support these sever measures, see them as their own, and are ready to participate in their enforcement” - clearly falls prey to the weaknesses of positive liberty as Berlin outlined them. And his call to take the “risk…to endorse again large-scale collective decisions,” while addressing the dangers of unguided expansion, does not take into account the dignity of the individual person (as Arendt said, sacrificing “individuals for the sake of the species”). Reliance on social arrangement to solve the problems of social cooperation (a key idea in so many of the “isms” offered or imposed on humanity) is thus built on a fundamental misapprehension of the human person and of interpersonal relation.

How then to arrive at a principle to guide such arrangement and yet remain in keeping with the nature of the human person and of interpersonal relation. Hobbes’ great insight was to begin with sense perception, for he saw that our convictions are tied to our perceptions, which are inherently subjective. Locke of course countered with an appeal to the Creator, which is the great answer of religion as a foundation for equality (i.e. that God made us for his glory). But the mere appeal to the Creator is on the same level as Robespierre’s appeal to supreme Reason, and runs the danger of providing a tautology

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138 Zizek, xxxvii.
139 Zizek, xxxviii.
140 Locke, 247-8.
based now upon our theology rather than our anthropology. But given the subjective nature of our perception, and the clear danger of moral frameworks based on some conviction, can we really counter the totalitarian program with another of our own with any certainty that ours is based on the objective reality of which our perceptions differ? Can we claim to somehow apprehend the “true” nature of the human person where so many other projects have failed?

One way to attempt this is via our negative convictions, which are in fact accepted with certainty by the sheer force with which crimes against the human person attack the humanity in all of us. Indeed, the measure of any program all along has been whether it justifies violence against the human person. Thus arising out of assurance of human suffering, we see something of the human person emerging, as distinct from an animal in pain, in but a few basic facts: the fact of questioning, of feeling an affront to one’s dignity, the sense that this should not happen; the fact of an inner self capable of such questioning; and the fact of the relational nature of that self, which finds and comprehends meaning (of any sort, even of the questioning of suffering) through communication with another. Mere secular pluralism does not provide for the human person as this fundamentally relational being with an inner self, because it allows for value to be conceived as a relative matter: truth as consensus is never acceptable for it is not in keeping with the truth of the human person.

Arendt’s warning not to be willing to sacrifice the individual for the species is quite in keeping with this interpersonal nature, as is Dostoevsky’s insight. Yet another twentieth-century philosopher, statesman, and churchman has in fact argued for the pro-

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141 Such flaws have clear historical precedents in pogroms and massacres during the Crusades, jihad and holy wars in general, as well as of course in the practice of human sacrifice found in certain religio-cultural
active principle supporting the person-as-relational idea in the principle of Love. Karol Wojtyla, the Polish priest later to become Pope John Paul II, drew upon the psycho-social aspects of phenomenology (which was his particular field within philosophy), combined with his own experiences with Nazism and Soviet Communism as well as his pastoral work with young people and families in Poland under the USSR, to produce Love and Responsibility, which aimed to give a basis of principles for action, “a basis as definitive as possible, relying on the most elementary truths and the most fundamental values or goods. Such a good is the person…” Interestingly, the work was principally designed to draw principles for human sexual relationships in particular, yet the reasoning applies to human action in general, because it is still based upon the fundamental value of the human person, which is the basis indeed for our sense of meaning, as noted in our discussion of crimes against humanity. Wojtyla thus offers Love as the guiding moral principle, “for love is a good peculiar to the world of persons.”

Wojtyla first denies any validity for those systems (already dealt with here) which subordinate the human person to some other end. As he says, “In modern times…what we have to deal with is a conscious utilitarianism, formulated from philosophical premises, and with scientific precision.” The programs decried by Berlin all valued some form of social control over the human person; people would be free, or fully human, only in a certain condition. The principle based on truth of the human person, Love (which “in its “purest form” is amor benevolentae, or goodwill: willing, in motive and action, the good of the other) can never use another person as a means to an end.

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142 Wojtyla, Love and Responsibility, 16
143 ibid.
Thus those systems which allow for systematic murder by placing other values above human life cannot be permitted.

...it becomes obvious that if the commandment to love, and the love which is the object of this commandment, are to have any meaning, we must find a basis for them other than the utilitarian premise and the utilitarian system of values. This can only be the personalistic principle and the personalistic norm. This norm, in its negative aspect, states that the person is the kind of good which does not admit of use and cannot be treated as an object of use and as such the means to an end. In its positive form the personalistic norm confirms this: the person is a good towards which the only proper and adequate attitude is love. This positive content of the personalistic norm is precisely what the commandment to love teaches.\(^{145}\)

The personalistic norm and Love are of course rooted in interpersonal relation (which is a necessary thing in order to avoid systematic murder), but is this norm in keeping with value of justice? The answer to this question goes back to the metaphysical nature of love: all human values such as justice, equality, and freedom only have their very meaning insofar as they correspond to something in the human person, namely the dignity which demands respect. Wojtyla writes, “To be just always means giving others what is rightly due to them. A person’s rightful due is to be treated as an object of love, not as an object for use.”\(^{146}\) Love and the personalistic norm thus can never be manipulated to subordinate the person, because their end is the person: “the general problem of sexual relationships between man and woman [and other problems, for the same reasons] cannot be solved in a way which contradicts the personalistic norm. we have to do here with the value of the person, which is for all humanity the most precious of goods - more immediate and greater than any economic good. It is therefore impossible to subordinate the person as such to economics, since its proper sphere is that of moral values, and they are intimately bound up with love for the person.”\(^{147}\) Economic and other goods thus find their proper place in relation to the good of the human person;

\(^{145}\) Wojtyla, 41.
\(^{146}\) Wojtyla, 42.
even the value of the species as such exists by fact of its containing persons.

Returning to the question of social arrangement, its very aim becomes clearer in light of the personalistic norm: the end of any political or economic system must be the good of the human community as revealed in the good of the person. Such a principle therefore does not demand a specific arrangement, but rather that every person and every institution recognize the inherent goodness of the person; it does not aim for a particular utopic state, but urges society to work in an ongoing way to strive ever closer to that goal. But at the same time, the personalistic norm provides a very concrete standard against which to measure the validity of a course of action (i.e. war, social programs), recognizing both the value of positive freedom as reflected in the free will which is an essential component of that “inner self” and the value of the objective good of the person.

The objection may certainly be raised that the commandment to Love and the personalistic norm is idealistic and abstract, no real blueprint for an political and socio-economic arrangement. But neither does Love hold that there is one “final solution.” Rather the ideal is necessary to provide an objective value against which to measure systems, policies, and even individual acts. In this way Love is quite practical: within reason, if human laws are based upon the personalistic norm, a group cannot at least attack or subordinate the human person justifiably and systematically, “in broad daylight,” as Arendt puts it. Within the practice of Love and the personalistic norm is contained all the goods hoped for by even the most violent ideologies: justice, human rights (natural and political), freedom, the fulfillment of the human person. Ironically, perhaps Robespierre said it best: “What is the goal we are aiming for? Peaceful enjoyment of liberty and equality; the reign of that eternal justice whose laws are

147 Wojtyla, 65.
engraved, not in marble and stone, but in the hearts of all men, even of the slave who forgets them, and the tyrant who denies them.”^148

^148 Robespierre, speech before the Convention “On the Principles of Political Morality that should Guide the National Convention in the Domestic Arbitration of the Republic,” February 5, 1794 quoted in, *Virtue*
Conclusion

On the day before his arrest, Robespierre spoke before the National Convention, which was now largely disenchanted with the application of terror over the last several months. Robespierre, fearing that his beloved Republic was in jeopardy, recalled the ideals which had inspired their grand endeavor: “the French Revolution is the first to have been founded on the theory of the rights of humanity and the principles of justice.” This fact - for fact it was - was the material for the leading question of this project. How indeed could a voyage announcing such a sublime destination and with such committed members wind up in the dark reality of terror in practice? The misappropriation of such ideals pointed us in the direction of political theory: how can the polis protect freedom and avoid systematic terror? This question deals with the legitimization of law and government, specifically with the notion of secular government: the idea that people can arrive at a system which protects human rights through the application of reason.

The Age of the Enlightenment was of course the quintessential “experiment” in reason, and was also the great influence upon the French Revolution itself, founded, as Robespierre said, on human rights and the principles of justice. The very variety of that period confirmed that reliance on reason was no sure means of arriving at a consensus of law and government, let alone truth and morality. The Enlightenment served to demonstrate that rational policies are in fact based upon the assumed premises of the policy-makers. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment has had a lasting impact in the form of this illusion that human beings can arrive at truth merely through the process of reason, apart from assumptions and beliefs which are thought to be necessarily distorting.

The example of the Reign of Terror proved to be an apt example (and perhaps the

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*and Terror, 109-110.*
first) of how this Enlightenment illusion can have devastating results even among well-meaning, level-headed, rational people. As Dan Edelstein helped to show, the Jacobin republicans had as their grounding premise the idea that a very specific political arrangement of society was necessary for the happiness and fulfillment of people. Given this premise, there were very little lengths to which they would not go in order to achieve that social arrangement. The prime element of the terror was its justification as a necessary good.

The illusion of rationality which the Enlightenment engendered has held influence even into the twentieth century and right up to our own day. The wars, revolutions, genocides, and general disregard for human life can be summed up in Camus’ phrase, “massacres justified by philanthropy.” The reflections and commentaries on such phenomena from thinkers from a variety of scholarly and religious backgrounds (Hannah Arendt was a Jewish political scientist; Gregory Stanton a Protestant in the field of law and genocide studies; Isaiah Berlin an analytical and liberal philosopher; and Karol Wojtyla a Catholic phenomenologist) help to reveal that one of the key flaws in the secular illusion is the claim that social structures must be changed for people to be fulfilled. Wojtyla’s notion of the personalistic norm and the principle of Love offer themselves as a sound answer to the illusion rational reductionism. They are grounded in common experience and on the premise of human value (an assumption which supports rational inquiry and also recognizes the existential aspects of meaning), and therefore cannot be manipulated in the way Berlin warned of because they cannot change the definition of man without destroying their own premises.

What is perhaps the most strongest testimony of the personalistic norm is that
while it certainly calls for social justice and structures which are in keeping with the good of the human person, it does not admit social change at any cost. What is more, Love and the personalistic norm are fundamentally grounded in interpersonal relation. Thus meaning and fulfillment are not found in some future utopia, but in the present relations of every individual; people must work toward political policies and social arrangements which uphold human dignity, justice, and equality, but even in situations of gross indignity, injustice, and inequality, individuals must still follow the personalistic norm and the principle of Love. This is what was being shown in Victor Frankl’s epiphany in the death camp at Auswitzch, when he said that “for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth -- that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love.”

Today’s policy-makers must recognize in law the fundamental value of the human person in such a way that it cannot be subordinated to any other end. This will require overcoming finally the illusion of the Enlightenment. In this project it would perhaps be fitting to pay heed to the words of another twentieth century thinker, one who did indeed strive for justice, always in light of the dignity of the human person.

A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.

- Martin Luther King, Jr

*Letter from a Birmingham City Jail*

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