Understanding the Dark Side of Human Nature

Course Guidebook

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Daniel Breyer is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Illinois State University, where he also serves as the director of the Religious Studies program. Dr. Breyer received a BA in Classics from the University of Montana, an MA in Liberal Arts from St. John's College, and a PhD in Philosophy from Fordham University.

PROFESSOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Breyer's research explores what it means to be a person and which features of ourselves we think are most important but also most puzzling. With this focus, he has addressed questions in the areas of epistemology, ethics, moral psychology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of religion, and Buddhist philosophy. He has been invited to share his scholarship at celebrated venues such as the Columbia Society for Comparative Philosophy, and philosophers have discussed his work in leading publications. Dr. Breyer has been awarded competitive research grants for projects in both philosophy and religious studies, and he has been selected to participate in multiple interdisciplinary summer institutes funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the John Templeton Foundation.

Dr. Breyer's students and colleagues have repeatedly recognized him for teaching excellence and instructional innovation. At Illinois State University, he has been awarded prestigious teaching awards, including the Outstanding University Teaching Award for pre-tenured faculty, the Kenneth A. and Mary Ann Shaw Teaching Fellowship, and the College of Arts and Sciences Outstanding College Teaching Award for the Humanities. He regularly teaches popular courses on Greco-Roman, Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian philosophy as well as courses on special topics like luck, evil, and blame. Dr. Breyer's passion for teaching has also motivated him to teach philosophy outside the boundaries of the traditional classroom to elementary-age children, high school students, the general public, and fellow faculty.

Dr. Breyer has published on a wide range of topics, including value theory, divine foreknowledge, reflective luck, epistemic justification, cognitive agency, free will, and moral responsibility. His articles have appeared in top journals such as *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, and *Sophia*. ∎

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UNDERSTANDING
THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

W e can't fully appreciate what it means to be human unless we come to terms with our dark side. This course tries to do just that, starting with a discussion of our fundamental nature. Are we fundamentally good, bad, or something in between? This question will lead us to consider the nature of evil and think about what, if anything, makes someone evil.

We'll then reflect on what our dark thoughts, twisted desires, and worst dreams have to say about us before investigating fascinating topics like ignorance, weakness of will, self-deception, original sin, and existential anxiety. We are also going to puzzle over the role that death and our fear of it plays in our lives, while reflecting on why the dark side fascinates us as intensely as it does.

As the course draws to a close, we'll think about how we might best respond to the dark side of human nature. Should we blame those who would harm us? Should we retaliate against them in anger? Or should we perhaps forgive even the worst of evils?

Although this is primarily a philosophy course, we'll be taking an interdisciplinary approach informed by scholarship from psychology, anthropology, theology, and other relevant fields. Rather than focusing solely on the Western tradition, we're also going to take a cross-cultural approach, one that will place intellectual traditions from across the globe in dialogue with one another, all in the hope of gaining otherwise unavailable insights.

Throughout the course, we'll consider cutting-edge scholarship while engaging with classic texts in a way that will put us in direct conversation with great thinkers from both the past and the present. We'll find ourselves learning from great thinkers like the Confucian philosopher Mencius, the Buddhist philosopher Śāntideva, the Stoic philosopher Seneca, and the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi. We'll also uncover contemporary insights from influential scholars like the epistemologist Miranda Fricker, the psychologist David Buss, and the theologian Walter Wink, among many others. Along the way, we'll also encounter compelling stories—some true, others fiction—that will shed light on the dark side of human nature.■

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE "DARK SIDE"?

Discussing the dark side of human nature is serious business. The dark side leaves wreckage in its wake, and it is a facet of human nature that's so mysterious that we feel drawn to decipher it. The dark side is our fragile underbelly. It is our negative but human side. It is impossible to understand what it means to be human without grappling with the dark side.

The Nature of the Dark Side

The dark side of human nature is about more than evil, immorality, and sin. It's also about the human condition—about the essential and often unpleasant facts of our existence in this world.

To that end, this course will trace two important threads. The first is related to evil and immorality, while the second is related to the human condition more generally. Two stories—one of a ring of invisibility and one of a man trapped in a well—help illuminate these dual threads.

The Invisibility Ring

In Plato's masterwork the *Republic*, Glaucon, who in real life was Plato's older brother, tells the story of a man who found a ring that could make its wearer invisible. His name was Gyges, and he was a shepherd. After an earthquake, Gyges ventured into a chasm torn into the earth, where he found the corpse of a giant, who was wearing nothing but a single golden ring. Gyges snatched the ring and returned to his flock.

As soon as Gyges realized the ring's power, he "arranged to become one of the messengers sent to report to the king. On arriving there, he seduced the king's wife, attacked the king with her help, killed him, and in this way took over the [entire] kingdom."

Glaucon thinks that everyone, when it comes down to it, would behave like Gyges. Everyone, no matter how apparently good—no matter how seemingly just—would ultimately succumb to the temptations of the ring.

The story raises some questions: What if a person knew for certain that he or she could get away with anything and face no consequences? Is there anything he or she would do that the person would be willing to call evil? The takeaway point is that if everyone has a side that flirts with immorality and evil, then it seems like everyone has a dark side.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE "DARK SIDE"?

"The Man in the Well"

To help show how the dark side is related to the human condition more generally, this lecture now turns to a story heard in various forms in the Jain and the Buddhist traditions. A version of it even appears in the Mahabharata, a great Hindu epic. It's an allegory, or a parable, often referred to as "The Man in the Well."
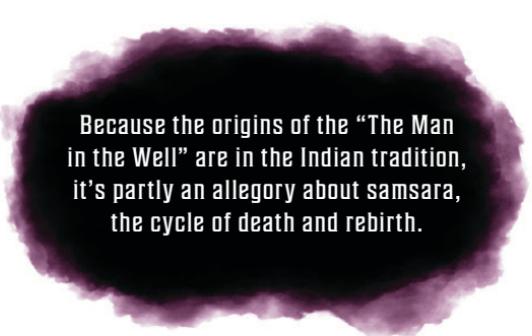
The following is a summary of the tale: Once there was a man who roamed from region to region, forced by poverty and circumstance to find a new home. As he made his way, he came to a great forest, dense with trees, and he lost his way.

First, he encountered a charging elephant, then a sword-wielding demoness. As he fled from these dangers, he came upon an abandoned well. He plunged into the well, grabbing roots on his way down to stop his fall.

At the bottom of the well was a writing mass of snakes, centered around a great python waiting to swallow him. The man heard the elephant madly pacing at the well's edge, shaking the walls of the well. Making things worse, mice began gnawing at the roots the man was clinging to.

As the elephant smashed around, it dislodged a honeycomb, which tumbled into the darkness of the well. The honeycomb sent furious bees into the man's hair, onto his face, and over his arms and hands.

Though suspended in the gloom and set upon by bees, with anger rumbling above and terror writhing below, the man caught a taste of the sweet honey. All he could think of was not the danger he was in, but how he might get more of that delicious honey.

Because the origins of the "The Man in the Well" are in the Indian tradition, it's partly an allegory about samsara, the cycle of death and rebirth.

The Human Condition

The parable of "The Man in the Well" helps further clarify the dark side of human nature. The dark side isn't just about immorality and evil, or even dark thoughts and twisted desires; it's also about the human condition. It's about the dark places we find ourselves in as human beings.

One of these dark places is in the shadow of death. In the parable, the man is driven partly by a fear of being mortal and frail. He flees from death, only to find that he cannot escape it.

The man in the well also suffers greatly and that seems to be part of what it means to be human, even if the goal is to escape such suffering. Additionally, the man remains trapped in the well at least partly because of his own failings.

He might be confused about the goodness of the honey. Perhaps he's ignorant or self-deceived. Alternatively, perhaps he's unable or unwilling to resist the temptation of the honey. Maybe he knows he shouldn't focus so much on it, but he can't follow through.

This Course's Approach

This lecture closes with a look at how the course will approach its subject. This is primarily a philosophy course in that it considers arguments, puzzles over thought experiments, explores big ideas, analyzes concepts, and engages with what philosophers, past and present, have had to say.

Additionally, the course is cross-cultural in nature. Keep in mind that cross-cultural philosophy is not the same thing as comparative philosophy, which is about studying the differences and similarities between very different philosophical traditions. Comparative philosophy is important but limited.

Rather than looking at the differences and similarities between the familiar and the alien, as comparative philosophy does, cross-cultural philosophy emphasizes that philosophy is a universal human enterprise.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE "DARK SIDE"?

The philosopher Mark Siderits refers to his brand of cross-cultural philosophy as fusion philosophy, which uses the elements of various philosophical traditions to solve philosophical problems and develop insights that might have been unavailable without blending traditions.

This course uses fusion philosophy. It already did so in this lecture by looking at two stories from two different traditions. This fusion approach is especially useful because it helps reveal humanity as fully as possible—from many different perspectives—while helping make progress toward finding real answers.

SUGGESTED READING

Plato, *Republic*, book II, 357a–368c.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 How would you define the dark side of human nature? Do you have firsthand experience with the dark side? If so, what is it and what do you think it tells you about human nature generally?

2 Would you choose Gyges's power of invisibility, or would you choose the power to fly? What do you think your choice says about you?

3 Why do you think the dark side of human nature is so fascinating? Why, in particular, have you decided to take this course, and what do you hope to learn?

OUR FUNDAMENTAL NATURE: GOOD OR EVIL?

In this lecture, we're going to consider our fundamental nature as humans, asking a mix of questions: Are we fundamentally good? Are we fundamentally evil? Are we a mixture of good and evil? For that matter, perhaps we are altogether neutral. As we consider these questions, we'll also develop a framework for thinking about the dark side of human nature.

OUR FUNDAMENTAL NATURE: GOOD OR EVIL?

Mencius and Xunzi on Human Nature

As a point of focus, this lecture explores the great Confucian debate between two philosophers: Mencius, who argues that we're fundamentally good, and Xunzi, who argues that we're fundamentally evil. Mencius lived from around 372 to 289 BCE, more than 100 years after the death of Confucius. Confucius himself never wrote a systemic treatise, and what we know of his thought comes from the *Analects*, a collection of his statements purportedly written down by his students.

Mencius and Xunzi agreed on the importance of moral cultivation through education, and they both endorsed the Confucian view that human beings are perfectible. They disagreed about our fundamental nature, and they saw this disagreement as having important personal and social implications.

If Mencius is right and we're fundamentally good, then it is external things like society and culture that corrupt us—that account for the dark side—and so we need to reform society and culture. If Xunzi is right and we're fundamentally evil, then it's our nature itself that needs correction, and so we need to create social structures that constrain and correct our natural tendencies.

Mencius's Thinking

According to Mencius's line of thinking, all human beings share a common nature. This means that he thinks human nature is universal. Additionally, Mencius points out that human beings naturally have minds and a moral sense, just like we naturally have other sense organs. Because all of our sense organs have natural preferences—our mouths prefer certain flavors, for instance—Mencius argues that our minds and our moral sense have certain preferences, including fine patterns and righteousness.

Mencius has other arguments. For example, if a person saw a child about to fall in a well, Mencius would feel confident that the person would at least feel motivated, in that moment, to rush and help the child. The person would be alarmed and concerned with the child.

However, not everyone would respond that way. What are we to make of this fact? One factor to note is that Mencius doesn't necessarily say that everyone would respond in a certain way; his point is that everyone would have a certain kind of gut reaction—a kind of involuntary response to the situation.

But still, we might insist, not everyone has these kinds of gut reactions. Mencius might reply to that objection by saying he is making a generic claim about how we would respond, and this generic claim represents the typical human response.

Paul Bloom and Mencius

The Yale Psychologist Paul Bloom has explored the moral lives of babies. In his book *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil*, Bloom reviews a number of studies that examine very young children. Bloom argues that the babies consistently demonstrate a clear pattern of preference for figures that are helpful over figures that end up hindering others. That sounds similar to Mencius, and evidence like Bloom's supports Mencius's view of human nature. However, Xunzi would disagree.

Xunzi's Thinking

Xunzi's view is that there is no such thing as an innate moral sense. In fact, Xunzi argues that we are all naturally evil—that is, selfish. Left unchecked, our nature will always push us to satisfy our own interests at the expense of others.

Additionally, Xunzi and Mencius actually disagree about what our nature is. For Mencius, our nature is our potential, or our innate tendencies, which might be frustrated or which might flourish. For Xunzi, by contrast, our nature is not our potential but our foundation; it's what is already complete at birth.

According to Xunzi, then, the difference between human beings and other animals is not our innate goodness, as Mencius claimed. Instead, we are distinguished from other animals by deliberate effort—the artifice of the mind that imposes morality on a twisted nature.

Xunzi points out that people have what seem to be natural emotions that aren't good. For instance, people are envious and resentful, they love profit, and they seek selfish pleasures. These emotions predictably lead people into conflict with each other.

Paul Bloom actually agrees with Xunzi here. He points out that moral emotions like anger, envy, and resentment can "have disastrous effects." In fact, Bloom thinks this can even be true of positive emotions, like empathy, which can blind us to the plight of some while bringing us to the plight of others.

This is why Bloom thinks that reason is crucial to our moral development. We start out, as babies, with a natural moral sense and a battery of natural emotions, but all of this requires reason to guide it.

Optimism, Pessimism, Dualism, and Indifferentism

Mencius represents optimism: the view that human nature is inherently good. Xunzi represents a type of pessimism: the view that human nature is inherently evil, at least in a certain sense of evil. Perhaps Bloom has pointed toward what philosopher Roy Perrett calls dualism—that is, the view that human nature is both good and evil, with the result that there is an inherent struggle between good and evil within us all. From Bloom's perspective, we have an innate moral sense, but we also have natural emotions and desires that can morally blind us.

The Confucian tradition helps identify another position. This is the view associated with Gaozi, a contemporary of Mencius. Gaozi argues that human nature is neutral with respect to good and evil.

To make his case, he compares human nature to a willow tree and to water. A willow tree's nature allows it to be crafted into many different kinds of objects, from cups to houses, depending on the interests of the carpenter. And water can flow east, west, north, or south, depending on how it is directed. For Gaozi, human nature is indifferent, meaning his view can be called indifferentism.

Mencius in Depth

Because Mencius emphasizes the importance of moral cultivation, he, along with Bloom, champions a qualified optimism, according to which our moral development depends importantly on moral cultivation. We can contrast Mencius's qualified optimism with absolute optimism, according to which our moral development is importantly impeded by moral cultivation.

More generally, Mencius has defended a specific model of human nature. This is the potentiality model, which frames human nature in terms of innate inclinations or potential.

OUR FUNDAMENTAL NATURE: GOOD OR EVIL?

At times, Mencius also appears to endorse strict universalism, the view that all human beings in all places and times share the very same natural tendencies. At other times, however, Mencius appears to concede that not every human being will exhibit all the same tendencies.

On this reading, Mencius is endorsing generic universalism—that is, the view that good theories of human nature capture what is representative of our tendencies as human beings in general. This is the view that Bloom seems to be getting at when he refers to normal human beings and typically functioning neurological structures.

This difference between strict and generic universalism has implications for the dark side of human nature. Under strict universalism, for instance, the mere existence of just a handful of psychopathic serial killers might serve as a counterexample. Under generic universalism, the existence of outliers like these might not make any difference.

Xunzi in Depth

Because the pessimistic Xunzi, like Mencius, emphasizes the importance of moral cultivation, Xunzi endorses a qualified pessimism. According to this view, even though we start off badly, we can check our natural tendencies through deliberate effort and become good.

Like Mencius, Xunzi has also defended a specific model of human nature: the foundational model. This model frames human nature in terms of what we begin with, not in terms of our potential. Our nature, Xunzi tells us, is what is completed at birth.

Gaozi in Depth

In opposition to both Mencius and Xunzi, Gaozi has championed indifferentism, the view that human nature is neutral with respect to good and evil. For Gaozi, our fundamental nature is insufficient to account for either our goodness or our badness. We start with a moral blank slate.

It is possible to distinguish between strong and weak indifferentism. Strong indifferentism is the view that, by nature, we have absolutely no moral tendencies; everything that counts as good and bad arises from experience and convention.

By contrast, weak indifferentism is the view that we start with amoral tendencies that we can later identify as morally relevant in the context of culture and convention. As an example, the weak indifferentist might say that our tendency to become angry is an amoral tendency that becomes morally relevant only when plugged into a cultural context. Someone who endorses weak indifferentism might also endorse a distinction between our non-moral and our moral nature.

Dualism in Depth

According to dualism, there is an inherent struggle between good and evil within us all, but as with the other views, there are two types of dualism. The first is fundamental dualism, which is the view that there is an irresolvable tension between our fundamental goodness and our fundamental badness. No matter what we do, so this view holds, we're saddled with both.

This kind of dualism is associated with the Tiantai Buddhist philosopher Zhiyi. It is also associated with Carl Jung's notion of a shadow self.

The other type of dualism is provisional dualism, which is the view that although we are originally both good and evil, we can overcome our dark side or, less hopefully, be overcome by it. This type of dualism is associated with Manichaeism, which holds that although right now we are mixture of evil bodies and good souls, we can ultimately separate the inherently good soul from the inherently evil body and achieve final liberation.

Individualism in Depth

The great Confucian debate has helped identify a number of important views, but there is one more view of our fundamental nature worth exploring. This is what Roy Perrett calls individualism, and it is the view that only individuals qualify as good or evil.

OUR FUNDAMENTAL NATURE: GOOD OR EVIL?

There are two types of individualism. The first is hard individualism, in which human nature doesn't exist. This view is associated with Jean-Paul Sartre and certain other existential thinkers. In this view, our dark side is not a matter of human nature but of individual determination.

The second type of individualism is soft individualism, according to which human nature is so plastic and variable that we cannot possibly understand it outside of specific contexts and environments. On this view, the best we can hope for is to provide a representative account of certain human tendencies while emphasizing the contextual factors that trigger those tendencies.

SUGGESTED READING

Bloom, *Just Babies*.
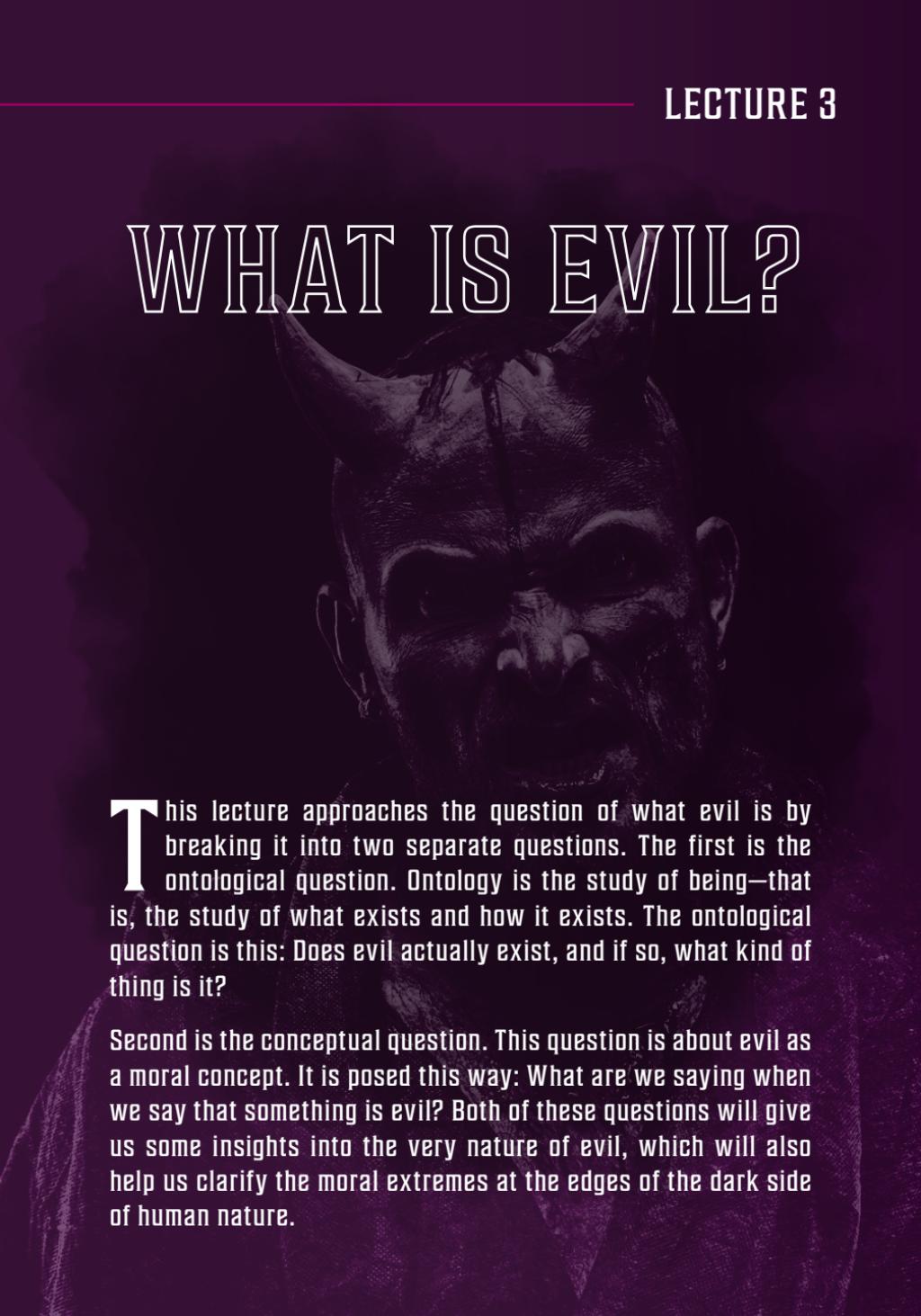
Liu, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy*, chapters 3 and 4.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1   What's your view of human nature? Are you a pessimist, an optimist, a dualist, or something else? Why is this how you see human nature?

2   What's the importance of the different metaphors Mencius and Xunzi use to describe human nature? What metaphors would you use to talk about our nature?

3   What, in your opinion, is the best empirical evidence for Xunzi's claim that human nature is bad? What is the best empirical evidence for Mencius's claim that human nature is good?

WHAT IS EVIL?

This lecture approaches the question of what evil is by breaking it into two separate questions. The first is the ontological question. Ontology is the study of being—that is, the study of what exists and how it exists. The ontological question is this: Does evil actually exist, and if so, what kind of thing is it?

Second is the conceptual question. This question is about evil as a moral concept. It is posed this way: What are we saying when we say that something is evil? Both of these questions will give us some insights into the very nature of evil, which will also help us clarify the moral extremes at the edges of the dark side of human nature.

The Ontology of Evil

To tackle the first question, this lecture begins by considering an influential way of thinking about what exists. This way of thinking has its roots in what Aristotle says in his *Categories* and what the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika philosophers held in ancient India, but it is also so straightforward and intuitive that many thinkers have adopted some version of it. This way of thinking classifies what exists into those that are universal, those that are particular, properties, and concrete particulars.

Something is a universal if it can be instantiated in different places and different times. Universals are abstract rather than concrete, and they can be located in multiple different places at the same time. For example, the color blue can exist in the sky, clothing, and many other instances.

By contrast, particular things are concrete entities that exist in specific places and times. A specific shirt hanging in a closet is an example. This shirt is present there and now.

As for properties, philosophers have sometimes made a distinction between essential properties, which tell us what kind of thing something is, and accidental properties. For instance, a feisty cat would have the essential property of being a cat and the accidental property of being feisty.

It might turn out that evil exists in the same way that the feisty cat exists. In this case, evil would be a concrete particular—it would be a substance that has a kind of independent existence.

Alternatively, it might be that evil exists in the same way that cat-ness exists. In this case, evil would be an essential property—that is, a property that makes particular things the kind of things they are.

Still another angle is that it might be that evil exists in the same way that a cat's feistiness exists. In this case, evil would be an accidental property—that is, a characteristic something can have or not have while remaining essentially what it is.

UNDERSTANDING THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

Theories of Evil

According to the privation theory of evil, evil is the privation of both being and goodness; it is not a thing in itself and, it is not even a property of anything. The privation theory has been incredibly influential as a way of thinking about evil, but it faces considerable problems.

For instance, consider a sadistic killer who wants his victims to experience extreme suffering. The killer's desire is positively bad, rather than simply not good. Additionally, desire is a property he possesses, not something he lacks, even if it turns out that he has the desire because he lacks compassion.

This course's view is that it's best to say that evil actually does exist and that it exists in the same way that feistiness exists as a property of cats. If this is correct, the answer to the ontological question is that evil exists as a property of things.

Note that some people are skeptics of the existence of evil, even as an accidental property of things. Others might believe that *evil* is a dangerous and loaded word, and that it is best to abandon the concept altogether.

The Conceptual Analysis of Evil

This lecture now turns to the conceptual question of evil. For answering it, conceptual analysis is necessary. In its ideal form, conceptual analysis requires us to think about how we apply concepts in specific cases in the hope of finding the necessary and sufficient conditions associated with the application of those concepts.

An evil action certainly seems like it would have to be morally wrong: It would be odd for an action to be evil but not be morally wrong. Perhaps, then, this is a necessary condition: An action is evil only if it's morally wrong.

That raises the question of sufficiency: Is being morally wrong enough to make an action evil? Some philosophers have suggested that it is. Most philosophers have disagreed with this view, however, holding instead that evil is qualitatively distinct from wrongness or badness.

In other words, an action has to be morally wrong, at the very least, to count as evil. However, being wrong doesn't seem sufficient to qualify an action as evil. Lying might be wrong, for instance, but is a man telling his employer that he's at the doctor while he's in reality golfing actually evil?

This still leaves open the possibility that if wrongness comes in degrees, the concept of evil identifies the most extreme wrongs. In this case, the concept of evil is not qualitatively distinct from the concept of extreme wrongness. This raises the question of if being extremely wrong is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for an action to be evil.

Thought Experiments

To resolve this dispute, this lecture uses a pair of little thought experiments in which the concept of the extremely wrong comes apart from the concept of evil. The examples are inspired by the late philosopher Bernard Williams and have been recently adapted by Todd Calder.

Assume that killing an innocent person is always extremely wrong. However, imagine this scenario: A man is holding 10 people hostage. A would-be interloper tries to intervene, but is also captured.

The man makes an offer to the interloper: Kill one of the hostages, and the other nine can go free. If the interloper rejects the offer, all 10 will die. In this case, if the interloper choose to kill one person to save nine, it would be difficult to call their action evil—even if killing in itself is extremely wrong. If this example holds, then being extremely wrong comes apart from evil.

Some people might not buy that example, so consider a second scenario. This one tackles the following assumptions: What makes an action morally wrong is that it brings about overall extreme harm, and what makes an action morally right is that it brings about overall good.

God and Evil

Neoplatonic philosophers like Plotinus and early Christian philosophers like Augustine of Hippo worried that affirming evil's existence, even as a property, implied that God was ultimately responsible for evil.

For instance, consider a hiring manager choosing between two candidates, Sam and Alex, to work for the charity Good Deeds. Imagine that the hiring manager knows that if Alex does not get the job, she will become deeply depressed, but if Sam does not get the job, she will be fine.

However, Sam is a celebrity. If she gets the job, Good Deeds will receive a lot of good press, which will increase the amount of money it receives in donations. With this in mind, the hiring manager has a good business reason to hire Sam over Alex. The manager also has a good social reason to hire Sam over Alex: Hiring Sam will result in more overall good than hiring Alex, even though Alex will suffer personally from not getting the job.

The catch is this: None of those reasons are why the hiring manager chooses Sam. The hiring manager chooses Sam because he wants to experience the pleasure of witnessing Alex's suffering.

As Todd Calder points out, this means that according to the theory of wrongness described above—an action is morally wrong if it brings about overall extreme harm—the hiring manager has done nothing wrong by hiring Sam. Still, it seems like this action is evil.

These cases suggest that extreme wrongdoing and evil are not the same thing. The concepts seem to come apart when pushed.

Evil Action and Harm

Another possibility is that evil actions are those that cause morally relevant harm. However, it still might be the case that some evil actions do no harm at all. To see this, consider a case from philosopher Luke Russell.

Imagine a voyeur who takes "great pleasure in witnessing extreme suffering." However, the voyeur is completely helpless: He cannot contribute to suffering or do anything to alleviate it. He is a completely passive spectator.

Russell claims that a case like this suggests that it's not essential for an evil action to cause harm. The reason for this is that the voyeur does not actually cause any harm to anyone, but the very act of watching and taking great pleasure in extreme suffering sure seems evil.

Objections to the Russell Case

One objection to Russell's example might be to say that the case doesn't tell us anything about evil action at all: It is the person who is evil, not the action. However, the problem isn't really with the person; instead, it is with the action in which the person is engaged.

To see this point, reimagine the case to feature someone who has never previously witnessed anything like this and who would never seek out such a spectacle, but who nonetheless derives great pleasure from an accidental experience. It seems plausible to say that the action of taking pleasure is evil, even if we don't want to say that the person is evil.

Another objection is to say that voyeuristic actions like this are evil partly because they actually do involve harm. This move is problematic because it exploits something that is not clear from the case.

That unclear factor is the cause of the extreme suffering the voyeur watches. If it is torture, then morally relevant harm is obviously involved because someone is causing the suffering. If, however, it is a naturally occurring bacterial infection, for instance, then matters are trickier. In this case, harm is not involved in the morally relevant sense because no one is bringing about the suffering.

An objector might still reply that naturally occurring suffering is close enough to harm, even though there no one bringing it about. The objector might point out that that is what really matters—evil action cannot be disentangled from suffering of some kind.

This certainly sounds like a sensible move, but the case can be modified yet again to get around it: Imagine that the voyeur enjoys watching simulated suffering of the very worst kind. In this case, both suffering and harm are gone. What can we say now?

At this point, the objector might reply that watching simulated suffering of the very worst kind ends up harming the voyeur himself. It harms him psychologically.

This, too, is a problematic response because it pushes hard against the stipulation that the act provides the voyeur with intense pleasure. Even if there are evil pleasures, which do in fact harm those who experience them, someone could still become so calloused and morally hardened that such voyeurism would do nothing further to damage them.

Conclusion

It seems that we have some good reasons to think that evil and harm come apart in a way that shows us that harm is neither necessary nor sufficient for an action to qualify as evil. The way we've pulled evil apart from harm suggests something very important for understanding the dark side of human nature.

It suggests that evil action is associated in some way with evil personhood. This is because what seems evil about the actions discussed in this lecture is that they are associated with inner states like intense pleasure.

SUGGESTED READING
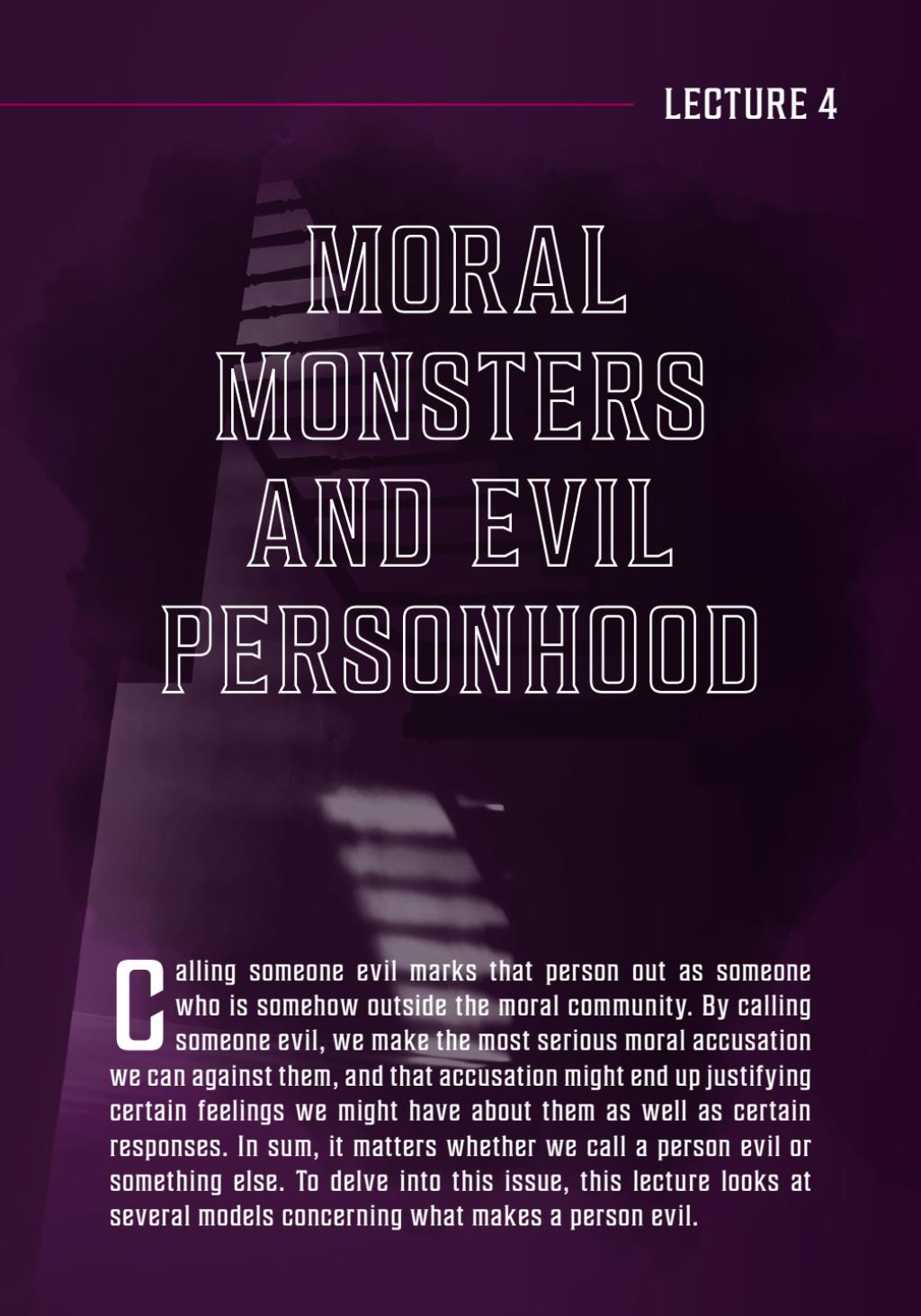
Calder, "The Concept of Evil."

Russell, *Evil*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1   Before working through this lecture, how would you have defined evil? Now that you've worked through it, what's your definition? Is it the same? Why or why not?

2   What is the privation theory of evil?

3   Can you think of an action that you would, without qualification, call evil? What does this example say about the nature of evil?

MORAL MONSTERS AND EVIL PERSONHOOD

Calling someone evil marks that person out as someone who is somehow outside the moral community. By calling someone evil, we make the most serious moral accusation we can against them, and that accusation might end up justifying certain feelings we might have about them as well as certain responses. In sum, it matters whether we call a person evil or something else. To delve into this issue, this lecture looks at several models concerning what makes a person evil.

The Evildoer Model

The most obvious way to identify evil people is through their behavior, and this might suggest that evil people are just evildoers. This lecture refers to this line of thought as the evildoer model.

Although this model has the ring of plausibility, it raises important questions. For instance, to cross that moral line, what matters? Is it the frequency of evildoing? That would make sense of someone like Hitler, a frequent evildoer, but a case of a person who infrequently commits evil acts would be more complicated.

Additionally, by focusing solely on what someone does, the model seems to miss important questions about who someone is. In other words, by focusing solely on external behavior, the model fails to account for the inner life of the evildoer—and it is the inner life that makes all the difference.

A 2017 Debate

During the 2017 debate in Louisiana over capital punishment, in his opposition to abolishing the death penalty, Assistant District Attorney Hugo Holland urged, "Life in prison just doesn't do it for some folks because they are that evil."

The Dispositional Model

Perhaps what matters for evil personhood is evil character—that is, being a certain sort of person. Luke Russell has suggested that we should think of evil people as those who are disposed to do evil things, not as those who actually do them. On this dispositional model, an evil person is someone who is "strongly and highly fixedly disposed to perform evil actions." Hitler and serial killer Ted Bundy are evil because they are the kinds of people who would do evil things.

This dispositional account of evil character allows us to avoid questions about how much evil someone must do to count as an evil person, and it helps us capture an intuition that some people are just evil, no matter what they've done. However, we might worry that the dispositional account suggests that too many people are evil.

This is because in certain kinds of situations, many normal people would do very bad—even evil—things. After all, studies like the famous Milgram experiment, in which everyday people obeyed orders to harm others, suggest that more or less ordinary people will do very bad things when pressured to do so.

Additionally, consider this story: A man named Eric burned his house down with his family inside. Before setting the fire, he strangled his two young sons. He killed himself as well. His wife escaped the house, but Eric had hidden her phone so that she couldn't call the police. However, what if Eric suffered from a specific mental illness that sparked his terrible deeds?

If he really suffered from a specific mental illness, then it's plausible that he was strongly and fixedly disposed to do the specific kind of evil things he in fact did. Yet it looks like his mental illness disqualifies him from being evil.

Russell himself agrees. He modifies his account to say that an evil person is someone who is "strongly and … fixedly disposed to perform evil actions when in autonomy-favoring conditions." This qualification would rule out ordinary folks whose autonomy is undermined by external factors found in Milgram-type experiments as well as people whose autonomy is undermined by internal factors like mental illness.

This modification makes it clear what it means for someone to be disposed to do evil. To be disposed to do evil, we can't just be manipulated into it or end up doing it because we're suffering from a disorder. To be disposed to do evil, we have to be the kinds of people who would do something evil, given conditions that allow us to determine how we act.

On this modified account, moreover, it might turn out that someone could be evil without ever actually doing anything evil, just as long as the person's character disposes him to act in certain ways. The problem here is that having a bad character doesn't seem sufficient for having an evil character, even if it's necessary.

The Affect Model

Many philosophers have acknowledged the importance of antisympathetic feelings. These are feelings associated with taking pleasure in another person's pain or suffering for its own sake. On the related affect model, someone has an evil character when they have or are at least disposed to have extreme antisympathetic feelings.

This model would explain what makes sadistic serial killers evil. They take great pleasure in inflicting extreme suffering on others, and they inflict that suffering for no other reason than to experience pleasure. It also helps explain why a helpless but sadistic voyeur could count as evil: On the affect model, taking great pleasure in witnessing extreme suffering, without actually causing the suffering, is sufficient for someone to count as evil.

As Todd Calder points out, however, even though some evil people take pleasure in extreme suffering, such sadism doesn't seem either necessary or sufficient for evil character. It doesn't seem sufficient because antisympathetic feelings might arise involuntarily.

Taking pleasure in extreme suffering doesn't seem necessary for evil character because it seems like someone could qualify as evil solely because of their indifference to human suffering. This kind of emotional detachment and disregard for others is the hallmark of the cold-blooded killer, who often serves as the symbol of evil. To return to an earlier example, Eric would still seem evil if he were completely indifferent to the suffering he inflicted on his family.

UNDERSTANDING THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

The Moral Monster Model

Perhaps the coldly indifferent killer who feels nothing and the sadistic killer who takes great pleasure in extreme suffering are both moral monsters. They have nothing in common with the typical person; they are of a radically different kind.

This is Daniel Haybron's position in his 2002 article "Moral Monsters and Saints," in which he notes, "There is nothing mysterious or alien about the psychological makeup of the average bad person. The evil person, by contrast, is not at all like us." The reason evil people are not like us, according to Haybron, is that they have no good side at all. They have either a deadened or a perverse moral sense.

Haybron recognizes that this moral monster model sounds both too demanding and too permissive. It might seem too demanding because it leaves out people who do extremely bad things but have a more or less normal sense of what's right and wrong. And it might seem too permissive because it doesn't require the evil person to do anything.

The model may have flaws, but it might be important because it tells us that calling anyone evil is dehumanizing and inherently problematic. Calling someone evil, on this model, means saying that they are not one of us—they are not truly human. If this is the case, then maybe it's not a good idea to call anyone evil.

Adopting this model would allow us to talk about evil people while making it more or less impossible for us to call any actual person evil. And if we can't actually call anyone evil, then we can't use that accusation to justify treating a person in any particular way.

Todd Calder has a potential counterexample to the moral monster mode. Consider the hypothetical Sandy, who cares deeply for her family and for many other people, but who also takes intense pleasure in torturing children to death on weekend getaways, even though she understands that it is deeply immoral to do so.

Sandy certainly seems like an evil person. Yet she's concerned about others, she recognizes moral reasons, and she often finds herself motivated to do what is right and good. If she's evil, then the moral monster model has missed the mark.

Conclusion

None of the four models discussed in this lecture has seemed obviously right, even though each of them has brought up certain intuitions about what an evil person is. Perhaps driving the confusion is the assumption that there is a single unified account of evil personhood—and perhaps assuming there is a single unified account is the problem.

This is what Luke Russell suggests in his book *Evil: A Philosophical Investigation*. The idea here is that we might want to adopt a conceptual pluralism about the concept of evil. Adopting this conceptual pluralism would mean that we recognize that there are a lot of different conceptions of evil and evil personhood, and it is hard to say which of these conceptions is objectively right.

If we adopt conceptual pluralism, we can recognize that some of the disagreements about evil personhood we've encountered are "merely linguistic disagreements." This turns on the word *evil*. Two people might agree on everything except whether someone is properly called evil, in which case the two people have different conceptions of evil.

Those two people might agree that an action was extremely wrong, that the person who performed the action had certain immoral motives, and that the action caused serious harm. Their only disagreement is about whether the person who committed the action is really evil.

Conceptual pluralism moves us away from asking questions about whether someone is truly evil and toward asking questions about which conception of evil we're employing. Still, we might wonder whether one conception of evil has a kind of primacy over the others.

SUGGESTED READING

Haybron, "Moral Monsters and Saints."

Russell, *Evil*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1   Do you think that doing evil things makes someone evil? Why or why not?

2   What's the difference between the dispositional model and the moral monster model of evil personhood? What model of evil personhood do you think is right?

3   What is conceptual pluralism regarding evil? Do you agree with it?

EVIL AND RESPONSIBILITY

Psychopathic killers like Robert Harris—a man executed for the murder of two teenage boys—are often seen as archetypes of evil. However, many psychologists and philosophers have also worried about whether psychopaths are really responsible for their actions. Therefore, being clear about the conditions for evil personhood is especially important.

This lecture explores the delicate boundary that separates ordinary people from people like Robert Harris. It is surprising how porous that boundary really is.

Psychopathy, Responsibility, and Evil

There is much disagreement about the nature and causes of psychopathy, about how to diagnose psychopathy, and about the relationship between psychopathy and other personality disorders.

However, we could start to make some progress by distinguishing between psychopathy and sociopathy. According to the Mayo Clinic, sociopathy is "a mental condition in which a person consistently shows no regard for right and wrong and ignores the rights and feelings of others ... [Sociopaths] tend to antagonize, manipulate or treat others harshly or with callous indifference."

According to criminal psychologist Robert Hare, psychopaths are extreme sociopaths. This means that all psychopaths are sociopaths, but not all sociopaths are psychopaths. The key difference between psychopathy and sociopathy is that sociopaths are able to form attachments with others in a way that psychopaths cannot.

Psychopaths seem to lack not only any feelings of remorse, guilt, and shame, but also any sense of empathy. This lack of empathy appears to result in an inability to recognize important moral facts.

In particular, psychopaths cannot reliably distinguish between conventional rules and moral rules. Conventional rules are rules that individuals and social groups create. In general, most of our laws are merely conventional, as are the rules associated with sports and games. In this sense, conventional rules are authority dependent. Their authority comes from outside them.

By contrast, moral rules aren't merely conventional. They are authority independent in the sense that their validity doesn't come from convention, agreement, or anywhere outside them. As philosopher Manuel Vargas puts it, "'conventional' rules rule out things because we (or some relevant group of us) say so, whereas 'moral' rules rule out things regardless of whether or not someone says so." Jaywalking is wrong because we say so; hitting people in the face with hammers is wrong no matter what anybody says.

EVIL AND RESPONSIBILITY

Psychopathy and Morality

In the 1980s, Elliot Turiel and his colleagues ran studies in which they asked children to consider some hypothetical scenarios. Their studies seemed to show that children as young as three grasped the difference between moral and conventional rules.

Even though very young children naturally grasp the distinction between conventional and moral rules, psychopaths perform very poorly on Turiel's moral-versus-conventional rules test. With this in mind, we might say that psychopaths are morally blind. Even when someone tries to explain the difference between conventional and moral rules to someone who suffers from psychopathy, they still don't grasp the difference, even if they learn how to pretend as if they do.

Psychopaths lack the capacity to understand moral demands as being morally relevant. Put another way, they understand that there is a demand, but they don't grasp those demands as being moral.

If all of this is right, then psychopaths are not blameworthy, but that doesn't mean we have to let them run amok. We could quarantine them, for instance, as if they had a contagious, deadly disease. But no matter how we feel about them, it seems as unreasonable to hold them morally responsible as it would be to blame someone who, through no fault of their own, contracted a highly contagious and very deadly disease.

Returning to the example of the murderer Robert Harris, a number of thinkers have suggested that Harris presents a paradigm case of psychopathy. This raises a question: Is Harris evil?

Harris laughed at the atrocities he committed. With this in mind, Harris seems like the archetypical evil person: He inflicts senseless and severe harm, he takes pleasure in the harm, and he seems altogether unlike typical people.

The philosopher Manuel Vargas thinks that this presents evidence that calling someone evil is to evaluate them as the very worst among us without taking a stand on how they became the bad people they are. For him, responsibility and evil come apart.

Legal Insanity, Responsibility, and Evil

This conclusion might make some people uneasy, however. After all, imagine that we were to discover that Robert Harris had been forced to commit his unspeakable acts, and to act as though he were taking pleasure in them, by gangsters who were holding his family for ransom.

This is a farfetched example that did not occur, but considering such a scenario is instructive. The introduction of duress and coercion reduces how responsible someone really is for what they've done. In the hypothetical case of diminished responsibly, is Robert Harris an evil person, or does he seem more like a conflicted and tortured man?

For the sake of argument, another scenario would be that Robert Harris suffered from a "defect of the mind." This would qualify him for the M'Naghten insanity defense, also known as the right-wrong test. This is the oldest insanity test, first introduced in England in 1843. It is also the most common insanity defense used in the United States

The M'Naghten Trial

Daniel M'Naghten believed that he was the target of a vast conspiracy involving the pope and prime minister of England. In a preemptive act, he attempted to shoot the prime minister, but he missed and killed the prime minister's secretary instead. During M'Naghten's trial, the jury found him not guilty by reason of insanity, noting his delusional beliefs about the prime minister. The public was outraged, however, and that forced the British House of Lords to develop a strict rule for legal insanity: the M'Naghten rule.

EVIL AND RESPONSIBILITY

According to the standards of the M'Naghten rule:

> To establish a defense on the ground of insanity, it must be clearly proved that, at the time of the committing of the act, the party accused was laboring under … a defect of reason, from disease of mind, and [did not] know the nature and quality of the act he was doing; or if he did know it, that he did not know he was doing what was wrong.

The M'Naghten rule stresses the importance of whether a defendant knows that what he's doing is wrong. This is what psychopaths have trouble with. The difference may be that the M'Naghten rule requires that this lack of moral knowledge be the result of a defect of the mind or a mental disease. Typical examples of such defects of the mind can range from schizophrenia and psychosis to traumatic brain injury.

Andrea Yates offers a real-life example of someone who was ultimately found not guilty by reason of insanity under the M'Naghten rule. On June 20, 2001, Andrea methodically drowned her five children in a bathtub. After laying her dead children on her bed, Andrea called the police. Her trial was controversial. Initially, she was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison, but that verdict was overturned.

In her retrial, she was found not guilty by reason of insanity and committed by the court to a mental facility. Andrea thought of herself as evil, saying as much when she explained why she killed her children to a prison psychiatrist. Andrea seemed to believe either that she was marked by Satan or that she was Satan himself. To save her children from herself and their doomed future with her, she felt that she had to kill them.

Andrea is not legally responsible for what she did, and if she really could not tell right from wrong when she committed her crimes, then it seems that she's also not morally responsible for killing her children. She seems less like a moral monster and more like a victim of her own mind.

UNDERSTANDING THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

Psychopathy and Cruelty

If it is difficult to call Andrea Yates evil, then perhaps we do care about how killers became the kind of person they are. This raises the question: What if Robert Harris became a psychopath not because of a disease of the mind, but because of his abusive upbringing?

We might not want to explore that difference because we might want to insist that Robert Harris, unlike Andrea Yates, was cruel. As Gary Watson notes, "Psychopaths are not just dangerous but cruel. They frequently enjoy forcing others into submission, for example."

Even if they don't understand that what they're doing is wrong, cruel people are perhaps responsible in the sense that we can attribute character flaws to them. We can note that their actions are vicious because they flow from their depraved dispositions.

On this way of seeing things, Robert Harris is significantly different from Andrea Yates. Now we have reasons to think that he is responsible, at least in a sense, for his actions. Because of this, it might seem perfectly reasonable to call him and other psychopathic killers evil.

But is a psychopathic killer like Robert Harris really cruel and contemptuous? Perhaps they don't actually understand moral demands, and they don't really grasp what makes their actions so awful.

According to the philosopher Dana Nelkin, it's a mistake to think that psychopaths are cruel. She's willing to grant that psychopathic killers take pleasure in their crimes and that they are insensitive to their victims, but she questions whether they are indifferent to human suffering in a way that would make them cruel.

Indifference is a matter of grasping moral facts, but not caring about them, whereas insensitivity is simply a matter of failing to grasp those facts. Psychopaths are insensitive but not indifferent, suggesting that they are perhaps neither contemptuous nor cruel.

Nelkin also argues that moral vices require moral understanding. Someone might derive pleasure from hurting others, but they cannot be cruel unless they understand the moral significance of what they're doing. If this is right, then psychopathic killers are not in fact contemptuous and cruel.

Active and Passive Members of a Moral Community

Responsibility and evil are intertwined. It is difficult to say that anyone who is not responsible in some morally relevant sense is evil. This is because calling someone evil is to acknowledge them as an active member of a moral community.

Being an active member of a moral community is different from being a passive member. Passive members are those beings—human beings and animals in particular—who are worthy of moral consideration. For an example of a passive member, take a cat: The cat's owner should treat his pet with kindness rather than cruelty.

Active members have certain obligations to passive members—obligations that a cat does not have. Active members are responsible for failing to live up to those obligations, whereas a cat, for instance, isn't.

Keep in mind that those who count as evil might dwell in the very darkest recesses of the human condition. Still, it seems that they occupy a space we all share, even though that thought may be uncomfortable.

SUGGESTED READING

Hare, *Without Conscience*.

Watson, "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil."
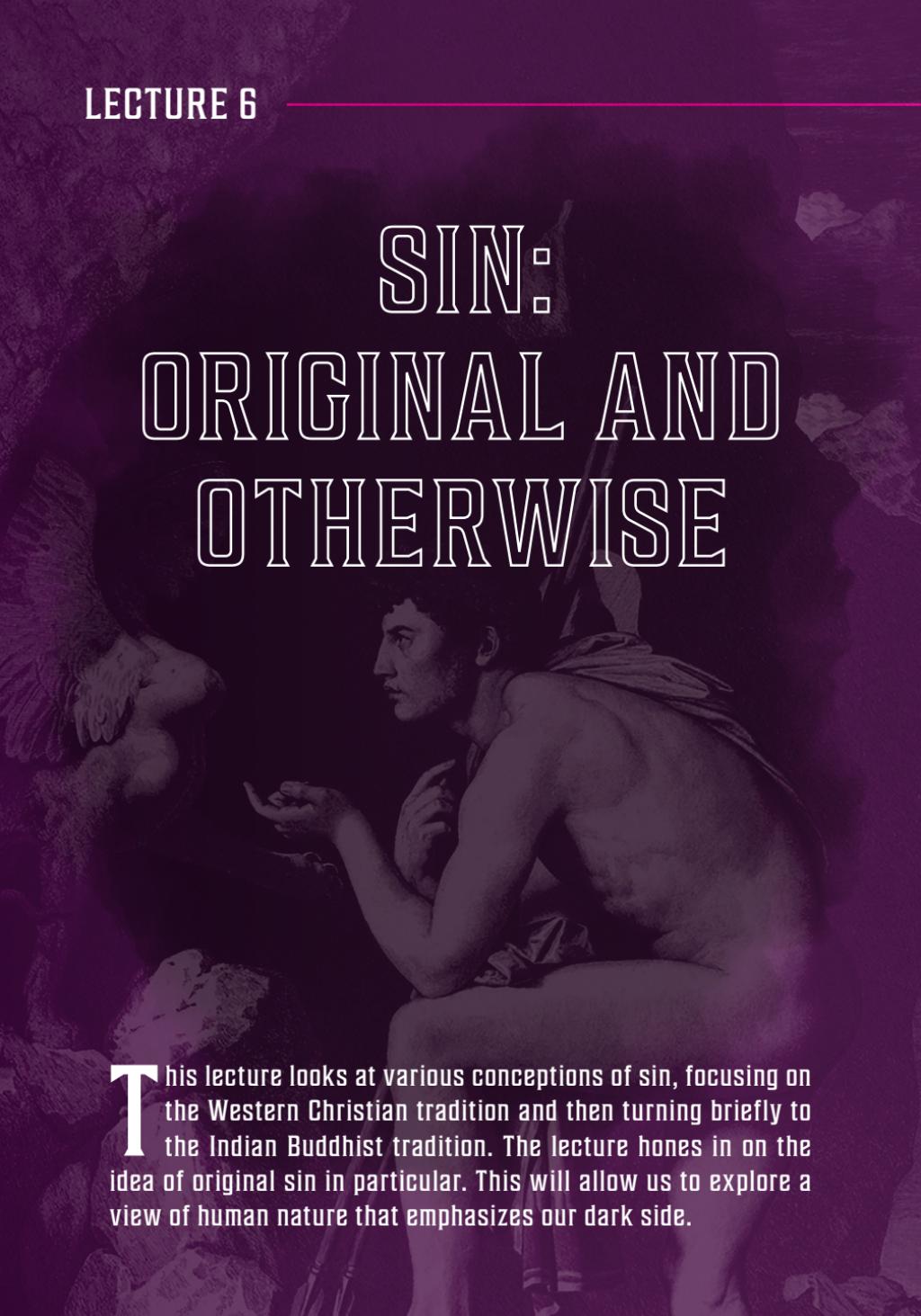
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1   What is the Turiel test? How does it help us understand psychopathy?

2   What do you think about the case of Robert Harris? Do you think he's a moral monster? Do you think he's responsible for his actions? What does reflecting on his case tell us about responsibility and evil?

3   What's the difference between legal insanity and psychopathy? What do you think about the case of Andrea Yates?

SIN: ORIGINAL AND OTHERWISE

This lecture looks at various conceptions of sin, focusing on the Western Christian tradition and then turning briefly to the Indian Buddhist tradition. The lecture hones in on the idea of original sin in particular. This will allow us to explore a view of human nature that emphasizes our dark side.

Sin in the Christian Tradition

In the New Testament, the idea of sin can sometimes be read as falling short of the goal. Another metaphor that is emphasized is a crossing of a line. This is sin in the sense of transgression or doing what we're not supposed to do.

Putting these two notions of sin together, we get the idea of sin as missing the mark set for us by God and as crossing the boundaries established for us by God. Often, these standards and boundaries are understood in terms of God's law, as in the First Epistle of John, which tells us that sin is lawlessness. But at other times, all wrongdoing is considered sinful.
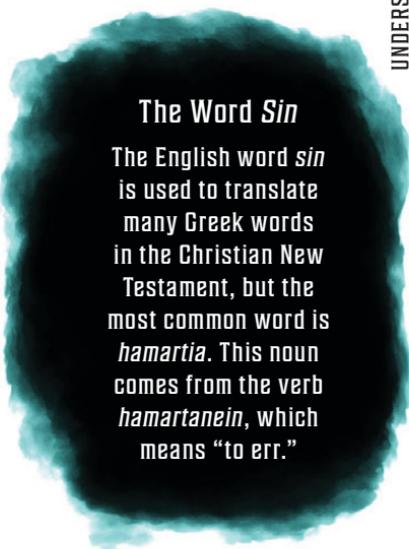
All of this suggests rather strikingly that sin is an act. It is wrongdoing, and wrongdoing is to miss the mark set for us by God and to transgress the rules God has established for us.

In the gospels, however, Jesus sometimes seems to challenge this understanding of sin as an act. For example, in Matthew 5, he suggests that we can miss the mark and transgress boundaries without doing anything at all; merely thinking or feeling a certain way seems to be enough for us to sin.

The Word *Sin*

The English word *sin* is used to translate many Greek words in the Christian New Testament, but the most common word is *hamartia*. This noun comes from the verb *hamartanein*, which means "to err."

We might read this in at least two ways. We might think that Jesus means that sin begins in the mind; it begins with intentions and feelings and thoughts, and so we should guard against bad thoughts so that we don't act on them in the future. This can be called the weak reading.

On the strong reading, by contrast, we might think that Jesus is suggesting that sin is not fundamentally about wrongdoing. It's about having a certain state of mind. In particular, it's about having certain habits of mind.

This strong reading of Jesus's words brings us to an important distinction between two ways of thinking about sin. The first is sin as wrongdoing; the second is sin as vice. As wrongdoing, sin is centrally an act (or perhaps an omission); it's something we do. As vice, by contrast, sin is centrally a temperament, a habit of mind associated with a disposition to act.

Thomas Aquinas and Augustine

In his *Summa theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas considers which is worse: sin as vice or sin as vicious act. Aquinas thinks that the only real reason we call a disposition sinful is that it results in sinful or bad acts.

For Aquinas, our dispositions might themselves be ambiguous. Anger, when moderated, serves justice. However, it is also dangerous because it can drive us beyond the bounds of reason and God's law in such a way that, though we had the right target in mind, we nonetheless miss the mark.

In the case of Augustine of Hippo, the great Christian philosopher, the idea that thoughts, feelings, and desires can be sinful in themselves is more plausible than for Aquinas. Aquinas thinks we should see dispositions and desires as leading to sin but not as properly sin. For Augustine, however, our desires can be sins. In other words, he seems to take the strong reading of Jesus' words in Matthew.

Sin, for Augustine, is playing by our own rules and making our own standards. Sinful desires are desires to be like God while denying our dependence on God.

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Original Sin

This brings us to the concept of original sin, a concept Augustine is often credited with inventing, though the seeds of the doctrine were sown by the apostle Paul in Romans 5:12. This is the how the passage is translated in the New Revised Standard Version of the New Testament: "Just as sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned."

Augustine takes Paul to mean that all humans have inherited sin from Adam. We are born sinful in the sense that through Adam's voluntary choice to turn away from God, human nature has been stained with sin.

According to Augustine, Adam and Eve biologically passed their sins down to us. We have not only received the disease of sin from our ancestral parents, however. Augustine thinks we have also received the guilt associated with their sin. Our fallen human nature, then, is corrupt and culpable.

There are three important ideas to keep in mind here. The first is Adam's primal sin, which is the result of Adam's free choice. Next is the idea of original sin, which is the corrupted nature that all of humanity inherits from Adam. And finally, there is original guilt, the culpability associated with the state of original sin.

Explaining Original Sin

Different strands of the Christian tradition offer different perspectives on original sin, but the traditional view includes these three important ideas. The trick, for someone like Augustine, is to explain not only exactly how we all inherit Adam's sin but also exactly how we all inherit Adam's guilt.

Very roughly, theologians have taken one of two approaches. The first is realism and the second is attributionism. Augustine himself endorses realism, according to which Adam's sin and Adam's guilt are, somehow, truly ours.

SIN: ORIGINAL AND OTHERWISE

John Calvin, the 16th-century century French theologian, endorses attributionism. According to this, Adam's sin and Adam's guilt are not strictly speaking ours, but they have been attributed to us by God.

There is yet another way of thinking about original sin. So far, this lecture has treated sin itself as primarily a moral category. This is the moral conception of sin—that is, sin as a missing of the mark and as a transgression.

The late Marilyn McCord Adams, an influential philosopher and priest of the Episcopal Church, suggests that this conception of sin is religiously inadequate. By explaining sin in terms of morality, either we reduce the concept of sin to more fundamental moral concepts, thereby making an idol of morality in favor of God, or we secularize the concept of sin in a way that even the non-religious can accept, thereby trivializing the concept.

Put differently, Adams thinks that the moralistic conception of sin is too human-centered—too anthropomorphic. She thinks we need a God-centered analysis of sin.

For Adams, the very concept of sin provides the resources we need to understand original sin. We are original sinners because of our nature as creatures—a nature that is necessarily inferior to God's. Adams thinks of this as sin as uncleanness, but we might also think of it as the relational conception of sin, as opposed to the moralistic conception.

The Buddhist Conception of Sin

The Indian Buddhist tradition has a very different conception of sin. In fact, it's so different that many scholars worry about attributing the concept of sin to Buddhist thinkers. The concept requires a divine lawmaker and, according to the Indian Buddhist tradition, there is no divine being whose commandments might be transgressed or whose standards we might fail to live up to.

However, the Buddhist tradition recognizes unwholesome actions that bring about negative effects. The Sanskrit word for this is *papa*, which refers to an unwholesome action that produces negative effects for us and others in this or a future life.

Papa is the opposite of *punya*, which refers to wholesome actions that lead to happiness in this or a future life. Both are concepts that make sense only in the context of rebirth and karma. Actions that count as *papa* bring about bad consequences for those who perform them, whereas actions that count as *punya* bring about good consequences for those who perform them.

In this sense, then, *papa* is sin: actions that count as *papa* defile those who perform them in such a way that they carry the seeds of these actions with them throughout this and future lives. This goes on until their sinful actions bear their unwholesome fruit, causing pain, or until they achieve liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth when, in a state of nirvana, all unwholesome seeds are destroyed and the stain of sin is finally cleansed.

This Buddhist conception of sin can be positioned as a view of sin as karmic defilement. Sin stains us; we are not necessarily originally stained, but through sin, we stain ourselves in ways that we are responsible for cleansing.

SIN: ORIGINAL AND OTHERWISE

This conception of sin is compatible with acts, dispositions, thoughts, and with feelings. For the Indian Buddhist tradition, what matters most in determining the karmic consequences of our actions is the state of mind associated with them.

SUGGESTED READINGS
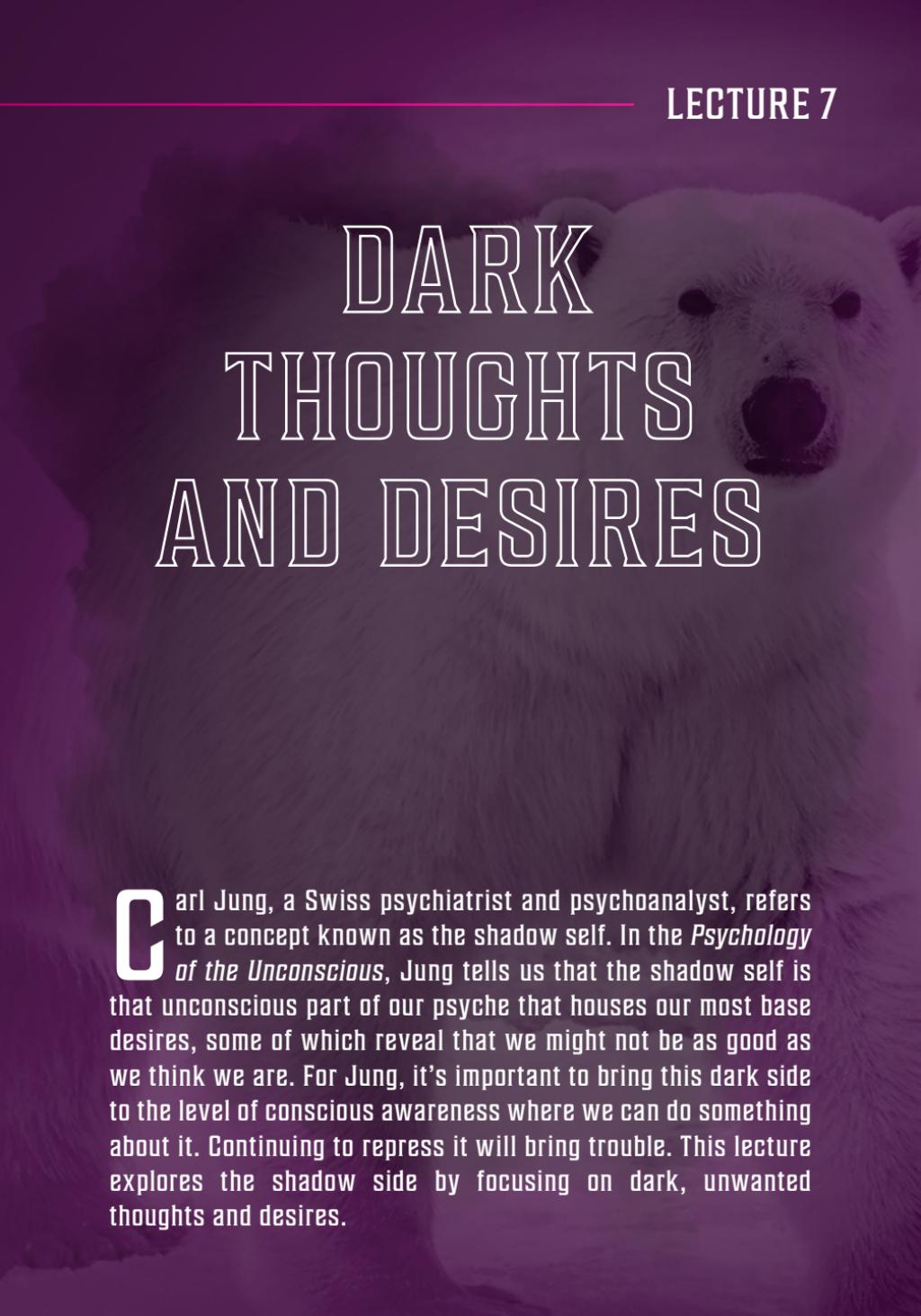
Adams, "Sin as Uncleanness."

Wyma, "Innocent Sinfulness, Guilty Sin."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1   How would you define sin? Do you think sin is a specifically religious notion, or do you think we could naturalize sin and make it a secular concept?

2   What is the difference between the Buddhist and the Christian concept of sin?

3   Does the concept of original sin make sense to you? What do you think of Wyma's Molinist account of original sin?

DARK THOUGHTS AND DESIRES

Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, refers to a concept known as the shadow self. In the *Psychology of the Unconscious*, Jung tells us that the shadow self is that unconscious part of our psyche that houses our most base desires, some of which reveal that we might not be as good as we think we are. For Jung, it's important to bring this dark side to the level of conscious awareness where we can do something about it. Continuing to repress it will bring trouble. This lecture explores the shadow side by focusing on dark, unwanted thoughts and desires.

Intrusive and Murderous Thoughts

A study run by Adam Radomsky at Concordia University suggests that most people have intrusive or upsetting thoughts. The study surveyed 777 college students in 13 countries. It found that more than 90 percent of the respondents had intrusive thoughts at least once in the past three months, with most saying they'd had them more than once.

Intrusive thoughts are unwanted thoughts. A relatively benign example is someone worrying they forgot to lock their door, but some intrusive thoughts are darker than that. Take, for example, thinking about killing someone.

David Buss, a psychology professor at the University of Texas, studied such thoughts. After finding out that one of his colleagues had murderous thoughts, Buss wondered how many people really have them. He surveyed the students in his introduction to psychology course and asked them whether they had fantasized about murder.

He found that about three-quarters of them had. Next, he surveyed 5,000 people from around the world and discovered that 91 percent of men and 84 percent of women have thought about killing someone in some way.

Buss's theory tells us that we all have "specialized psychological circuits that lead us to contemplate murder as a solution to adaptive problems." We almost all have homicide fantasies, at least some times, because having them has been good for survival.

These dark thoughts, however, typically remain merely thoughts, Buss suggests, because once we have them, we're able to consider them for what they are. On reflection, we're able to dampen our violent urges and get ourselves under control before acting out on them.

Considering Dark Thoughts

People tend not to want to know about their dark thoughts. Unwanted and intrusive thoughts seem different from thoughts and desires we acknowledge as our own.

We might explain this by distinguishing between those thoughts and desires that represent our real self and those that don't. The American philosopher Harry Frankfurt has an influential and helpful way of thinking about all of this. In developing a theory of autonomy, Frankfurt suggests that we should identify the real self with our second-order desires, rather than first-order desires.

To make sense of this, consider an example: A person who wants to eat ice cream has a first-order desire. However, if he does not truly want to eat ice cream—that is, if he is conflicted about it—he does not have a second-order desire that the first-order desire come to fruition. He does not want to want to eat ice cream.

Frankfurt suggests that when our second-order desires do not match up with our first-order desires, we are alienated from our first-order desires. To take an example from philosophy professor Laura Ekstrom, consider a personal injury attorney who experiences a desire to look at grisly photos of an accident victim. But he stops himself, asks why he has this desire, and cannot come with a good answer. His second-order desire does not want his first-order desire to become effective.

In a later development of his theory, Frankfurt suggests the attorney is alienated from his first-order desires because he does not wholeheartedly identify with his dark desire. According to Frankfurt, we are wholehearted when we have no conflicts in our desires and no ambivalence about what we want.

Ekstrom also provides perspective on this. On Ekstrom's account, we own our desires only if they embody our conception of the good, because they have arisen from a process of critical evaluation. These critically evaluated desires are what she calls preferences, and to really count as our own, they have to integrate with other preferences in a stable support system that effectively constitutes the real self. The reason our attorney's dark desire says little about him, morally speaking, is because it's not an integrated preference.

Schadenfreude

Schadenfreude—finding joy in someone else's misfortune—is a dark feeling. In fact, extreme versions of schadenfreude would probably count as evil. The voyeur who does not bring about terrible suffering but who experiences high levels of pleasure while watching someone being tortured would, it seems, be experiencing an evil feeling.

In the Buddhist tradition, thoughts and feelings like schadenfreude are seen as poisonous: They are an important part of the complex of causes that trap us in the cycle of death and rebirth and cut us off from liberation and enlightenment.

In response to this, the Buddhist tradition has emphasized *mudita*, or appreciative joy. Appreciative joy is finding joy in the happiness and success of others. It cultivates a sense of joy in the happiness and success in others in a way that battles both schadenfreude and indifference.

The Buddha

It seems like it would be perfectly reasonable to think that the Buddha himself, as an enlightened being, would have practiced appreciative joy in such a way as to completely eradicate any trace of schadenfreude. For that matter, it seems like it would be perfectly reasonable to think that the Buddha himself, as an enlightened being, would have eradicated all dark thoughts, desires, and feelings.

According to the Buddhist scholar Stephen Batchelor, this might not be quite right. To see this, he asks us to consider the Buddha's temptation by Mara, the Buddhist equivalent of the devil. Mara challenges the Buddha by tempting him in various ways—with sensual pleasure, with violence, and with doubt. The Buddha battles against these temptations and ultimately triumphs.

However, Batchelor wants to emphasize that the "Buddha and Mara are figurative ways of portraying a fundamental opposition within human natures." As he puts it, "When Buddha-nature prevails, fixations ease and the world brightens, revealing itself as empty, contingent, and fluid. When Mara-nature dominates, fixations tighten, and the world appears opaque, necessary, static."

These two natures are inseparable, according to Batchelor. This means that none of us, including the perfect Buddha, can disentangle them. Even perfect comes with darkness.
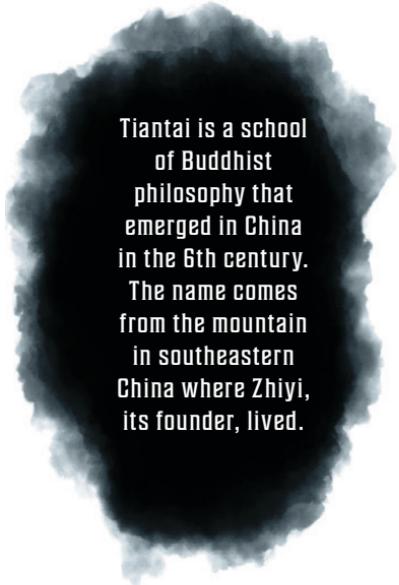
Tiantai Thoughts

Batchelor's ideas connect with what the Tiantai Buddhist philosophers Zhiyi and Zhili have to say about the relationship between dark thoughts and moral and even spiritual perfection.

Tiantai Buddhism focuses on explaining the subtle doctrine of emptiness. It's in explaining this doctrine that Zhiyi and later Zhili suggest that even the Buddha had dark thoughts.

Tiantai is a school of Buddhist philosophy that emerged in China in the 6th century. The name comes from the mountain in southeastern China where Zhiyi, its founder, lived.

The Tiantai philosophers hold that one instant of consciousness—a single thought—contains all worlds. There are 3,000 worlds when we add up all the different realms of rebirth. A single thought contains the 3,000 worlds in the sense that the mind reflects those worlds.

If all of reality is reflected in any single aspect of reality, and some realms of reality contain evil, then reality itself contains evil. Even the Buddha's mind contains evil, because each thought in the Buddha's mind reflects or contains all other thoughts. If there is evil at all, then evil is everywhere, even in the Buddha's mind. If there is good at all, then good is everywhere, even in the devil's mind.

In this view, even a perfect person—morally perfect, spiritually perfect, all that—shares in our imperfections and, in particular, our dark thoughts. It seems it is impossible to get rid of them unless everyone gets rid of them. This might be disconcerting, but the basic idea is that having dark thoughts, at least on this view, is so normal that not even a perfect person could completely eradicate them.

In our fundamental nature, all of us have the potential for dark thoughts, even the Buddha. Because we can't hope to eradicate this potential, the important factor is how we cultivate our fundamental nature.

On this way of thinking, the Buddha needs to actively cultivate himself even after achieving enlightenment by practicing things like appreciative joy. For us, this suggests that perfection is not an ultimate accomplishment but an ongoing achievement—that is, a continuous journey.

The Buddhist tradition is vast, and not all Buddhist thinkers would agree with this characterization of the Buddha. However, the Tiantai school provides an interesting view of what perfection might look like. Perfection might include a potential dark side beneath the surface. In particular, perfection might be compatible with the always-present potential for dark thoughts and desires.

SUGGESTED READING

Batchelor, "Living with the Devil."

Pincott, "Wicked Thoughts."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 How would you define a dark thought?

2 Do you think that even the very best of us have dark thoughts?

3 What is the difference between a first-order desire and a second-order desire, and how does that help us think about dark thoughts and desires?

SUFFERING AND ITS CAUSES

The Greek philosopher Epicurus presented an analogy that can be framed in this way: Just as medicine diagnoses and treats the diseases of the body that cause physical suffering, philosophy diagnoses and treats the diseases of the soul that cause psychological suffering.

Epicurus is not alone in thinking this way. Many Hellenistic philosophers, who flourished in ancient Athens and then Rome from roughly the fourth century BCE to the second century CE, agree with him. The dominant schools of Hellenistic philosophy included Epicureanism (named after Epicurus himself), Stoicism, and skepticism. Indian Buddhist philosophers also agree with Epicurus.

This lecture explores this way of thinking about the human condition. It also examines the nature and causes of psychological suffering. The lecture focuses on the Indian Buddhist tradition's analysis of suffering while drawing connections with contemporary work in evolutionary psychology.

UNDERSTANDING THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

The Nature of Suffering

After achieving enlightenment, Siddhartha Gautama, now the Buddha, thought long and hard about how he would communicate his insights to others in a way they could understand. At the center of his message, he emphasized the Four Noble Truths.

Roughly, the Four Noble Truths are the truth of suffering, the truth of origination, the truth of cessation, and the truth of the path. In *The Path of Purification*, the 5th-century Buddhist philosopher Buddhaghosa explains the Four Noble Truths this way:

> The truth of suffering is like a disease, the truth of origin is like the cause of the disease, the truth of cessation is like the cure of the disease, and the truth of the path is like the medicine.

Buddhaghosa provides a medical analogy that is very similar to the analogy Epicurus offers. On Buddhaghosa's reading, the Four Noble Truths have the form of a medical diagnosis, along with a treatment plan.

As for suffering itself, Buddha summarizes the truth of suffering with these words: "In brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering." For the Buddha, there are five different aspects of us as persons: the physical body, feelings, perceptions, volitions, and consciousness.

Each of these aspects is subject to clinging—that is, each aspect is involved in our lifelong struggle to obtain what we want and avoid what we don't want. However, no matter how hard we try, nothing lasts. That fact itself is suffering because it is so unsatisfying.

SUFFERING AND ITS CAUSES

Types of Suffering

There are at least three kinds of suffering, or three kinds of *dukkha*. The first is *dukkhadukkhata*. This is the kind of suffering associated most closely with mental and physical pain and our aversion to what we find unpleasant.

The second kind of suffering is *viparinamadukkhata*, or suffering associated with change. This kind of suffering is paradoxically bound up with pleasant experiences. Pleasurable feelings are such that, if we continue doing whatever brings us pleasure, we'll end up experiencing pain.

Other Causes of Suffering

Although this lecture focuses on craving as the most salient cause of suffering, it's important to note that, given the Buddhist commitment to the view that everything arises from complex causal conditions, there is no single or first cause of suffering. Instead, there is a complex set of causes that leads to suffering. Ignorance, aversion, attachment, and craving all come together to produce suffering.

The third and final kind of suffering is *samskaradukkhata*, or suffering inherent in conditioning factors. This kind of suffering is associated with the fact that experiences that seem neutral—neither pleasant nor unpleasant—in one moment might end up changing in the next.

Craving and Suffering

According to the Buddha, this is the second truth—that is, the truth of the origin of suffering:

> It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.

The important Sanskrit word here is *trishna*, which means something akin to an overpowering desire or a craving. If suffering is the human disease, then craving is the cause. The cessation of suffering, which the third noble truth tells us is possible, is accomplished by getting rid of craving, which, according to the Buddha, we can do following the path offered in the fourth noble truth.

According to the second noble truth, however, there are three kinds of craving: craving for what is pleasurable, craving for existence, and craving for extermination. Craving for what is pleasurable is straightforward. Craving for existence can be understood in terms of our strong desire for self-preservation. Craving for extermination is a craving for the elimination of everything that we judge to be negative. However, none of these can be permanent.

Even if we have a craving for something that does last forever—perhaps nirvana itself, the complete cessation of suffering—the problem, at least according to the Buddha, is that craving of any kind presupposes that we are stable enough to possess something permanent. However, this is wrong: We are also impermanent; there is no stable self, according to the Buddha, that could permanently possess anything. Craving is fundamentally delusional.

The Truth of Suffering

In his book *Why Buddhism Is True*, the evolutionary psychologist Robert Wright notes that our complex evolutionary history has produced human animals that are, as he puts it, recurrently dissatisfied. To stay alive and to get our genes into the next generation, we have to do things like eat and mate. But we have to keep doing these things over and over.

We can't just eat and feel completely satisfied, because we wouldn't eat again—and we'd die. We can't just have sex once and feel completely satisfied, because we wouldn't reliably pass on our genes. Wright argues that we are hardwired to crave good things in a way that's never fully satisfying—and that is the Buddha's diagnosis of the human condition.

SUFFERING AND ITS CAUSES

Wright notes that our brains have evolved to process thoughts, perceptions, and feelings that contribute to the goal of passing our genes on; they have not evolved to process thoughts, perceptions, and feelings that accurately represent how the world really is. That doesn't mean we're systematically deceived, but it does mean that we tend to represent the world in ways that contribute to survival and reproduction.

We tend to overestimate how satisfying pleasures like food and sex will be, and we underestimate how fleeting those pleasures really are. This is a good thing from the perspective of evolution, because it enhances survival and reproduction, but it's not so great either for our sense of reality or for our personal sense of satisfaction.

SUGGESTED READING

Batchelor, *After Buddhism*.
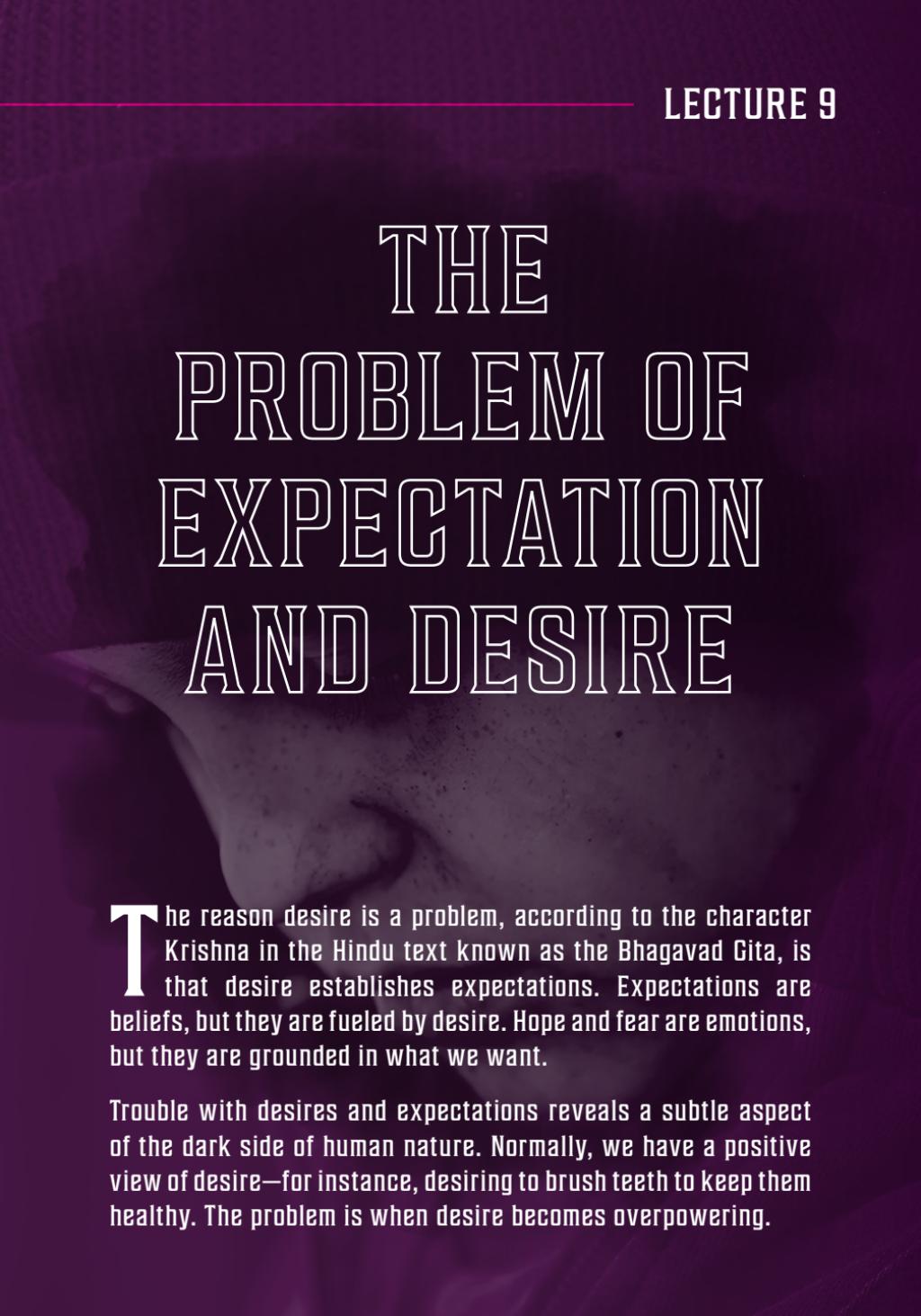
Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What do you think about the claim that we're all suffering? Is suffering the same as pain?

2 What is Buddhaghosa's medical analogy, and how does Batchelor's interpretation of the Four Noble Truths differ from this traditional reading?

THE PROBLEM OF EXPECTATION AND DESIRE

The reason desire is a problem, according to the character Krishna in the Hindu text known as the Bhagavad Gita, is that desire establishes expectations. Expectations are beliefs, but they are fueled by desire. Hope and fear are emotions, but they are grounded in what we want.

Trouble with desires and expectations reveals a subtle aspect of the dark side of human nature. Normally, we have a positive view of desire—for instance, desiring to brush teeth to keep them healthy. The problem is when desire becomes overpowering.

THE PROBLEM OF EXPECTATION AND DESIRE

The Disciplined Way of Action

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna provides advice to the warrior Arjuna, who is torn between two paths. He is facing a battle in which he has friends and family members on the opposing side, so he thinks he either has to attack them and fail in his familial duties or refrain and fail as a warrior.

According to Krishna, Arjuna has various paths to liberation. He can seek insight into reality by following the disciplined path of knowledge, he can devote himself to God by following the disciplined path of devotion, or he can abandon desire by following the disciplined way of action. The first two paths play important roles in the Hindu tradition, but this lecture will focus exclusively on the third path.

On this path, Krishna advises Arjuna, we abandon our desires and expectations, acting in the world without being a part of the world. We lose who we imagine ourselves to be and merge into the true self: the atman. The atman is the self that lies behind who we take ourselves to be; it's who we really are, deep down in our essence.

This notion is central to the Gita, but we can gloss over it for the moment simply by noting that the basic idea is that by abandoning desire and expectation, we can let go of who we usually take ourselves to be, lose our sense of self, and merge, somehow, into something more fundamental. That's what the atman is; it's fundamentally who we are.

By following a disciplined path of action, we merge with who we really are through a thoroughgoing absorption in activity. We detach ourselves from our typical concerns, losing any hope for success and abandoning any worries about the future.

The disciplined path of action does not advise non-action. Instead, it advises desire-less action, or in Sanskrit, *nishkamakarma*. This can be understood in two ways. The first is detachment from the objects of desire. The second way is that it means removing desire altogether.

The Necessity of Desire

This lecture now turns to the question of whether it is possible for anyone to act on purpose, or voluntarily, without desire. Desires are about how we'd like the world to be. If a person desires a glass of water, but finds that there's no water around, the desire doesn't go away. It might even become stronger.

With this in mind, the philosopher Michael Smith offers the direction of fit argument. Among other things, to have a motivating reason is to have a goal. To have a goal, however, is to be in a state with which the world must fit. But to be in such a state just is to have a desire. Therefore, motivation and intentional goal-oriented action require the presence of some kind of desire.

One response to Smith's argument is to claim that Krishna advises Arjuna not to act on desire in a special sense. He's telling Arjuna that his actions should not arise primarily from desires. He's not telling him that he shouldn't have any desires at all.

Another response to Smith's direction of fit argument is to say that acting on purpose is really acting based on what one cares about, but that caring about something is not to have a desire for it. Instead, caring is a form of evaluation that we can understand in cognitive terms.

Perhaps we can deny that voluntary action is goal oriented at all. The philosopher Russ Shafer-Landau takes this line, arguing, "an agent may be motivated by evaluative beliefs without at the same time having a goal to be brought about thereby."

This is an interesting response to Smith's argument, and it might show that we don't need desires to act. However, it might still seem mysterious what desire-less action would look like.

THE PROBLEM OF EXPECTATION AND DESIRE

Flow Experiences

What would it look like to act without desire in the sense that we are detached from any expectations, hopes, or fears about outcomes? The answer might lie in detached action in the form of what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls flow experiences.

In flow experiences, we tend to lose track of ourselves in skilled activity that is intrinsically rewarding—that is, in activities that do not look beyond themselves for completion. In such states, we also tend to find deep satisfaction.

A flow experience is a kind of detached engagement. It's the kind of experience a great writer might have while being lost in the experience of writing, a great basketball player might have when completely absorbed in the game, and a musician might have while getting lost in the music.

> Flow experiences are not the same thing as zoning out. For instance, daydreaming while driving home is not a flow experience.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, people find flow experiences far more satisfying than the typical pleasures we pursue. The gratification we derive from active flow experiences contrasts sharply with the pleasure we derive from passive experiences such as binge watching our favorite shows.

Csikszentmihalyi claims that flow experiences are intrinsically motivating. When we are engaged in them, we don't look for something outside them; they are complete in and of themselves. Additionally, flow experiences are valuable in and of themselves, rather than being merely instrumentally valuable. The philosopher Joel Kupperman has suggested that this is the kind of psychological state Krishna advises Arjuna to adopt.

A Life of Flow?

One concern is that flow experiences are temporary. Is it really possible for someone like Arjuna to live a life of flow? Csikszentmihalyi identifies a certain personality type, the autotelic personality, which does experience extended periods of flow.

These are people who have a self-goal. The idea here, roughly, is that such people are self-sufficient in the sense that they have their own motivating ends; they aren't looking outside themselves all the time for satisfaction.

To return to the Bhagavad Gita, this means that Arjuna can act as he must—he can perform his duty and enter into the great battle—while at the same time losing his sense of self in a way that makes his actions selfless and in a way that eliminates any concern he might have for any particular outcome.

For us, this means that if we agree that desire and expectation are in fact a subtle aspect of the dark side of human nature, it might also be possible for us to live, at least for the most part, without them, immersed in the flowing current of our own lives.

SUGGESTED READING

Bhagavad Gita

Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow.*

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What is Arjuna's dilemma? How is it related to the problem of desire?

2 What are flow experiences? How do they help us resolve the problem of desire?

3 What is the paradox of liberation? How is it related to the problem of desire?

THE FEAR OF DEATH

In his book *The Denial of Death*, the cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker argues that most of what we do is in fact driven by our fear of death. Like Becker, the Roman philosopher Lucretius and the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi also think that the fear of death dominates our attention, driving us into organized religion and causing us to act in ways that go against our best interests.

This lecture considers what Lucretius, Zhuangzi, and other thinkers have to say about our fear of death. Then, the lecture discusses whether immortality—genuine immortality as eternal life after bodily death—would actually be all that desirable.

UNDERSTANDING THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

Zhuangzi on Death

Zhuangzi was a Daoist philosopher who lived in the 4th century BCE. His work denies the badness of death. In one of his arguments, Zhuangzi emphasizes our ignorance about the nature of death. He asks, "How do I know that loving life is not a mistake? How do I know that hating death is not like a lost child forgetting its way home?"

Zhuangzi thinks that, if we regard life as good, we have to regard death as good. This is because death is the completion of life; the function of life is to work and the function of death is to give us a break from that toil—to give us rest.

For death to give us rest, it seems Zhuangzi has to assume that we continue to exist in some way after death. Along with birth, death for Zhuangzi is another stage in transformation.

Qi—which is energy or breath—comes together to form things. Things die when the qi that composes them fragments. In death, our bodies will return to the earth. Our energy will dissipate into the world. But our bodies will nourish other things: animals, plants, and soil. Our energy will continue to form new things.

Socrates on Death

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates provides a different reason to think that death might not be so bad after all. He states: "Being dead is one of two things: either the dead are nothing, as it were, and have no awareness whatsoever of anything at all; or else, as we're told, it's some sort of change, a migration of the soul from here to another place."

If death is simply a lack of awareness, then it would somewhat line up with Zhuangzi's view that death is a rest from life. Socrates thinks that it would be a great advantage to dreamlessly sleep so deeply that the whole of time would seem no more than a single night.

THE FEAR OF DEATH

Epicurus on Death

The Greek philosopher Epicurus suggests that the state of death is not bad, because "when we are, death is not come, and when death is come, we are not." The idea here is that we are never actually dead, because we cease to exist at the moment of death, and so being dead "is nothing to us."

At least on one reading, his point is that death is not bad because death can't be bad for us. When we're alive, death isn't yet bad for us. This is because we're not dead.

When we're dead, death isn't bad for us. This is because we no longer exist. There is no time when death is actually bad for us, and because it's not actually bad, there is nothing to fear.

Lucretius on Death

Lucretius, a Roman philosopher and follower of Epicurus, also thinks that death isn't actually bad for us. To show this, he picks up on the comparative aspect of the deprivation account.

It's true, Lucretius admits, that after we die we won't experience all the goods life has to offer. After we die, we will cease to exist, and our nonexistence will last indefinitely. That might sound bad, but Lucretius wants to consider things from a different perspective.

Consider that, before we were born, we also failed to exist, and our nonexistence also lasted indefinitely. Lucretius points out that because our postmortem nonexistence is exactly analogous to our prenatal nonexistence, consistency requires that we recognize that our postmortem nonexistence isn't bad for us, either. Therefore, we have no reason to fear it. In other words, our fear of death is irrational.

Postmortem and Prenatal Nonexistence

Consider this example: When a person thinks about what it would be like if she were born earlier, she probably doesn't imagine living a longer life. Instead, she probably imagines living in a different time period. However, this probably is not what she imagines when she wonders what things would be like if she were to die later. Instead, she imagines extending her current life—that is, living longer.

According to the philosopher Fred Feldman, this explains why we care about postmortem nonexistence and not prenatal nonexistence. When we think about dying later, we think about living longer and experiencing more of the goods that life has to offer, but when we think about living earlier, we think about having more or less the same life with more or less the same goods but at an earlier time.

In general, we care more about postmortem nonexistence because we think it deprives us of something we otherwise might have had. That's not the case when we think about prenatal nonexistence. Another way of saying this is that we seem to care more about our future existence than our past existence.

Lucretius might reply that this is fair enough. It is obvious that we regard the future in this way, but this doesn't justify our concerns. It doesn't show that our worries about postmortem nonexistence are rational.

The Fear of Death

The reasonable fear of death is what helps us avoid carelessly jumping off cliffs and eating poisonous foods. Our preference for what happens to us in the future over what happened in the past is related to this reasonable fear of death, because both allow us to make forward-looking decisions.

By contrast, the irrational fear of death plays only a debilitating role in practical deliberation. The irrational fear of death is the terror we feel when we think of death itself, a terror that shakes us and misleads us. It's that terror that Lucretius wants to eliminate more than anything else.

With this distinction in mind, we might find the arguments we've seen against the fear of death far more plausible. It would be biologically disastrous for us to eliminate all fear of death from our deliberation; we'd go extinct as a species.

However, eliminating the irrational fear of death—the terror of death—doesn't sound so bad. Being haunted by the specter of death is not ideal. If death itself isn't something so awful, then being consumed by the fear of it seems irrational.

Terror Management

Inspired by Ernest Becker's suggestion that the fear of death drives us, the psychologists Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski have developed what they call terror management theory. On this theory, our awareness of the inevitability of death stimulates a devastating terror in us. We culturally manage this terror by developing and maintaining shared beliefs— or worldviews—that reduce our terror by giving our lives meaning and value that transcend us as individuals.

Life after Death

Another line of thought is that we shouldn't fear death because there is a life after death. A person who believes in a life after death might fear that they are going to hell; however, that person fears hell, not death. Another person might believe they are going to heaven, which raises the question: Why should such a person fear death?

Such a person might think that such life after death would be impoverished in important ways. As Achilles tells Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*, life after death is a wretched non-life; it is not hellish, but neither is it great.

Alternatively, a person might think that life after death would be impoverished simply because the person would be separated, at least for a time, from those he or she loves. In that case, we could find comfort, as the philosopher Seneca suggests, in thinking of death as a type of vacation, as we wait for our loved ones themselves to arrive.

We might worry that because life after death isn't this life, then death deprives us of this life. In that case, the fear of death would be like the fear of something uncertain—a change like moving to a new city, starting a new job, and making new friends. In sum, it might be the case that an afterlife of some sort solves the fear of death.

Immortality

The idea of an afterlife raises another question: Is immortality really all that desirable in itself? The philosopher Bernard Williams argues that Immortality is not in fact desirable: It would actually be quite horrible to live forever, if living forever were even intelligible.

Immortality is desirable, Williams suggests, only if two conditions can be met. The first is that we have to be able to recognize that we ourselves have survived the process of death. This is the identity condition.

THE FEAR OF DEATH

The second is that we have to find the future life appealing. This is the desirability condition. In light of these two conditions, Williams considers a dilemma: Either who we are (our goals, desires, and the like) remains the same or who we are changes.

If who we are remains the same, then we will face painful boredom or alienation while living an immortal life. This is because the desires that ground our life projects are finite and exhaustible.

We could imagine that our interests change over time. The problem here is that if who we are does change throughout our immortal existence, then we can't possibly evaluate whether the future life we'll have will be appealing. According to Williams, whether we remain who we are or change in the afterlife, immortality is undesirable.

SUGGESTED READING

Kagan, *Death*.
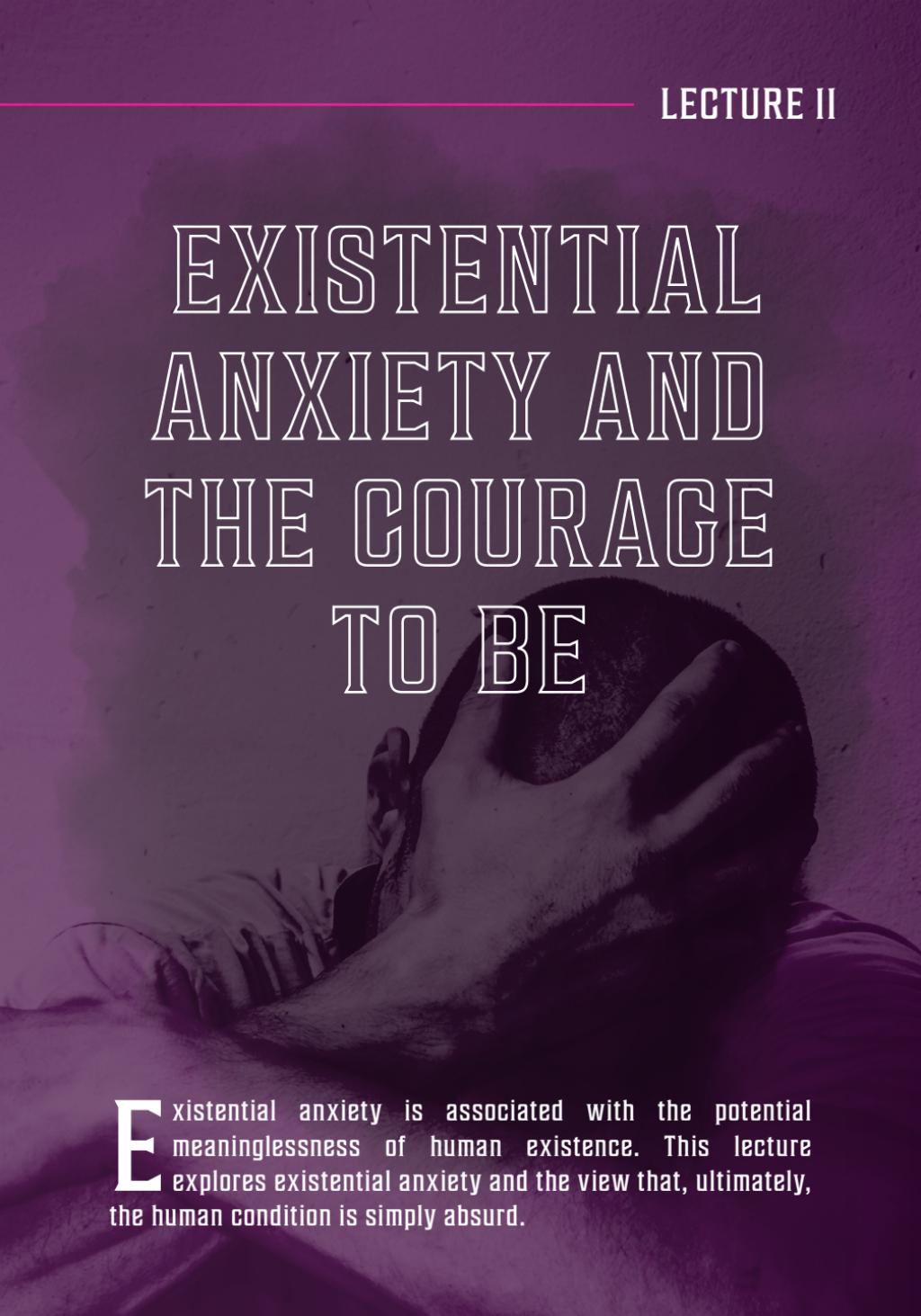
Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What role do you think that the fear of death plays in your life?

2 Why do you think death is bad? What is the deprivation account of the badness of death?

3 What is Lucretius's argument against the badness of (and fear of) death? Is his argument convincing? How would you respond to Lucretius?

EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY AND THE COURAGE TO BE

Existential anxiety is associated with the potential meaninglessness of human existence. This lecture explores existential anxiety and the view that, ultimately, the human condition is simply absurd.

EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY AND THE COURAGE TO BE

Albert Camus and the Myth of Sisyphus

According to the French thinker Albert Camus, "There is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." Camus thinks the question of suicide is especially pressing, because the human condition is absurd.

For Camus, the absurdity of the human condition is grounded in the objective meaninglessness of the world. As he sees it, because there is no God and no divine plan, there is no overarching meaning in the world. Because there is no afterlife and death is simply nonexistence, it's absurd to hope that another stage in things could provide us with such meaning.

The human condition is also absurd because we just can't understand the world in a way that would make it satisfying. Not even reason can rescue us, because the world itself is irrational.

For Camus, the Ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus helps explain the absurdity of the human condition and provides an answer for how we might persevere in the face of life's absurdity. For his sins, including cleverly stalling his own death and putting death itself in chains, Sisyphus was condemned to Tartarus, the abyss of torment, by the gods. His punishment was to forever push a boulder uphill, only to watch it roll back down the hill each time it reached the top.

For Camus, Sisyphus is the hero of the absurd. He pushes his stone in defiance of death. To Camus, Sisyphus is "stronger than his rock." Additionally, Sisyphus represents everyone, with one small difference: Sisyphus is conscious of the absurdity. In the end, Camus says, we have to imagine that Sisyphus is happy.

For Camus, we overcome our existential anxiety over the absurdity of the human condition by taking ownership of our lives. There is no overarching meaning of life, but each of our lives matters to each of us.

UNDERSTANDING THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

Thomas Nagel on the Absurd

The philosopher Thomas Nagel considers the fact that our lives are mere blips on the cosmic screen, lasting only briefly. Nagel suggests that the factor that makes our lives absurd is "the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt."

We take ourselves seriously in the sense that we self-consciously pursue our lives. But when we step back from our lives and reflect on them and the reasons that drive us, things start to seem ungrounded, unjustified, and arbitrary.

To deal with or perhaps to avoid life's absurdity, we try to find meaning in things that are bigger than we are. The problem with this, however, is that to eliminate absurdity, these bigger things must themselves be meaningful, their meaning must be clear to us, and the meaning they have must be meaningful to us. And so, when we step back from these bigger things and question them, the whole process starts over.

And this doubt cannot be laid to rest partly because once we step back from our lives, we consider them from a perspective "in which *no* standards can be discovered." The step backward is not a step into the realm of the truly meaningful; it is a step into meaninglessness.

We only really need to do something if we think that life's absurdity is a problem in need of a solution, and Nagel, unlike Camus, suggests that it's not. Rather than being a problem, the absurdity of the human condition is one of its defining features.

EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY AND THE COURAGE TO BE

Tillich on the Courage to Be

According to the 20th-century Christian theologian Paul Tillich, existential anxiety actually has three distinct aspects, each grounded in a distinctive source. The first aspect is anxiety about fate and death. For Tillich, anxiety about fate and death ultimately threatens what he calls our ontic self-affirmation—our ability to affirm ourselves as existing.

The second aspect of existential anxiety, according to Tillich, is anxiety about meaninglessness and emptiness. Driven by the worry that nothing is satisfying to us, we may search for something that is ultimately meaningful. We then may experience the dread that no such thing exists. For Tillich, anxiety about meaninglessness and emptiness ultimately threatens what he calls our spiritual self-affirmation—our ability to affirm that our lives are meaningful.

The final aspect of existential anxiety, per Tillich, is anxiety about guilt and condemnation. For Tillich, anxiety about guilt and condemnation ultimately threatens what he calls our moral self-affirmation—our ability to affirm our lives as morally serious.

All three of these aspects of existential anxiety pervade the human condition. Together, they lead us toward despair. For Tillich, despair is a state "without hope." When we're in this state, we want nothing more than to escape it. As Tillich sees it, if existential anxiety were simply about death and fate, suicide "would be the way out of despair." In this case, real courage would be the courage not to be.

But that's not real courage, Tillich argues. Real courage is the courage to be. At its core, Tillich argues, courage itself is the affirmation of our existence in the face of threats. The courage to be is our self-affirmation in the face of despair. Courage is always a risk, because it is threatened by nonbeing in many forms. One form is death, but others include losing our individuality, losing our world, and losing meaning.

Tillich identifies three types of the courage to be. The first is the courage to be as a part. This is the courage to affirm ourselves through participation in something bigger than us. In this way, we translate our individual anxiety into collective anxiety.

UNDERSTANDING THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

As valuable as this kind of courage is, it doesn't face existential anxiety head on. For that, we need the courage to be as oneself. This is individual self-affirmation. By undertaking this kind of courage, we take on the task of becoming the individuals we are.

The problem with the courage to be as a part is that we end up losing ourselves in the collective. The problem with the courage to be as oneself is that we end up losing the world and others. However, the problem with both kinds of courage is that neither is "beyond the … threat of nonbeing."

According to Tillich, we also need courage as absolute faith. This is faith not in the personal God of theism, but in "the God above God" and being itself. In having the courage to be in this sense, we transcend the dichotomies of self and other while uniting them. We go beyond ourselves in a way that truly affirms the ground of who we are.

Some research supports Tillich's basic framework for describing existential anxiety. One study published in 2004 found that the kinds of existential concerns Tillich articulates are core human issues. Tillich seems to have identified something measurable—something we all experience.

SUGGESTED READING

Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.
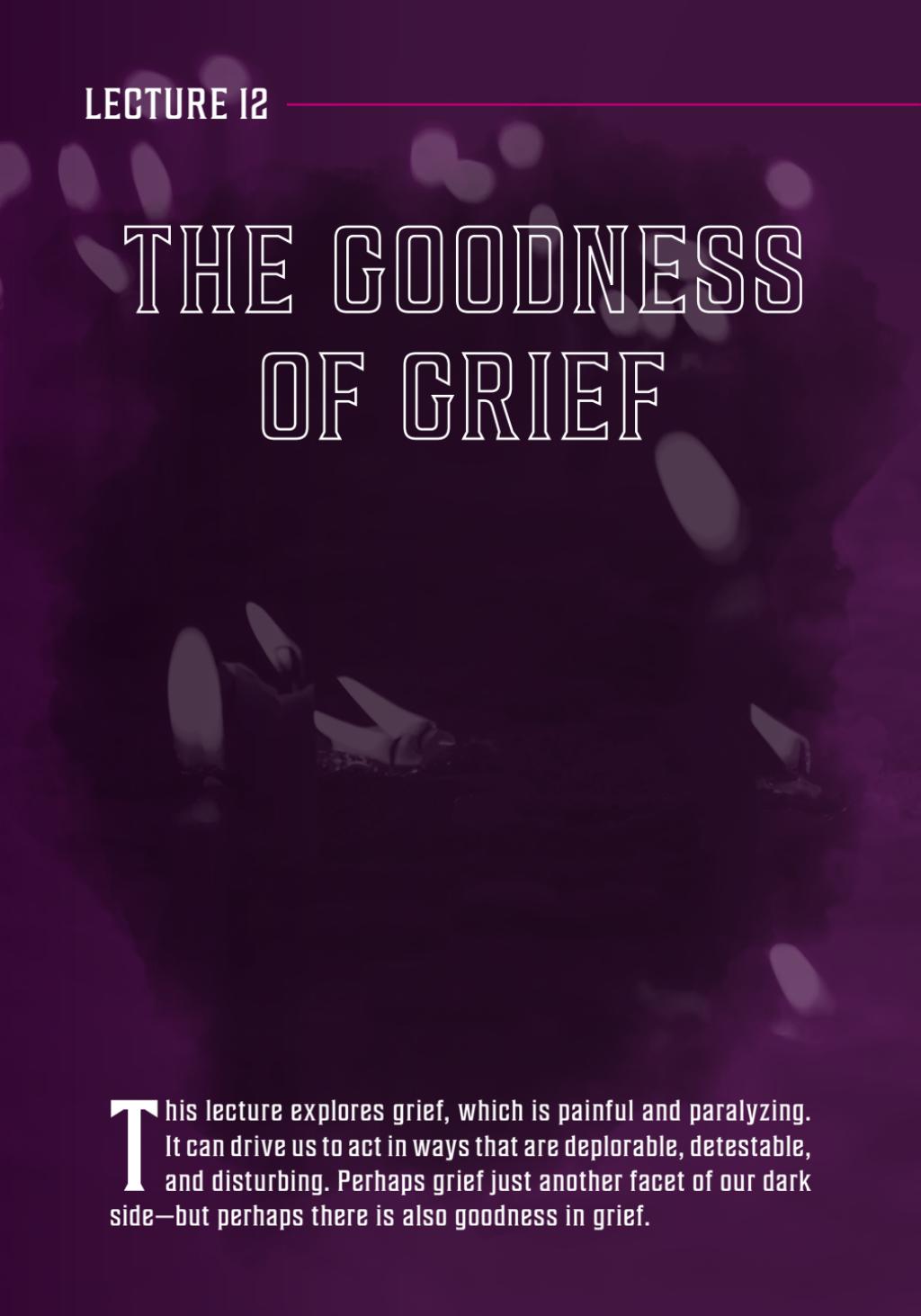
Tillich, *The Courage to Be*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1   What does it mean to say that life is absurd? Do you think life is actually absurd?

2   Does the notion of existential anxiety make sense to you? Is it something you've experienced?

3   What is the courage to be, according to Tillich?

THE GOODNESS OF GRIEF

This lecture explores grief, which is painful and paralyzing. It can drive us to act in ways that are deplorable, detestable, and disturbing. Perhaps grief just another facet of our dark side—but perhaps there is also goodness in grief.

What Grief Is

Grief is an emotional response to any significant loss—for instance, the loss of one's career, the loss of one's ability to walk, or the loss of a relationship. This lecture focuses on the sense of grief associated with death, as in the loss of a loved one. This is perhaps the most profound kind of grief.

Grief is an emotional response to the loss of a loved one, but what exactly is the object of grief? It seems like the obvious answer is that the object of our grief is the person who has died. However, we truly grieve over the loss of the relationship we had with the person who has died.

The object of grief is the fact that our relationship to someone is transformed by his or her death. Death is grief's trigger. Grief's object is the lost relationship.

Grief and Mourning

There is an important distinction between grief and mourning. Grief is a mental state, whereas mourning covers the behaviors associated with that mental state. On this way of thinking, grief is an internal emotional response, whereas mourning is the external expression of that emotional response.

Seneca on Grief

The Stoic philosopher Seneca worries about the goodness of grief. Letters of consolation were popular as a literary genre in the ancient world, especially in Rome. Seneca himself wrote many, including one to a woman named Marcia, who had been grieving for her son, Metilius, for three years. Seneca starts out by praising Marcia for being a good person and by letting her know that he's going to try to cure her of her grief.

THE GOODNESS OF GRIEF

As part of the cure, Seneca asks Marcia to consider the examples of two Roman women who also lost a loved one. The first is Octavia, the sister of the Roman emperor Augustus. The second is Livia, Augustus's wife.

Octavia "would not lay aside her mourning garb" and "lived buried and hidden from view, neglecting her accustomed duties." By contrast, Livia "left her sorrow there with [her son when she buried him], and grieved no more than was … due to a son." With these examples in mind, Seneca asks Marcia which example she thinks "the more commendable."
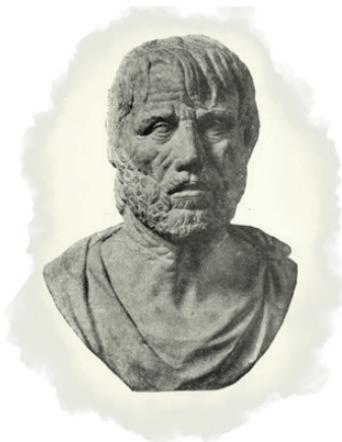
The answer, for Seneca, is that Livia is the better example. He hopes that Marcia agrees, because to follow Octavia's example is to punish herself for misfortunes in a way that just compounds misery.

Seneca thinks of grief as a type of disorder, one that can be more or less extreme. In Marcia's case, things have gotten quite bad, and so he's providing her with an example of someone who recovered from the disorder of grief.

Seneca's Arguments

This lecture now turns to two of the arguments Seneca uses to cure Marcia of her bad case of grief. The first argument is the object of grief argument. Seneca asks Marcia why she grieves over her lost son. Is she focused on her suffering or her son's? If it's her son's suffering, she needn't worry, because the dead do not suffer.

If the object of her grief is Marcia's suffering, however, then Seneca thinks the issue boils down to whether she received no pleasure from him during his life or whether she "would have received more had he lived longer."

If she received no pleasure, then it should be easy to endure her son's death. If she received pleasure, then she should be thankful for the pleasure she received, rather than complain about what she's lost.

Seneca's argument might strike some as having missed the point. The object of grief is the loss of one's relationship, not the loss of value associated with the person or the loss of the pleasure they brought.

In acknowledgement of this, Seneca makes another argument, this one about what truly bothers us. Seneca says, "It is regret for the absence of his loved one which causes a mourner to grieve." If this is right, however, then it's easy to point out that being away from someone in itself is bearable enough.

What truly bothers us, Seneca insists, "is an idea." This impression of how things are causes us all the trouble. With that in mind, we can see that "the remedy [is] in our own hands," because we can reframe the situation. "Let us suppose," Seneca says, "that [our dead loved ones] are on a journey, and let us deceive ourselves: We have sent them away, or, rather, we have sent them on in advance to a place whither we shall soon follow them."

It seems right that we need to work through our idea of what grieves us as we grieve. However, Seneca's analogy between the loss we feel when someone leaves for a trip and the loss for which we grieve doesn't seem apt. If someone we love were to go on a lifelong trip, we would miss him or her terribly, but we would only grieve upon learning of his or her death. Moreover, Seneca suggests an unhealthy dose of self-deception in his reframing techniques.

The Absence of Grief

Next, this lecture tackles a pair of questions: Would someone who never experiences grief be in a better position, morally speaking? Is there a goodness to grief that we'd miss out on if we were to follow through on Seneca's advice or if we were to, for example, take a drug that eliminated grief altogether?

THE GOODNESS OF GRIEF

The researcher Michael Cholbi thinks we'd lose out on something quite important—namely, the opportunity to gain self-knowledge. When those we love die, we're forced to reevaluate ourselves, because their deaths make it clear to us how much who we are depends on other people.

Grief is a trigger for self-reflection. More than that, however, grief is a source of self-knowledge. As Cholbi explains, this is because going through grief is a matter of experiencing many different emotions, all focused on the relationship we've had with the person who has died. These different emotions reveal "different aspects of our personalities and practical identities."

The experience of anger, for instance, gives us important information about what we consider harmful, and the experience of fear gives us important information about what we find threatening. In general, Chobli argues, these different emotions reveal different aspects "of what matters to us."

Zhuangzi on Grief

The Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi agrees with Seneca about the necessity of death and the importance of shifting with circumstance. He even suggests, along with Seneca, that the ideal sage greets loss with equanimity. But Zhuangzi's account of his own grief is more nuanced than anything we find in Seneca's work.

When Zhuangzi's wife died, a friend who came to console him saw him "drumming on a pot and singing." This shocked his friend, who found the whole spectacle unseemly. "Could there be anything more shameful?" his friend asked. Zhuangzi disagreed. Here is Zhuangzi's response at length:

> When she first died, do you suppose that I was able not to feel the loss? I peered back into her beginnings; there was a time before there was a life. Not only was there no life, there was a time before there was a shape. Not only was there no shape, there was a time before there was energy. Mingled together in the amorphous, something altered, and there was the energy; by the alteration in the energy there was the shape, by alteration of the shape there was the life. Now once more altered she has gone over to death. This is to be companion with spring and autumn, summer and winter, in the procession of the four seasons. When someone was about to lie down and sleep in the greatest of mansions, I with my sobbing knew no better than to bewail her. The thought came to me that I was being uncomprehending towards destiny, so I stopped.

Zhungzi comes, like Seneca, to end his grief after reflection, but there's no suggestion that he never should have grieved. The text even makes it possible for us to interpret Zhungzi's grief as a motivator and source of self-knowledge. This contributes, it seems, to his well-being.

The scholar Amy Olberding suggests, "in his grief, [Zhungzi] foregoes [the] possibility [of perfection] to affirm an enriched humanity." To make sense of this, she draws a memorable analogy. She suggests that Zhuangzi's grief works like a humility square.

Humility squares are found in Amish quilts. These quilts are beautifully and skillfully crafted, but they contain an important flaw. According to legend, at least, the flaw is intentional. The purpose of the flaw is to demonstrate the quilter's humility before God. As skilled as the quilter is, she lacks God's perfection, and she acknowledges this in her craft.

THE GOODNESS OF GRIEF

According to Olberding, in affirming his grief, Zhuangzi is no more clumsy or unskilled than the humble Amish quilter. If he were to prolong his grief, he would be like an unskilled quilter, but if he were to forgo grief entirely, he would be like an arrogant quilter, chasing after an unseemly perfection.

Perhaps Zhuangzi has found a middle way through his own grief. This path avoids the excessive search for perfection that makes Seneca seem so inhumane and the excessive despair that makes Marcia seem so lost.

SUGGESTED READING

Cholbi, "Finding the Good in Grief."
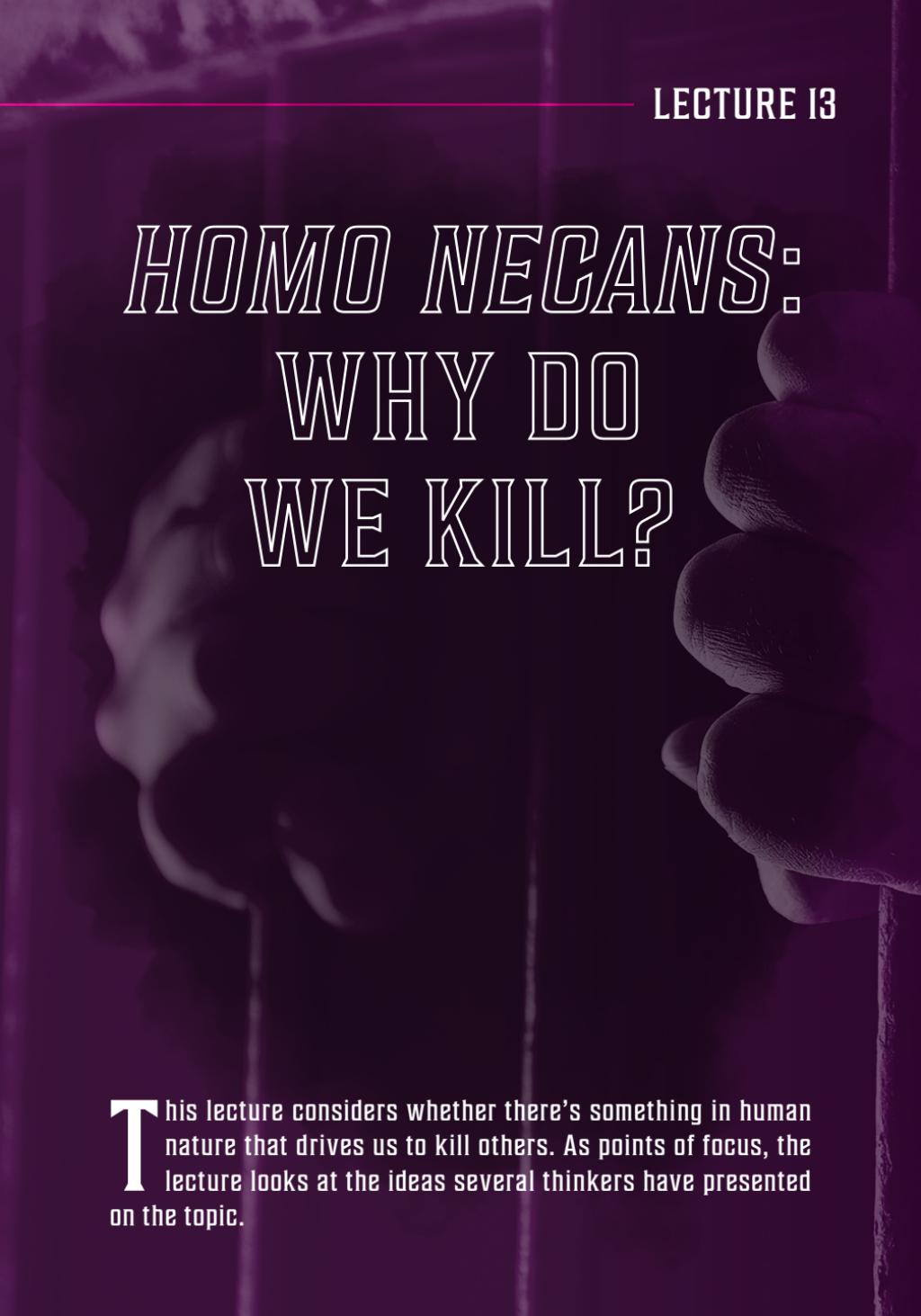
Seneca, *Epistles* (especially the letter to Marcia).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Do you think that to experience grief when someone has died, we need to have an actual relationship with that person? Why or why not?

2 What do you think of Seneca's view of grief? Does it seem reasonable to you? What about Zhuangzi's view?

3 Do you think that Cholbi is right about what makes grief valuable? If you could take a pill that would allow you to avoid the pain of grief, would you? Why or why not?

HOMO NECANS: WHY DO WE KILL?

This lecture considers whether there's something in human nature that drives us to kill others. As points of focus, the lecture looks at the ideas several thinkers have presented on the topic.

HOMO NECANS: WHY DO WE KILL?

Psychopaths, War, and Biology

Some people are different from most of us. Psychopaths, for instance, don't grasp the difference between conventional and moral rules, and so perhaps something like this explains why some people would murder while others never would.

However, it is not true that everyone who has ever killed someone is a psychopath, and extreme situations like war complicate the picture further. Still, perhaps there's something we can say that marks a middle way between the extremes of psychopathy and combat.

The psychologist Adrian Raine thinks there is. Raine suggests there are biological indicators that help explain violent behavior, including murder. One research method is to look at children who have been adopted and have never known their parents, but whose parents have criminal and violent backgrounds. These kinds of studies, Raine argues, shows that "having a biological parent convicted of a violent crime raises the likelihood of criminal violence in the adoptee."

Other biological facts about us increase the likelihood that we'll commit murder. Being born biologically male, for instance, makes someone exponentially more likely to commit violent crime than being born biologically female. Damage to the areas of the brain that are associated with impulse control greatly increase the likelihood of violent behavior.

Heart Rates, Serotonin, and Violence

Surprisingly, a low resting heart rate is a strong predictor of aggressive behavior in children and adolescents. Low levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin also correlate with impulsive and violent behavior.

There are even factors that we can trace to fetal development. For instance, pregnant women who drink, smoke cigarettes, or even fail to receive proper nutrition are more likely to have children who end up becoming violent and committing crimes later in life.

For Raine, all of this suggests that violent crime is at least partly a public health issue. By making sure people—children and pregnant mothers in particular—are as healthy as they can be, we can reduce violence, including murder.

In Raine's view, treating violence as a public-health crisis would transform how we handle violent offenders. Just as we think it's worth our time to cure cancer, so too we should think it's worth our time to cure violent crime.

Paul Bloom versus Adrian Raine

Psychologist Paul Bloom finds problems with Raine's analogy. Cancer, Bloom notes, is something we could get rid of without any cost. We could, as he puts it, cleanly excise cancer from the world and this would be unambiguously desirable. By contrast, Bloom worries, violence is not something we could get rid of without any cost; we could not cleanly excise it from the world.

This is because, as he puts it, "Violence is part of human nature, shared with all other animals, evolved for punishment, defense, and predation." Violence is an adaptation. Getting rid of it would cause problems. In particular, Bloom thinks, it would put us at a disadvantage in reining "in our worst instincts," because the threat of violence and actual violence in the form of punishment serve to deter a whole range of harmful behaviors, from perjury to theft to murder.

Essentially, Raine and Bloom disagree how ingrained violence is. Raine suggests that violence is a kind of biological aberration, whereas Bloom suggests that it's a fundamental part of human nature.

David Buss on Killing

Psychology professor David Buss argues that killing is in our fundamental nature. In his book *The Murderer Next Door*, Buss states: "Murder is a product of the evolutionary pressures our species confronted and adapted to." By killing competitors, our ancestors would have benefited themselves in various ways.

Buss also notes that the difference between homicide patterns in men and women can be explained by emphasizing the different adaptive problems murder evolved to solve. After all, men make up 87 percent of all killers and 75 percent of victims, while women are far more likely to commit certain kinds of murders than men, especially infanticide.

With this in mind, Buss argues that men evolved homicidal mechanisms associated with warfare and other adult-on-adult violence. Women, on the other hand, evolved homicidal mechanisms that helped them solve problems like investing precious parental resources in children who were unlikely to survive.

Buss also notes that a single emotion can motivate many different kinds of violence—even different kinds of murder. Jealousy, for instance, can cause someone to kill a rival, or it can cause someone to strangle a spouse, or it can lead someone to commit suicide.

If that's so, however, why don't more of us commit murder? Buss points out that external pressures such as the legal system, institutionalized punishment, and cultural norms play a role in explaining why most of us refrain from murder.

There are also internal pressures associated with what Buss refers to as a "coevolutionary arms race between homicide adaptations and victim defenses." Being a victim of murder has deep costs associated with it, and so the human mind has also evolved in ways that push against our motivation to murder, including rational reflection and emotional regulation.

Homo necans

The late classicist Walter Burkert offers a slightly different perspective. Burkert coined the Latin phrase *Homo necans*, or the "killing human." In his work, Burkert explores the nature of sacrificial violence in religion, tracing it back to its roots in hunting.

Burkert's evolutionary hypothesis is that ritual sacrifice originated in our early attempts to resolve the tension between our social nature and our predatory nature—the tension between the sphere of the home and the sphere of the hunt. In acts of sacrifice, Burkert argues, humans domesticated and ritualized the violence and aggression of the hunt so that our destructive and violent tendencies could express themselves "harmlessly" in society.

Additionally, Burkert recognizes that we have two natures: one geared toward the social and one geared toward survival. His thoughts point to another angle on the topic of humans as killers.

Situationism

So far, this lecture has emphasized a dispositional model, according to which murder is most saliently explained by certain predispositions found either in all of us or in at least some good portion. However, another model is the situationist model.

According to situationism, the internal factors that contribute to violent behavior matter less than the external factors. Perhaps the most ardent proponent of situationism is Philip Zimbardo, who is most famous for

conducting the Stanford Prison Experiment in 1971. In this experiment, male undergraduates participated in a prison simulation, making use of a converted basement on the Stanford University campus.

Some of the participants were randomly assigned to be guards, while others were randomly assigned to be prisoners. There were nine prisoners and nine guards, who worked in sets of three for eight-hour shifts. Prisoners were housed together in groups of no more than three, and there was a solitary confinement cell for any prisoners who acted out of line.

Although prisoners and guards were assigned their roles randomly, and not based in any way on their personalities, interests, preferences, everyone settled into their roles rather quickly. Just hours into the experiment, the guards began exercising control over the prisoners.

On the second day of the experiment, the prisoners openly rebelled by removing their numbers and barricading inside their cells. After that, matters continued to deteriorate between the guards and prisoners. Although the experiment was supposed to last for two weeks, Zimbardo terminated it after six days. The guards' abusive behavior continued to escalate and prisoners began to break down emotionally, growing seriously despondent, extremely anxious, and increasingly confused about their identities.

Situationism in Practice

The Stanford Prison Experiment is just one study in a vast collection of experiments that Zimbardo thinks demonstrate that the most salient factor in explaining violent behavior is the situation. This suggests that perhaps any of us could commit murder, given the right circumstances. Consider, for example, soldiers in Nazi Germany ordered to commit unspeakable atrocities against civilians.

Additionally, scholars have appealed to situationism and Zimbardo's work to explain how German police who weren't soldiers could have willingly murdered Jewish people in Poland, even though they were not forced to do

so. Indeed, many perpetrators of the Holocaust were murderers on the job, but loving parents at home. Normal people, it seems, did the unthinkable, but only because they were in unthinkable circumstances.

However, the philosopher Lawrence Blum points out that not everyone behaved badly in Nazi-occupied territory. In fact, many people resisted authority and rescued others even when they put themselves at risk. Of these people, some seemed to have stable dispositions, including stable dispositions to feel empathy for others. Even in the Stanford Prison Experiment, some people responded better to the situation than others.

Conclusion: The Bodhisattva Example

This lecture closes with a question: What if someone is a good person and has a stable disposition to act morally across situations? Take, for example, the Buddhist example of a bodhisattva.

During a particular lifetime, a bodhisattva generates the aspiration to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. The bodhisattva forgoes nirvana until he or she has helped everyone escape the cycle of death and rebirth by eliminating suffering.

It seems that someone like that surely wouldn't murder anyone. However, the 4th-century Buddhist philosopher Asanga published a work known, among other titles, as *The Stages of the Bodhisattva*. In this work, Asanga considers the circumstances under which a bodhisattva might actually break certain moral rules—or precepts—including the prohibition against killing. Asanga presents this example:

> The bodhisattva may behold a robber or thief engaged in committing a great many deeds of immediate retribution, being about to murder many hundreds of magnificent living beings … for the sake of a few material goods. Seeing it, he forms this thought in his mind: "If I take the life of this sentient being, I myself may be reborn as one of the creatures of hell. Better that I be reborn a creature of hell than that this living being, having committed a deed of immediate retribution, should go straight

> to hell." With such an attitude the bodhisattva ascertains that the thought is virtuous …[and] with only a thought of mercy for the consequence, he takes the life of that living being. There is no fault, but a spread of much merit.

According to Asanga, at least in this case, the best thing for the bodhisattva to do is to kill this person. This is because, as the Buddhist scholar Charles Goodman points out, "By killing him, the bodhisattva rescues the robber from a fate much worse than mere death."

SUGGESTED READING

Buss, *The Murderer Next Door.*
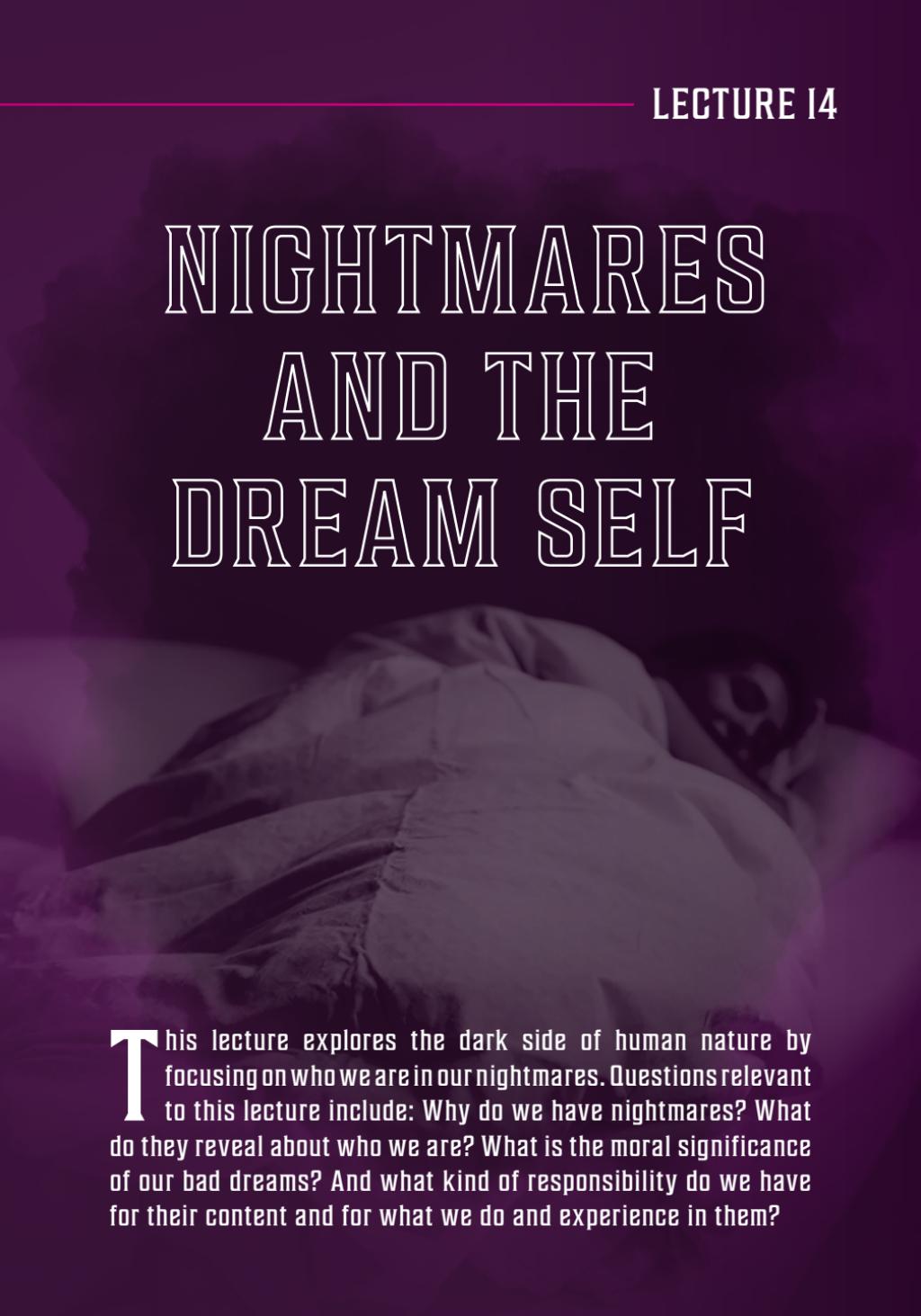
Zimbardo, "A Situationist Perspective on the Psychology of Evil."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1   What is the most important difference between Buss's theory and Raine's theory?

2   What do you think about Zimbardo's situationist perspective? Do you think situations or dispositions are more important in explaining why someone is violent?

NIGHTMARES AND THE DREAM SELF

This lecture explores the dark side of human nature by focusing on who we are in our nightmares. Questions relevant to this lecture include: Why do we have nightmares? What do they reveal about who we are? What is the moral significance of our bad dreams? And what kind of responsibility do we have for their content and for what we do and experience in them?

UNDERSTANDING THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

NIGHTMARES AND THE DREAM SELF

Freud on Dreams

Sigmund Freud, the Austrian psychoanalyst, thinks about dreams in ways that can help us appreciate the challenge that bad dreams pose. Freud's view is that the central function of dreams is wish fulfillment, but the content of our dreams is often difficult to unpack.

Therefore, Freud makes a distinction between the content that we are conscious of in the dream—the manifest content—and the content that is latent. The latent content is the obscure trigger or inspiration for a dream. It's the symbolic side of the dream, and it captures the underlying wish that the dream functions to fulfill.

Sometimes, the manifest and latent content are clearly related. Other times, however, the manifest and the latent content are less clearly related. Freud's view is that, in these cases, the manifest content is functioning to obscure or disguise embarrassing or uncomfortable latent content.

The latent content of our dreams is associated, for Freud, with repressed desires and the unconscious. According to Freud, our wishes, as repressed and unconscious desires, are transferred into the manifest content of our dreams through a process he calls dream-work.

This process transmutes the latent content of our repressed and forbidden desires into an acceptable form—that is, into the manifest content we're conscious of while dreaming. This acceptable form makes our dreams less distressing, but more is going on than that.

In the process of dream-work, things become condensed in ways that blend multiple images and ideas into one thing. A dream whose manifest content is a dog, for instance, might be the result of the condensation of someone's current pet and a childhood pet, or the condensation of someone's fear of animals and fear of loss. In the process of dream-work, moreover, things get displaced. Displacement is the process of transforming one thing into another.

Freud's theory of dreams as wish fulfillment helps explain at least some of the content of bad dreams. For example, if a person were having a dream about strangling a white dog, he or she would take that to be an unpleasant dream. Freud can say that its unpleasantness is related to an underlying wish that the person needs to acknowledge consciously. Additionally, for Freud, our bad dreams might well reveal a hidden dark side that we're more or less unwilling to acknowledge.

Daniel Wegner on Freud

The psychologist Daniel Wegner offers one way to test part of Freud's theory. Wegner observes that when we want to stop thinking about something, we have a hard time suppressing the thought.

To explain this, Wegner noted that there are two cognitive processes working against each other: one process that tries to suppress the thought and another that monitors for the suppressed thought. The monitoring process ends up triggering the very thoughts we're trying to suppress.

With this in mind, Wegner hypothesized that something similar might be happening while we're sleeping. When we sleep, many of mechanisms that help us suppress thoughts, such as attention, control, and working memory, become deactivated, especially during rapid eye movement (or REM) sleep.

NIGHTMARES AND THE DREAM SELF

Wegner's thought was that if these suppressing mechanisms are turned off, then our dreaming minds might end up flooded with the very thoughts we've been trying to suppress—just like Freud suggested. To test this, Wegner had subjects identify someone they knew and then spend five minutes writing down whatever thoughts came to mind before they went to sleep.

For the writing activity, one group was instructed not to think of the person they had identified, a second group was instructed to think about the person they had identified, and a third group was instructed to think about anything at all. The next morning, they reported any dreams they had.

Evolution and Bad Dreams

One view on the evolutionary function of bad dreams is that bad dreams might help us process our emotions. Alternatively, as the philosopher Owen Flanagan puts it, the content of bad dreams—and the content of all dreams, for that matter—could just be a spandrel of sleep, serving no adaptive function whatsoever.

Wegner found that those who were instructed not to think about the person they had identified—those who were instructed to suppress their thoughts—ended up dreaming about those people far more than subjects in either of the other two groups. This is the dream rebound effect, which various studies have now verified.

Now, this effect is a little different from the thought rebound effect; in dream rebound, we're not actively trying to suppress thoughts in our dreams. That said, something similar is happening: those of us who are consciously trying to suppress thoughts before we fall asleep end up, ironically, having those thoughts reappear in our dreams, partly because the mechanisms associated with successful thought suppression are deactivated.

Suppression and Nightmares

Following Wegner's methods, the clinical psychologist Tana Kröner-Borowik and Kröner-Borowik's colleagues have found that "suppressing unwanted thoughts can lead to an increased occurrence of the suppressed thought in dreams." They found that bad dreams and nightmares might well be the result of thought suppression.

This fits with some findings about insomnia. People who suffer from insomnia worry about whether they will be able to sleep properly. Often, they try to suppress their unwanted worries about experiencing insomnia. However, when these people end up falling asleep and dreaming, they tend to dream about insomnia-related topics.

This can also help explain recurrent bad dreams and nightmares. According to researcher Victor Spoormaker, recurrent nightmares result from the activation of a specific nightmare script. Kröner-Borowik suggests that the unwanted thoughts we try to suppress might in part activate this script.

Immoral Dreams

What happens if we dream something immoral? Augustine of Hippo worried about this. For instance, in his autobiographical work *Confessions*, he considers whether dreams in which he commits sexual actions, despite his conscious commitment to celibacy, speak against him. The same problem emerges in the Buddhist tradition, too, where monks who are supposed to be celibate experience sexually charged dreams in which they experience nocturnal emissions.

NIGHTMARES AND THE DREAM SELF

Augustine distances himself from the darkness of his dreams by categorizing what he does in them as something that happens to him—as something involuntary. In our dreams, Augustine suggests, we are not really agents who voluntarily do things; we are subjects who involuntarily undergo things.

This seems like a plausible move to make, but some cases are more difficult to evaluate. Consider the case of 59-year-old Brian Thomas. Brian had a history of sleepwalking and night terrors since childhood.

Night terrors are like nightmares. Both are vivid, negative, and emotionally charged dreams that produce high enough levels of fear that they ultimately awaken dreamers. Unlike nightmares, however, night terrors occur during the deepest of sleep, and when dreamers wake up from them, they awake abruptly in a state of terror, confused and typically incapable of communication.

Dreamers who experience night terrors can sleepwalk and talk before waking up. Night terrors are more common in children than adults, but some adults do experience them. Brian Thomas was one.

Brian had been married to his wife Christine for nearly 40 years when they went camping in western Wales during the summer of 2008. One day, some kids made Brian and his wife feel threatened. That night, Brian had a vivid dream in which someone broke into their camper and was assaulting his wife. Brian was having a night terror and sleepwalking. When he abruptly awoke, he realized that he was choking his wife and that he had strangled her to death.

Brian was horrified and immediately called the police. Ultimately, Brian was acquitted of murdering his wife, because prosecutors believed that he was truly sleepwalking, rather than using his past history as an excuse.

The thought behind Brian's acquittal was that he suffered from a sleep disorder, and so what happened wasn't something he did; it was something that happened to him. Additionally, Brian's dream seemed to be a vicarious dream: He seems to have been dreaming that someone else was attacking his wife, not that he was her attacker. The idea, then, seems to be that Brian wasn't really himself when he murdered his wife; his dark dream did not properly represent who he is.

In the case of someone like Brian who is sleepwalking and suffering from night terrors, the areas of the brain like the frontal cortex that regulate behavior—those moral parts of the brain—are dormant. The areas of the brain like the hypothalamus and limbic system, which are associated with emotion, are active. Sleepwalkers like Brian seem like they are less themselves while sleeping if only because they, like Augustine, cannot regulate their ancestral urges—lust in Augustine's case and rage in Brain's.

SUGGESTED READING

Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Springett, "Philosophy of Dreaming."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What do you think the relationship between who you really are and who you are in dreams is?

2 What role might unwanted thoughts play in our bad dreams and nightmares?

3 Do you agree with Augustine that you're not really responsible for what you do in your dreams? What about lucid dreams? Would the possibility of lucid dreaming complicate Augustine's view?

VARIETIES OF SELF-DECEPTION

This lecture explores the nature and significance of self-deception. Specifically, the lecture considers whether self-deception is truly part of our dark side, or whether there's something positive—and perhaps unavoidable—about self-deception.

The Paradoxes of Self-Deception

The traditional model of self-deception states that self-deception isn't about persisting in an irrational belief. Rather, it's about lying to ourselves. This model clearly has some virtues, but it also runs us into some problems. It requires self-deceivers not only to hold contradictory beliefs, but also to try to get themselves to believe something they already believe to be false. These are the contradictory belief requirement and the intentional deception requirements, respectively.

The contradictory belief requirement leads to what the philosopher Alfred Mele has called the static paradox. This paradox asks: How can someone actually hold contradictory beliefs? Is that even possible?

The traditional model also faces another paradox, which Mele has called the dynamic paradox. This paradox arises from the intentional deception requirement. This paradox begs the question: How can someone intentionally deceive themselves? Wouldn't being aware of the deception undermine the effort?

These two paradoxes call into question the traditional model, which sees self-deception as lying to oneself. However, perhaps we can modify the traditional model in ways that help us avoid paradox.

Modifying the Traditional Model

Two basic strategies seem apparent for modifying the traditional model. The first is to emphasize that self-deception extends over time. It's a process that doesn't require anyone to hold his or her contradictory beliefs at the same time. The second is to emphasize the psychological complexity of self-deception.

In many cases of self-deception, we do see that it extends over time, fitting with the first strategy. Think of someone who commits a crime, later feels uncomfortable with it, and resolves to get rid of his guilt by lying to himself about what happened.

The second strategy involves dividing the self into parts, with one psychological part playing the role of the deceiver and another playing the role of the deceived. This move would dissolve the static paradox by locating contradictory beliefs in different psychological subsystems.

However such a division of the mind might work, the idea would be that the deceptive subsystem would act below the level of conscious awareness, so that it could effectively and successfully deceive the conscious self. However, it is not obvious how this approach makes room for the intentional deception requirement. After all, the deceptive subsystem has to operate below the level of conscious awareness. Are unconscious intentions really possible?

That's a big question, but rather than resolve it, another option is to eliminate the intentional deception requirement altogether. Self-deception might be less about lying to oneself than about our tendency to believe in biased ways. This is precisely the approach to self-deception that revisionist models take.

The Revisionist Models

This revisionist approach helps us see self-deception in new ways. This approach views self-deception as related to our tendency to favor flattering or welcome information as opposed to unflattering or unwelcome information.

Picking up on this, we can identify three varieties of self-deception. The first variety of self-deception is a matter of failing to tell ourselves the entire truth—that is, self-deception as information resistance. The second variety of self-deception is a matter of obscuring the truth— that is, self-deception as obfuscation. The final variety is a matter of lying to ourselves—that is, the classic notion of self-deception.

In cases of self-deception as information resistance, we avoid unwanted information and seek out what we want to hear. In cases of self-deception as obfuscation, we dismiss unwanted information.

The revisionist approach might not have room for the classic notion of self-deception as lying to oneself, but it might have room for self-deception as self-evasion. For instance, consider the work of researchers Nicholas Epley and Erin Whitchurch. One experiment found that people more quickly identified photographs of themselves when the images had been altered to make them appear more attractive than when the photographs were unaltered.

Some have used this finding to suggest not only that people have a self-image that is more attractive than how they actually look, but also that this is the result of self-deception. In response to this suggestion, however, Steven Pinker has pointed out that such findings cannot tell us that people are actively deceiving themselves unless we know that they have an accurate self-image.

Such experimental findings seem to point to self-deception as self-evasion. This is different from self-deception as information resistance, because in this variety of self-deception, we don't avoid new information; we evade the truth about ourselves.

VARIETIES OF SELF-DECEPTION

The Evolution of Self-Deception

The revisionist approach leads to an important question: What explains our tendency toward self-deception? Perhaps the best way to approach this question at least at first, is by considering self-deception from an evolutionary perspective—that is, looking at self-deception as an adaptation.

The main reason to think that self-deception is an adaptation is that it is associated with a number of benefits. Having an inflated self-conception might enhance our chances of success. According to Dominic Johnson and James Fowler, for instance, overconfidence is "advantageous, because it encourages individuals to claim resources they could not otherwise win if it came to a conflict."

Picking up on this, William von Hippel and Robert Trivers contend, "self-deception evolved to facilitate interpersonal deception." Self-deception allows us to avoid exhibiting signs associated with "deceptive intent." According to von Hippel and Trivers, self-deception has a host of social advantages that make it plausible to think that it's the adaptive product of our evolutionary history.

Shakti Lamba and Vivek Nityananda provide some support for this view. In a 2014 study, they looked at university students in tutorials who were asked to predict how they and their peers would do on an upcoming assignment. Some students self-deceptively predicted that they would perform well, but didn't actually end up performing as they predicted.

These students were also expected to perform well by their peers. Their overconfidence, it seems, had influenced everyone around them. Though they didn't do well, their self-deception facilitated interpersonal deception, just as von Hippel and Trivers would expect.

It might be the case, then, that self-deception is the adaptive product of our evolutionary history because it carries with it a host of social advantages that improve our chances of survival and success. On the cruel savanna, self-deception might mean survival. In the competitive boardroom, it might mean success.

Self-Deception as a Moral and Existential Concern

Even if self-deception has survival value and practical benefits, it still might seem disturbing. Joseph Butler, an 18th-century theologian, proposes that we are inclined to self-deception because we fail to reflect properly on what we're doing when it fits with or serves our interests.

Another view is that, in broad agreement with existential philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Søren Kierkegaard, something like self-deception blocks us off from living authentically. Living authentically, with a clear-eyed sense of ourselves and our commitments, certainly seems antithetical to self-deception, as does living with integrity.

Conclusion

These issues raise an important question: What can we do about self-deception? Perhaps we should educate ourselves about our tendency toward self-deception. However, many different studies suggest that learning about our tendencies doesn't provide much help.

In one study, for instance, researchers told subjects about eight biases people commonly have. They then asked participants to rate themselves. On average, the participants thought they were better than the average person.

Joseph Butler recognized that the attempt to counteract self-deception is ironically prone to self-deception. He suggests that we need to make a habit of critical reflection. In important matters such as morality, we need to follow rigid rules while being as impartial as possible.

VARIETIES OF SELF-DECEPTION

His advice is that anytime we're thinking about what the right thing to do is, we should substitute another for ourselves. From this vantage point, we can achieve some epistemic and moral distance from our situations.

The 20th-century philosopher Richard Rorty has another suggestion: We should surround ourselves with honest people—good friends—who are willing to tell us the truth, who are willing to correct our mistaken view of ourselves, and who are also willing to do so in a kind and encouraging way. The company we keep can serve as a corrective to keep us honest.

SUGGESTED READING

Deweese-Boyd, "Self-Deception."

Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What are the two paradoxes associated with self-deception?

2 Do you think that being self-deceived helps us deceive others? Is there any sense in which self-deception is a good thing?

VARIETIES OF IGNORANCE

This lecture examines ignorance through the lens of questions such as: What is ignorance? Why is it bad? How can we counteract it? To start answering these questions, the lecture looks at an important debate between two great Hindu philosophers. After that, the lecture considers some contemporary accounts of ignorance.

Shankara's Theory of Maya

This lecture begins with the 8th-century Hindu philosopher Shankara, who is remembered as one of the greatest champions of the Advaita Vedanta school of philosophy. As a Vedantin philosopher, Shankara acknowledged the authority of the *Upanishads*—a group of texts that commented on and developed the earlier Vedic texts.

Shankara sees his work as closely related to meditation, because meditation is the means by which we achieve genuine insight into *brahman*, or unconditioned reality. Specifically, for Shankara, meditation has *nirguna brahman* as its object—that is, brahman without qualities, or the unqualified real.

According to Shankara, the world is ultimately one with nirguna brahman, and nirguna brahman is a pure unity, without distinctions or qualities. This means that the world as we experience it is merely an appearance, not reality itself. We will only realize this, however, when we become enlightened and see that our ordinary experience is, in a sense, like a dream, which is undermined and replaced by wakefulness.

We have to do more than sublate just the experience of the world, however; this is what is causing our distorted experience of the world. Shankara thinks something causes us to miss what's ultimately real.

This something is *maya*—that is, is the force of illusion or appearance. Maya brings the world as we typically experience it into existence.

Maya has no beginning, because time exists only within it; it cannot be thought, because it constrains thinking; and it cannot be described, because all language depends on it. As a result, maya is mysterious, lying outside the bounds of reason in much the same way that brahman does. In the end, however, none of this adequately explains what the source of the first superimposition is, because maya itself remains mysterious.

Ramanuja on Shankara

The 12th-century Hindu philosopher Ramanuja has a number of sophisticated arguments against Shankara's account, but his most interesting and powerful argument focuses on Shankara's understanding of ignorance itself. He recognizes that Shankara wants to understand ignorance not as a property of something, but as a negation. Ramanuja thinks Shankara's "theory of ignorance is altogether untenable."

Ramanuja notes that there are actually two ways of understanding ignorance as a negation. The first is as "non-knowledge of the true nature of brahman." The second is as "the [mistaken] view of the reality of the apparent world." According to Ramanuja, however, both options cause problems for Shankara.

The first option fails because enlightenment and ignorance have different intentional objects—enlightenment is about brahman, while ignorance is about maya. This is a problem, Ramanuja claims, because ignorance can be the negation of enlightenment only if they refer to the same object.

In the case of the second option, ignorance and knowledge do have the same intentional object. Both enlightenment and ignorance are about brahman. The problem with this understanding of ignorance, according to Ramanuja, is that once we remove what's getting in the way—namely, maya—we don't reveal the essence of brahman. Instead, we simply get rid of maya.

To delve into these arguments further, imagine this scenario: A person wakes from a dream and sublates her dream experience. In doing this, the dream world completely dissolves, and she come to realize that this world is real, not the dream world.

VARIETIES OF IGNORANCE

Ramanuja's problem is this: When the person wakes up, she is aware of the phenomenal world, but this does not thereby entail that she knows its true nature. She might well remain ignorant of important facts about the world.

In response to such a situation, Shankara might have emphasized ignorance as the contradictory of knowledge, not as a property. Shankara thinks that talking about properties is to use concepts that are infected with maya and, as a result, misleading.

Specifically, Shankara might argue that the dream-world analogy is misleading. When the person wakes up from a dream, she doesn't immediately know everything about the phenomenal world. However, the case would be different if she were to sublate maya.

When she removes maya as a limitation, only one thing remains: nirguna brahman. It is hard to see how she could possibly remain ignorant of any aspect of brahman. That is because there would now be only one possible object of knowledge, that object of knowledge is radically simple, and the possibility of being mistaken about that object of knowledge has been removed.

Ramanuja and Shankara's Views

Shankara's views, in dialogue with Ramanuja, offer a window into what liberation through pure enlightenment might look like. Ramanuja thinks it's ridiculous to suppose that enlightenment is just a matter of knowledge. For him, salvation is about doing something, not just coming to know something.

As an analogy, imagine a person who is trapped in a well. He might have an insight into how to get out of the well, but that doesn't magically get him out. He also has to do something, or someone else has to do it for him. With this in mind, Ramanuja thinks that the only way to achieve salvation—the only way to get out of the well—is to devote himself to God, who will actively save him.

For Shankara, it's as though the man merely thinks he is trapped in a well, but then he realizes he is not. In reality, there's no well at all.

UNDERSTANDING THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

The Roots of Ignorance

It might be worthwhile to explain ignorance as a psychological or as a social phenomenon—as something that is produced by psychological and social factors—rather than simply saying that individuals are ignorant because they lack knowledge.

It is natural to think of ignorance as the product of social structures or practices that routinely blind us to the truth. This is perhaps part of the story about why it was so hard, for instance, to move from the geocentric astronomical model to the heliocentric model. Related to this, however, is a more worrisome sense of social ignorance.

This is related to what the philosopher Miranda Fricker calls testimonial injustice. Testimonial injustice happens when someone doesn't receive the credence they deserve because they belong to a marginalized group.

People from marginalized groups suffer from this kind of social ignorance in many ways. They are harmed because their ability to communicate information and impart knowledge is undermined in a way that degrades them as human beings. They are also harmed when they are treated harshly and unjustly as a result of having their testimony dismissed.

Gaslighting

One type of harm that results from testimonial injustice is related to the phenomenon of gaslighting. The term *gaslighting* comes from the 1944 movie *Gaslight*. In that movie, the character Gregory manipulates his wife Paula into believing that she's going crazy. In acts of gaslighting, the gaslighter not only refuses to give someone's testimony the proper credence; the gaslighter causes the person to question their own beliefs and knowledge. In cases of gaslighting, people are harmed by being made to feel ignorant when they are not.

VARIETIES OF IGNORANCE

Counteracting Injustice

In cases of testimonial injustice, ignorance is a complex and harmful social phenomenon. To counteract this kind of ignorance, we have to uproot prejudice, empower the marginalized, and work hard for social change. This task can be tackled in various practical ways.

For example, the philosopher Hilde Lindemann Nelson has suggested that we use counter-stories to offset the master narratives that make testimonial injustice and gaslighting possible. Counter-stories are narratives that we can construct as correctives to the flawed representations that harm those who are marginalized and oppressed.

Nelson considers the case of a group of nurses whose identities were partly determined by the stories the doctors told about them. These stories suggested that the work of the nurses was "touchy-feely" while the work of the doctors was "technical." This touchy-feely narrative minimized nursing work and marginalized the nurses, causing damage. In response to this, the nurses countered these destructive stories with stories of their own.

Counter-stories are a powerful way to counteract ignorance, but counteracting any ignorance is complicated by some psychological tendencies we have. One of these tendencies is the Dunning-Kruger effect. This is a cognitive bias that makes it very hard for people who are incompetent to recognize their incompetence. As one of the theory's namesakes, researcher David Dunning, puts it:

> An ignorant mind is precisely not a spotless, empty vessel, but one that's filled with the clutter of irrelevant or misleading life experiences, theories, facts, intuitions, strategies, algorithms, heuristics, metaphors, and hunches that regrettably have the look and feel of useful and accurate knowledge.

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This means that ignorance can often feel like expertise in a way that makes it very hard for people to recognize their mistaken views. One way we might counteract these mistaken views, as Dunning suggests, is to try to disarm people's misconceptions by asking questions, pointing out misbeliefs, and helping the ignorant come to see the error of their ways.

The problem with this way of counteracting ignorance is that it falls afoul of another of our psychological tendencies. This is the so-called backfire effect. When confronted with facts or evidence or arguments that conflict with what we already believe, our beliefs often don't weaken in response to this information; instead, our potentially mistaken beliefs actually tend to get stronger.

Ignorance about things we care about is especially hard to counteract with arguments and facts—the tools we philosophers often employ. To overcome ignorance, we might just have to be humble enough to recognize that we might be the ones who don't have all the answers.

SUGGESTED READINGS
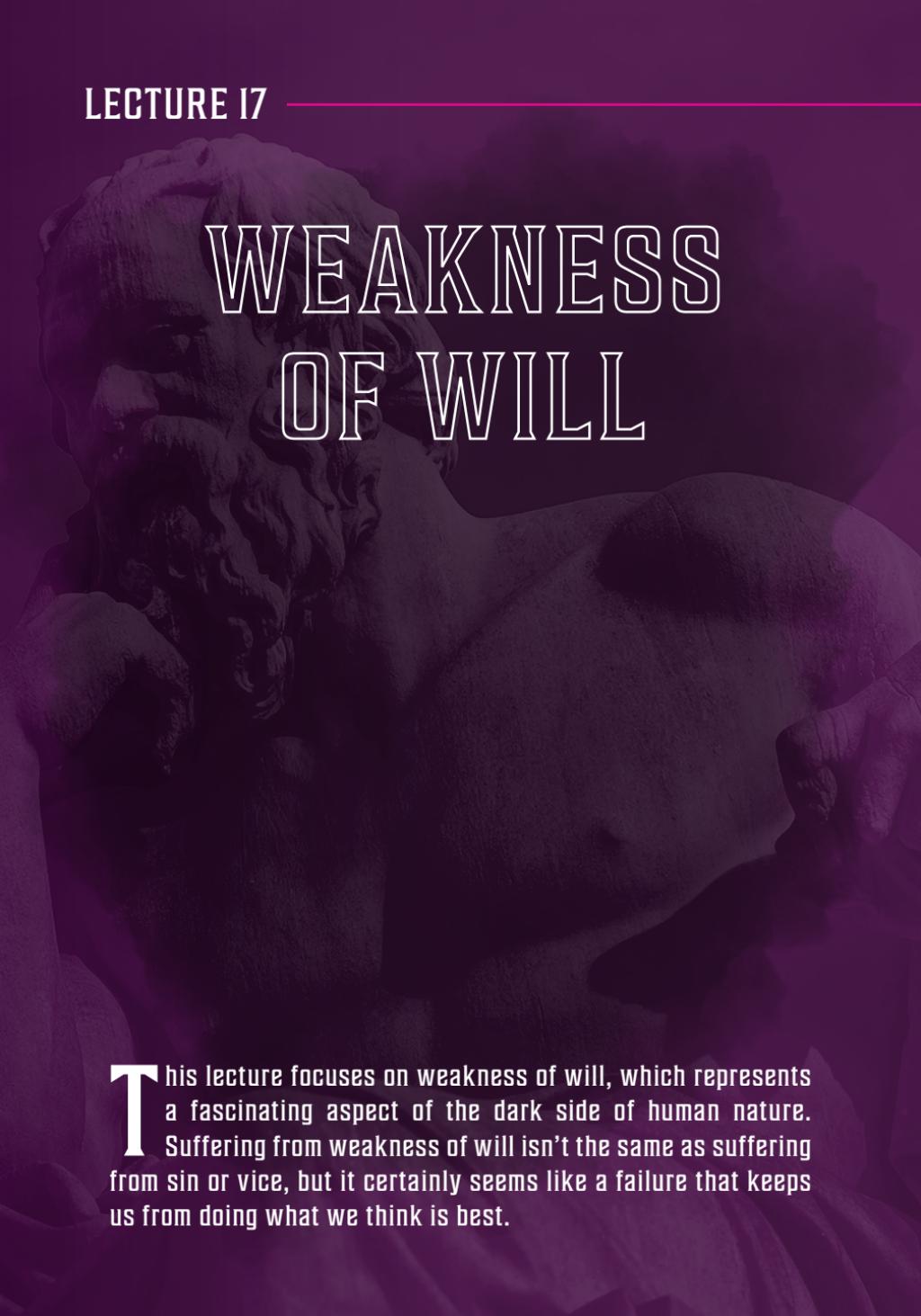
Fricker, *Testimonial Injustice*.

Radhakrishnan and Moore, eds., *Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, selections from Shankara and Ramanuja.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1   The debate between Shankara and Ramanuja reveals much about the nature of ignorance. What are two lessons we can learn from it?

2   What is testimonial injustice, and how does it differ from gaslighting? Have you ever been the victim of either?

3   What is the Dunning-Kruger effect, and how is it relevant to our discussion of ignorance? How might the backfire effect make correcting ignorance difficult?

WEAKNESS OF WILL

This lecture focuses on weakness of will, which represents a fascinating aspect of the dark side of human nature. Suffering from weakness of will isn't the same as suffering from sin or vice, but it certainly seems like a failure that keeps us from doing what we think is best.

Aristotle on Weakness of Will
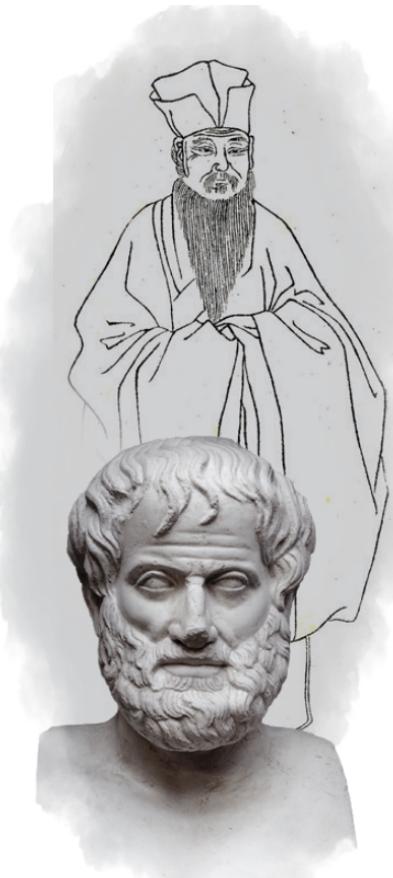
Some thinkers, such as the philosophers Socrates and Cheng Yi, deny the possibility of weakness of will. However, many thinkers have wanted to explain how weakness of will is possible. Aristotle is one example.

The ancient Greek word meaning "lack of self-restraint" is *akrasia*. According to Aristotle, someone who is *akratic* goes against their better judgment as the result of some kind of feeling or desire.

He notes that there are really two kinds of akratic people. Those who act impetuously act directly from their feelings without deliberating about what they should do. By contrast, those who act from weakness experience an internal conflict as they deliberate about what they should do. People who act like this suffer from weakness of will.

Aristotle suggests that weakness of will is a cognitive failure. In the moment of deliberation, the akratic person sort of knows that he shouldn't do something, but he doesn't fully know it.

On this way of reading Aristotle, weakness of will is less a matter of going against our better judgment and more a matter of allowing desire to ruin our judgments. Weakness of will is a matter of having our better judgment temporarily derailed.

Donald Davidson on Weakness of Will

In an influential article, the late philosopher Donald Davidson offers another way to think about the possibility of weakness of will. According to Davidson, Aristotle gives us a picture of weakness of will that emphasizes a struggle between two contestants: reason on the one hand, and desire on the other. Weakness of will arises, on this picture, when reason is overpowered by desire.

Davidson thinks this picture is inaccurate. He develops a different picture by focusing on the use of a person's better judgment. Davidson's way of explaining weakness of will emphasizes what it means to say that someone has made an all-things-considered judgment.

All-things-considered judgments are conditional, rather than categorical. A conditional judgment depends on and is relative to a set of considerations. Conditional judgments take the form of something like this: Relative to these particular considerations, this, at least at first blush, is better than that. Conditional judgments differ from categorical judgments, which simply affirm that one thing is best, without qualification.

Conditional judgments give us prima facie judgments that depend on comparative considerations. For instance, in light of the fact that bacon is delicious, Sarah might judge that eating bacon is prima facie better than eating salad. Or, in light of the fact that salad is healthy, Sarah might judge that salad is prima facie better than bacon.

With this in mind, Davidson argues that Sarah suffers from weakness of will when she eats some bacon only if:

- She eats that bacon intentionally.
- She believes she could choose to eat a salad instead.
- She has a reason to eat the bacon.
- She eats the bacon for this reason, even though she has other considerations on the basis of which she judges that eating the salad would be better than eating the bacon.

When Sarah takes into account every consideration she might have, she decides that eating the bacon is a bad idea and that eating salad is best. When she considers just the deliciousness of the bacon, however, she has a reason to eat it.

Though she has a reason to eat the bacon, her all-things-considered judgment is that she shouldn't eat it. She doesn't really have an adequate reason to eat the bacon, even by her own thinking.

However, she never fully commits to the view that the bacon is not the sort of thing she should eat. In other words, she never commits to the categorical judgment that bacon is the sort of thing she should never, without qualification, eat. So, Davidson argues, she never actually contradicts herself.

For Davidson, this is how weakness of will is possible. There's no contradiction in choosing against our better judgment. We simply go against our better judgment, all the while having a reason to do so.

Davidson's picture doesn't require that we see weakness of will as a battle between reason and desire; instead, it's a matter of weighing reasons. Those of us who suffer from weakness of will are actually irrational in the sense that we go against our better judgment, even if we don't strictly contradict ourselves.

Holton on the Ordinary Sense of Weakness of Will

In a 1999 article, the philosopher Richard Holton argues that weakness of will isn't about acting against our better judgment at all. Rather, it's about our failure to follow through on our intentions.

As Sarah Stroud points out, Holton's revisionist view of weakness of will presents a pair of alterations to the subject. The first change is that weakness of will is no longer about the incongruity between our better judgment and what we actually do. Now it's about an incongruity between what we intend to do and what we actually do.

The second change is that weakness of will is no longer about a conflict with our present judgments. This is because now we can exhibit weakness of will by giving up on plans we made in the past.

Holton points out that one important factor is whether giving up on our previous plans is reasonable or not. For instance, if a person plans on going to a party but decides not to attend for good reasons, then the person is not suffering from weakness of will.

Holton also points out that some of our plans for the future are more important than others. Resolutions, for instance, are plans we make to ensure we do something we might not feel like doing later.

Holton's ideas help explain why some people are better at keeping to their resolutions than others and why some people suffer more or less from weakness of will. Even if we're all more or less reasonable, we might not all have the same willpower.

Ego Depletion

The philosopher Neil Levy offers a slightly different perspective on weakness of will. As he sees it, weakness of will isn't a distinctive failure. Instead, he thinks it's just a special case of a broader phenomenon: ego depletion. Ego depletion results from the depletion of certain mental resources associated with cognitive processes like logical reasoning and self-control.

Conclusion

In *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, the great Buddhist philosopher Shantideva notes that, perhaps just by luck, he has found himself in a good position. Things are going well, and he's aware of that fact.

However, he worries that he might not stay on that path. He might stray for reasons that he's not entirely certain of. As he puts it, his mind might well end up being reduced to nothing, as though he were bewitched by spells. In that case, he won't know the source of what dwells within him, driving him to fall back into old habits.

However, Shantideva has a suggestion. The important factor is being able to pay attention to the right things at the right time. He knows people can focus and control themselves when things really matter to them.

The trick is conscientiousness or vigilance—that is, paying attention to what matters at all times, as a skillful habit. For Shantideva, conscientiousness helps us keep our resolutions because it's a virtue that helps us keep what's important to us in view even when we're flooded with emotion and even when we're depleted, tempted, and tired.

SUGGESTED READING

Holton, "Intention and Weakness of Will."
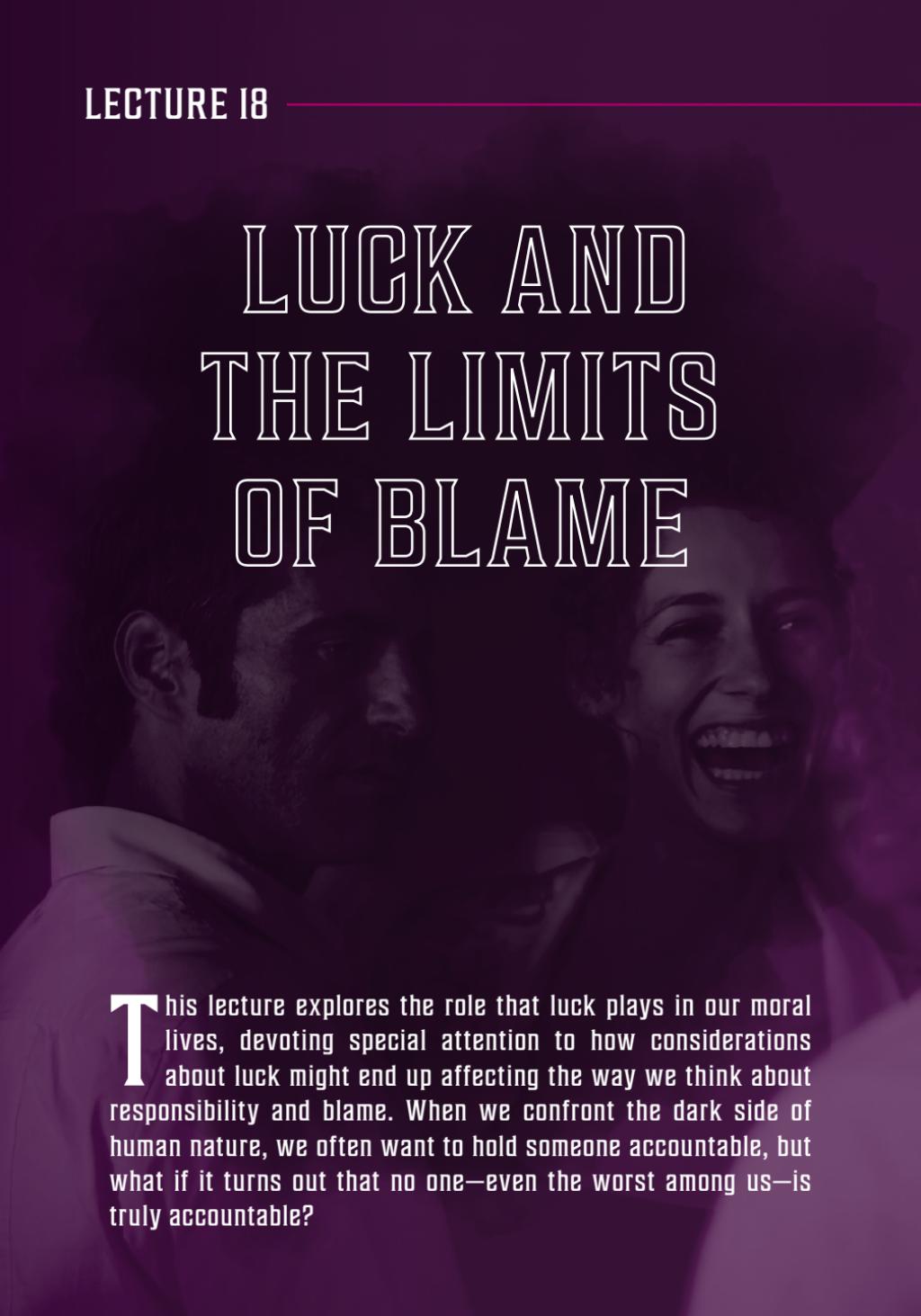
Stroud, "Weakness of Will."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Have you ever experienced weakness of will? How would you describe the experience if you've had it?

2 What's the relationship between weakness of will and akrasia?

3 Is weakness of will about breaking our resolutions, or is it about going against our better judgment? What view of weakness of will have you found most plausible?

LUCK AND THE LIMITS OF BLAME

This lecture explores the role that luck plays in our moral lives, devoting special attention to how considerations about luck might end up affecting the way we think about responsibility and blame. When we confront the dark side of human nature, we often want to hold someone accountable, but what if it turns out that no one—even the worst among us—is truly accountable?

Moral Luck and Control

This lecture begins with the topic of moral luck. We normally excuse people from responsibility when their actions are involuntary or physically forced. It is natural to think that there's a control condition for moral responsibility and blame: We can hold someone responsible and blame them only if what they've done is within their control.

This is intuitive, but it is possible to challenge the control condition. Consider the classic case of a drunk driver who wrecks his car. Now imagine two possible results. One result is that a pedestrian is killed; the other is that no one is injured. The driver whose accident results in someone's death might be convicted for manslaughter or even worse, whereas the driver who injures no one will have his driver's license suspended at worst. How we judge each of these drivers depends on factors outside their control.

This is where we find moral luck. Roughly, moral luck occurs when we're willing to hold someone responsible even though what they've done depends on factors that are beyond their control.

The drunk-driver scenario is a case of what the philosopher Thomas Nagel calls resultant moral luck. This kind of luck is associated with how the results of our actions are, at least sometimes, beyond our control.

Other Types of Luck

In addition to resultant luck, Nagel identifies three other kinds of moral luck: causal luck, constitutive luck, and circumstantial luck. Causal luck is associated with the ancient problem of freedom and determinism. Causal luck occurs when our actions are determined by causes over which we have no control.

The next kind of moral luck Nagel identifies is constitutive luck. Constitutive luck occurs when who we are is, at least in some significant sense, beyond our control.

The final kind of moral luck Nagel articulates is circumstantial luck. This kind of moral luck is about how the places and times we find ourselves in are, at least sometimes, beyond our control. Being in these different places and times might affect our actions.

The Problem with Luck

The four kinds of moral luck present a serious philosophical problem: If we consistently apply the control condition—the principle that we're responsible only for what's within our control—then we can no longer blame people for their bad actions. This is because, in as Nagel puts it, "'almost nothing about what a person does seems to be under his control."

The philosopher John Greco frames the problem of moral luck as a straightforward argument about our lack of control. The first premise of the argument is the control condition. To this premise, however, Greco adds the luck assertion: Everything that happens is the result of luck.

These two premises together present a conclusion that many people want to resist. The conclusion is that no one is morally responsible and blameworthy for anything that happens.

Moral Luck and Moral Difference

The problem of moral luck can become even worse. To see just how bad the problem of moral luck is, imagine two people: Alex and Beth. Alex drinks too much at a party, tries to drive home, and kills a pedestrian after swerving onto the sidewalk. Beth also drinks too much at the party and drives home. At one point, she swerves onto the sidewalk as well, but no pedestrians are present.

The only difference between Alex and Beth is a matter of resultant luck. Alex and Beth make all the same choices and even do all the same things, right up until the lucky difference: Alex's car hits and kills a pedestrian who happens to be standing on a corner, whereas Beth's car doesn't hit anyone because no one happens to be there.

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Beth is only morally different, with respect to her drunk driving, from Alex due to factors outside her control. It wasn't up to her that no pedestrians were around when she lost control of her car, just like it wasn't up to Alex whether a pedestrian was standing on the corner when he lost control of his car.

The philosopher Michael Zimmerman suggests distinguishing between two kinds of blame: substantial and insubstantial. Substantial blame is grounded in the decisions we make, whereas insubstantial blame is grounded in the results of those decisions. Using this distinction, we might say that Alex and Beth are equally to blame in the substantial sense, but not equally to blame in the less fundamental insubstantial sense.

At the risk of moving beyond common sense, we can imagine yet another person: Erica. Under no circumstances would Erica ever drink and drive. But the only reason Erica would never ever drink and drive is a matter of luck: Erica had a family member die in a drunk-driving accident, and that trauma has made drunk driving unthinkable for her.

UNDERSTANDING THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

LUCK AND THE LIMITS OF BLAME

Erica is in no way blameworthy for being the kind of person who would decide to drink and drive if given the chance; she never would make that choice. But the only reason she wouldn't make that choice is due to luck—something that happened in her past and was beyond her control.

Moral Record and Moral Worth

Erica is a very different kind of person from Alex, but she also has a very different moral record. Someone's moral record is a function of what they have freely decided and what they've voluntarily done; it's a record of their actual choices and actions.

On Alex's moral record, he has a drunk-driving accident that has resulted in someone's death, and that appears on his record because he made a choice. Nothing like that appears on Erica's moral record, because she made no such choice. On this way of thinking, moral record is impacted by luck, but it's only a function of the actual choices one makes.

Beyond our moral record is what Greco refers to as our moral worth. Someone's moral worth is a function of what they would freely decide and what they would voluntarily do in the circumstances they might never even encounter. Moral worth is about the kind of person someone is, whereas moral record is about what someone has actually done.

> The Buddhist philosopher Shantideva thinks that each person's fundamental nature lies beyond praise and blame.

Erica and Alex have different moral records, but also different moral worth. Alex and Daniel only have different moral records; they have the same moral worth because they are both the kinds of people who would voluntarily drink and drive given the opportunity. This raises a question: Is moral nature insulated from luck, or is our nature just a fact over which we have little or no control?

Luck and Nature

The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre resists the idea that we have tailor-made natures that determine who we are. He argues that in every moment of our lives we are making ourselves through our choices.

Picking up on this, Robert Kane, one of the most influential contemporary philosophers of free will, argues that each of our genuinely free actions is "the initiation of a 'value experiment' whose justification lies in the future and is not fully explained by the past." Kane posits that in making a choice, people say, "'Let's try this. It is not required by my past, but is consistent with my past and is one branching pathway my life could now meaningfully take.'"

This is an exhilarating view of free choice and human possibility. If it is correct, it might show that luck can't undermine blame. Perhaps we have to allow that resultant luck infects our moral lives, but substantial blame still lies with our choices—for which we are ultimately responsible.

The philosopher Galen Strawson is not convinced. He thinks that luck swallows even our most basic choices, rendering responsibility an impossibility and blame irrational. Strawson's view is that how we are from a mental standpoint is always the result of factors over which we don't have even a small amount of control. As a result, it is impossible for us to be free in the sense that grounds responsibility and blame, because factors over which we have no control always cause us to act as we do.

The Victim's Perspective

Tamler Sommers has suggested that facts about victims—their attitudes, wishes, and behavior—should play a role in determining blameworthiness and responsibility. In particular, these facts should play a role in determining what perpetrators deserve.

LUCK AND THE LIMITS OF BLAME

On his approach, Alex and Beth, for instance, might be equally culpable, perhaps due to their shared choice to drink and drive. Whether Alex deserves more blame than Beth is something that depends on facts about the victims of his drunk-driving accident.

In this sense, Sommers wants to embrace moral luck, at least to a degree. What we do is, to some large measure, the result of luck, but how we deserve to be treated is also, to some degree, a matter of luck. It's not up to Alex how the family of the pedestrian he killed will respond, but their response is important in determining just what Alex deserves.

Imagine two ways Alex's story could play out. In the first, the police track him down. He is put on trial, convicted of homicide, and sentenced to death by firing squad. Sommers notes that this is an unusually harsh penalty, but that's the point: Alex does not get what he deserves in this scenario. He likely deserved to go to prison, but surely he didn't deserve the death penalty.

In the other telling of Alex's story, the police are unable to track Alex down, but the father of the young man whom Alex killed is determined to find the driver who killed him. The father uses all of his resources to track Alex down, goes to Alex's home, and fatally shoots him.

Sommers argues that, in this scenario, it's far more plausible that Alex got what he deserved than in the first. The only difference between the two scenarios, however, is that the second considers the victim's perspective.

This is an extreme case, but Sommers's point is telling. It does seem like the victim's perspective makes a difference when it comes to determining what someone deserves, whether that's blame or even punishment.

Of course, there are limits here, too. It's unreasonable to think that someone deserves harsh treatment simply because a victim feels a certain way. The problem is that considerations about luck make it hard to know just where to set the limits of blame.

SUGGESTED READING

Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, chapter 3.

Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, chapter 6.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1   What are the different kinds of moral luck? What is the problem of moral luck?

2   What does reflecting on the role that luck plays in people's lives tell you about the appropriateness of blame?

3   What do you think of Tamler Sommers's view that the victim's perspective makes a difference when it comes to determining what someone deserves?

VICTIM BLAMING AND THE JUST-WORLD HYPOTHESIS

This lecture focuses on victim blaming and the just-world hypothesis. The just-world hypothesis refers to our tendency to believe that the world is a just and fair place and that, as a result, people get what they deserve. Victim blaming is a dark tendency related to the just-world hypothesis.

The Psychology of Victim Blaming

We can trace the psychological study of victim blaming and the just-world hypothesis back to Melvin Lerner and Carolyn Simmons, social psychologists who first explored these issues in the 1960s. When we are helpless, Lerner and Simmons found, we tend to reject and devalue the suffering experienced by victims. We do this, they hypothesized, because of our need to see the world as a just place.

Picking up on Lerner and Simmons's work, in a 1975 study, Zick Rubin and Letitia Anne Peplau wondered what kind of people believe in a just world. They observed that, at a very young age, everyone might well believe that the world is just. At least some people "outgrow the belief," whereas others never do.

In their surveys, they found that people who endorse the just-world hypothesis tend "to be more religious [and] more authoritarian … than nonbelievers." They also found that believers in the hypothesis tend to be "more likely to admire political leaders and existing social institutions, and to have negative attitudes toward underprivileged groups"

In a 2016 study, Laura Niemi and Liane Young explored why we're sometimes sympathetic towards victims and why, at others, we scorn and blame them. They suggest that our attitudes are a function of our moral values and our ideological commitments.

Focusing on Perpetrators

In their research, Laura Niemi and Liane Young found that one way to reduce victim blaming is to increase our focus on perpetrators and decrease our focus on victims. When study participants read vignettes that focused on victims rather than on perpetrators, participants perceived the victims as more responsible for what happened to them. How we tell stories affects our perception of victims.

VICTIM BLAMING AND THE JUST-WORLD HYPOTHESIS

Specifically, they distinguish between two value systems. On the one hand, there are people who largely endorse individualizing values, which focus on prohibiting harm and promoting equality and fairness. On the other hand, there are people who endorse binding values, which focus on maintaining loyalty, obedience, and respect.

Niemi and Young argue that, the more someone endorses individualizing values, the more they tend to care about people who stand outside the group. The more someone endorses binding values, the more they tend to be insensitive to the suffering of victims. This means that there is more than the just-world hypothesis at work when we blame victims; underlying moral outlooks also support it.

Retributive Karma and Victim-Blaming

The phrase "what goes around comes around" is an expression of the just-world hypothesis, but it's also grounded in a powerful view of the world associated with various Indian philosophical and religious traditions. The concept at issue here is karma.

Karma is a Sanskrit word for "action." In the early Vedic religion, *karma* was a word used to refer to specific kinds of action, particularly ritual action. In time, however, the word came to refer to both action and its consequences.

Along with this expansion of the concept, various traditions developed different theories of karma. For Jain thinkers, for instance, karma becomes a kind of physical filth that we produce through unwholesome actions. This gunk weighs down on the soul and binds it to the cycle of death and rebirth. To achieve liberation from this cycle, we have to cleanse ourselves of this karmic filth, and we do that through moral discipline and spiritual asceticism.

VICTIM BLAMING AND THE JUST-WORLD HYPOTHESIS

For Buddhists, karma is grounded in mental intention. The Sanskrit word here is *cetana*. According to the Buddha, "Action is volition, for after having intended something, one accomplishes action through body, speech, and mind."

There are four kinds of action: wholesome actions, which lead to good consequences; unwholesome actions, which lead to bad consequences; mixed actions, which have a mix of good and bad consequences; and indeterminate actions, which are performed by enlightened beings, like the Buddha. These are actions that have no consequences.

Karma centrally refers to whatever it is that keeps a mental intention going and the connection between the action and its consequences. In this sense, karma is the moral law of cause and effect.

Belief in karma, in the Buddhist and Jain senses, would certainly seem to suggest at least a moderate belief in the just world hypothesis. This is because it links actions with their consequences in a way that suggests that, on the whole, people reap what they sow.

One natural way is to think of this is as a retributivist conception of karma. According to this conception of karma, the suffering and misfortunes that people experience can often be tracked to unwholesome actions that they have committed either earlier in this life or in a previous life.

VICTIM BLAMING AND THE JUST-WORLD HYPOTHESIS

A Medical Analogy

On matters of blame, the professor Arvind Sharma offers a medical analogy. When a doctor encounters a chronic smoker who has lung cancer, it's reasonable to think that the smoker is, in some important sense, responsible for bringing about the cancer.

The morally important factor is whether the doctor actually does her duty and treats the patient. Blaming the patient is neither helpful nor appropriate, even if attributing responsibility is reasonable. Additionally, blaming the less fortunate is neither helpful nor appropriate, even if attributing responsibility is reasonable.

This analogy highlights that for those who endorse retributive karma, karmic explanations are causal and factual explanations. It makes an implicit distinction between what it means to blame someone as opposed to what it means to hold them responsible. One way to flesh this distinction out is to say that blaming someone is to hold them morally accountable, whereas as to hold someone responsible is to say that they played a causal role in bringing about a certain state of affairs.

As the author Mikel Burley highlights, however, "there is an important difference between the medical scientific belief that smoking increases one's chances of developing lung cancer and the karmic belief that suffering in this life results from sins performed in previous ones." To see this difference, Burley asks us to imagine someone who doesn't believe in karma but visits a doctor who does.

This patient asks the doctor why she has cancer when so many other smokers are perfectly healthy. In response, the doctor tells her that there's more to the story than lifestyle and genes; in the end, it's one's karma that determines such things. She must have done something bad in a past life.

The difference between the medical diagnosis and the karmic judgment is that the medical diagnosis is a statement of fact that might carry with it implications about personal responsibility, whereas the karmic judgment is inherently bound up with moral disapprobation. For someone who endorses the karmic worldview, this might not be so jarring, but for someone who doesn't, it's morally offensive because it carries with it a kind of moral condemnation that seems otherwise—outside the framework of retributive karma—completely unwarranted.

Thich Nhat Hanh on Blame

The contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has a suggestion that might help us see how someone could maintain a belief in karma without even implicitly blaming anyone for the state they're in. Consider lettuce: If person plants it, but the lettuce does not grow, blaming the lettuce would be absurd.

Blaming lettuce is absurd because the lettuce is just a thing—it's not a subject, an agent, or anything like that. It doesn't seem like *the* right candidate for blame. Additionally, blaming lettuce is ineffective. It just doesn't work. A more effective route would be understanding what conditions make lettuce grow and what conditions inhibit its growth.

The deeper lesson is this: People are like lettuce. As Thich Nhat Hanh goes on to say, we should think of our children like that lettuce and ultimately extend such concern to everyone we meet, because the fact is that everybody's like the lettuce. It's inappropriate to blame anyone, and what's more, it's pointless.

With this in mind, Thich Nhat Hanh provides us with the resources to articulate a conception of karma that is causal but not retributive. No one is ultimately responsible for their situation, even if there are complex causal processes entangled with our past and present choices that have led up to where we are now. No one is blameworthy, and so the problem of victim blaming will never emerge.

VICTIM BLAMING AND THE JUST-WORLD HYPOTHESIS

Conclusion

This course's instructor does not endorse either the just-world hypothesis or any version of karma. However, some people do, and so this lecture closes with two ideas.

The first is that thinking the world is a just place might not actually be what centrally drives us to blame victims. Instead, the driving factors might instead be binding values and a commitment to the reasonableness of blame. Whether anyone thinks victim blaming is reasonable might end up boiling down to very specific moral commitments like these.

The second thought is that it appears as if we can eliminate victim blaming while maintaining the belief that the world is, at bottom, a just place. In other words, believing that the world is a just place doesn't have to come with the dark tendency to think that victims always get what they deserve.

SUGGESTED READING

Burley, "Retributive Karma and the Problem of Victim Blaming."
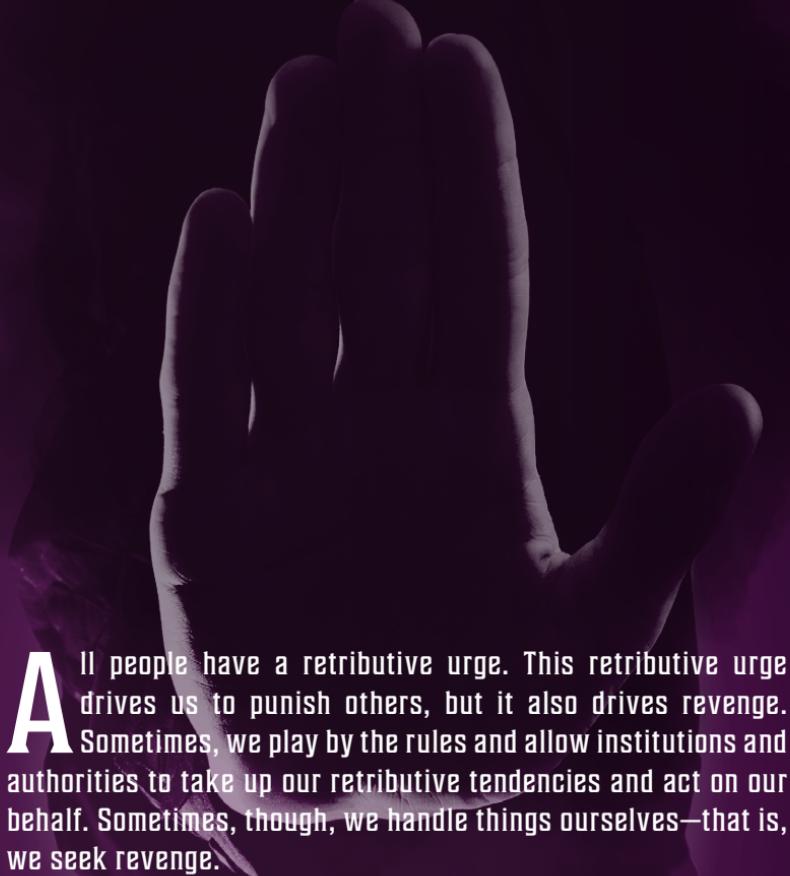
Niemi and Young, "When and Why We See Victims as Responsible."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Do you hold some version of the just-world hypothesis?

2 Have you ever found yourself blaming a victim, whether someone else or yourself? If so, why do you think you did it? If not, why not? Do you think it has to do with your values or your worldview?

3 Do you think victim blaming is morally defensible? Why or why not?

RETRIBUTION AND REVENGE

All people have a retributive urge. This retributive urge drives us to punish others, but it also drives revenge. Sometimes, we play by the rules and allow institutions and authorities to take up our retributive tendencies and act on our behalf. Sometimes, though, we handle things ourselves—that is, we seek revenge.

The Retributive Urge

One view is that the retributive urge reveals an important moral fact about us: We all have a sense of justice that drives us to stand up when we're treated unfairly and that even drives us to stand up for other people who have been treated similarly. To some extent, that seems correct. Fairness does matter to most of us.

However, the retributive urge also drives us to act immorally. It drives us to hurt other people, turn our backs on others, hold grudges, and act in ways that endanger ourselves and those we love. The retributive urge also drives us to break the rules, break the law, and take matters into our own hands, when it would be more appropriate to leave things to others.

Why do we have this urge? The answer we commonly get from evolutionary psychology is that the retributive urge is fitness enhancing. Emotions like anger, resentment, and indignation are the mechanisms that motivate us to act retributively. Acting retributively is beneficial because it increases our chances of survival in the sense that it contributes to social coordination.

The idea here is that the retributive urge drives us to keep others in line in ways that enhance fitness. As a group, we're more likely to thrive if we work together. The retributive urge, which is always on alert for unfair behavior, is part of what drives us to cooperate with each other.

Punishment versus Revenge

Punishment is institutional or authoritative retaliation, whereas revenge is individual or unauthoritative retaliation. In a game of basketball, for instance, a referee might punish a player for unsportsmanlike behavior with a technical foul. The rules of the game allow for this, and the referee has the authority to discipline players in this way. However, if a player retaliates against another player, that player has engaged in an act of revenge. The player is reacting as an unauthorized individual.

Institutionalized Cultures and Honor Cultures

The scholar Tamler Sommers has argued that, even if the retributive urge is necessary for retributive behavior, it's not enough for cognitively sophisticated creatures like us. This is because "we can question the rationality of our emotions." If we think that acting on a certain urge is irrational or against our self-interest or otherwise inappropriate, we have reason to resist that urge.

Sommers's point isn't that we're always good at resisting these urges; it's that we can and do, at least sometimes, resist them. The problem is that retributive behavior remains "fitness enhancing for its role in improving social coordination," but "increased cognitive sophistication" makes it less likely that we'll act out on our retributivist urges. This is a problem, rather than an advantage, so long as we think that retributive behavior is important for social coordination.

Sommers thinks that many societies have recognized this problem and have made steps toward resolving it. Their resolution has been to introduce cultural standards that support retributive behavior.

The two relevant cultural environments are honor cultures and institutionalized cultures. In honor cultures, social cooperation is small-scale, focusing on interactions with "tight-knit groups" and family members, often excluding strangers. Resources are also relatively scarce in such cultures, and there's little protection provided by the government or other formal institutions.

In institutionalized cultures, by contrast, social cooperation is large-scale, focusing on interactions with people beyond family and small groups, including anonymous interactions with strangers. Resources are not as scarce in such cultures, which are governed by institutions that provide protection and policies that encourage cooperation and discourage uncooperative or criminal behavior.

RETRIBUTION AND REVENGE

Sommers points out that our retributivist urges function differently in these two types of societies. In honor cultures, the retributive urge drives individuals to handle their own problems and to make displays that signal to others that any attempt to take advantage of them would come at a great cost.

In institutionalized cultures, offenders are still punished, but the role of punisher is taken up by a third party—a formal institution like the justice system. Individual acts of revenge are viewed as crimes. In institutionalized cultures, revenge is often viewed as immoral, even if we nonetheless admire it. In honor cultures, by contrast, revenge is admired and required.

Vengeance in the *Oresteia*

The tragedian Aeschylus explores the difference between these two views of revenge and the transition from an honor culture to an institutionalized culture in his *Oresteia*, a trilogy made up of the interlinked plays *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. For a summary of the events in the plays, refer to the audio or video lecture.

The most straightforward reading of this story, at least as told by Aeschylus, is that we move from an honor culture in which the offended take responsibility for avenging wrongs to an institutionalized culture in which a formal legal system handles such things. The futility of private revenge is replaced with the power of retributive justice.

Aeschylus suggests that the transition from an honor culture to an institutionalized culture is both a matter of progress and a matter of some delicate complexity. Even in an institutionalized culture, after all, honor will matter, and the thirst for vengeance will remain. This raises an interesting question: In an honor culture, revenge can be just, but what about in an institutionalized culture?

Just Revenge

The philosopher Brian Rosebury argues that revenge can be just even when it's not moral. Rosebury's idea is that revenge, although indefensible morally, "is capable, under certain conditions, of a well-founded respect which is based on its standing outside morality, as a choice by the revenger not to act morally but to follow other motives."

Rosebury thinks that revenge is morally indefensible because we can't justify it by appealing to altruism or social safety. This is because acts of revenge harm others and because acts of revenge undermine moral order, at least in institutionalized cultures. Even so, Rosebury argues, we might still call a vengeful act just.

Some might worry that the only truly respect-worthy actions are morally justified actions. To ease such concerns, Rosebury presents a case. Imagine that Albert's daughter has been killed by a diplomat from another country. Because of nuances surrounding diplomatic immunity and tensions between the diplomat's country and Albert's, the killer returns home without facing any consequences.

RETRIBUTION AND REVENGE

Albert knows, given the two country's histories, that nothing is going to happen to the killer. He'll go free. Albert wishes he could forgive the man, and he agrees, at least theoretically, that revenge is fruitless. Yet he finds himself with the overwhelming sense that he has to avenge his daughter; otherwise, he just wouldn't be able to live with himself. Albert tracks the killer down and kills him.

Rosebury wants us now to consider whether we think what Albert has done is morally right or wrong. Then, Rosebury wants us to consider whether we respect what he has done. If we think the action is wrong but respect it nonetheless, Rosebury thinks we'll see that our moral judgment doesn't track our judgment of respect.

Albert did something we can sympathize with, and we can recognize that his act of vengeance is in a sense just. It follows from basic principles of reciprocity: The diplomat did something to Albert and his family. Lacking any institutional recourse, Albert did the same to the diplomat.

Laura Blumenfeld

Another type of situation requires us to reconsider the norms associated with institutionalized cultures and honor cultures. Sommers points out that we can have mixed cultures and within-group variation.

To demonstrate this, he considers the example of Laura Blumenfeld, author of a book titled *Revenge*. Blumenfeld was from a Jewish middle-class family living on Long Island. She graduated from Harvard, but after her father was shot on a trip to Israel, she went on a revenge quest lasting a decade.

However, her father wasn't killed, he didn't suffer any long-term injuries, and the person who shot him was already in prison. Institutional justice had done its job. Blumenfeld's quest for revenge baffled everyone she knew, including her father, who felt that justice had been served. Blumenfeld felt dishonored and believed that institutional justice inadequately compensated for that dishonor.

The desire for vengeance drives us to do terrible things, but the retributive urge also plays a crucial role in creating and maintaining social cooperation. The tension between retributive justice (which is something moral) and just revenge (which is something beyond morality) is fascinating and troubling. It is fair to wonder whether the transition from honor to institutions is, or can ever be, completely satisfying.

SUGGESTED READING

Aeschylus, *Orestia*.
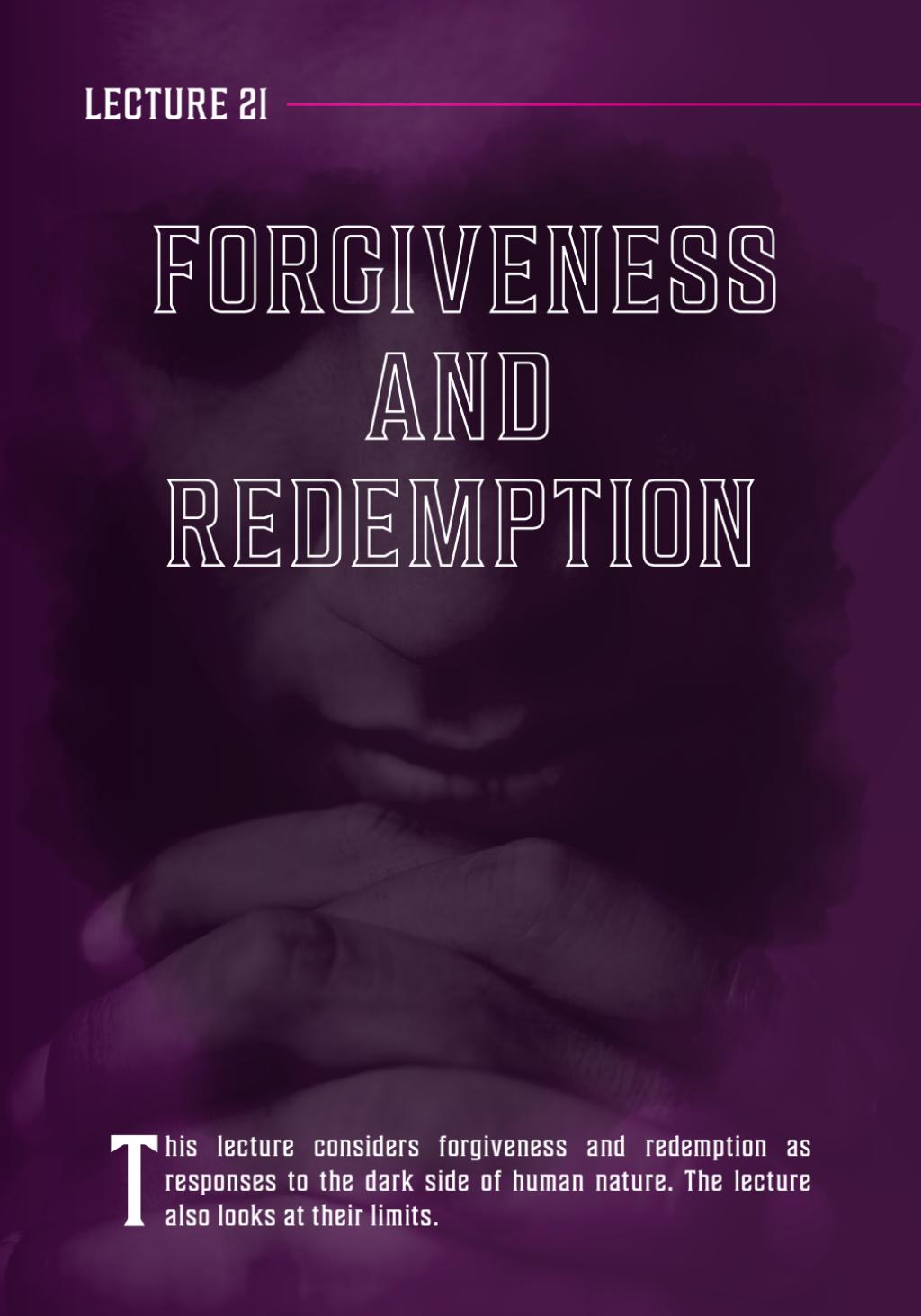
Sommers, *Relative Justice*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1   Have you ever felt the retributivist urge?

2   What do you think the importance of cultural variation is when thinking about revenge?

3   What lessons about revenge do you think we can draw from Aeschylus's *Orestia*?

FORGIVENESS AND REDEMPTION

This lecture considers forgiveness and redemption as responses to the dark side of human nature. The lecture also looks at their limits.

UNDERSTANDING THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is more than forgetting and less than excusing. It is a response to someone whom we continue to see as responsible for what they've done. Additionally, forgiveness is not necessarily a response to a request for forgiveness.
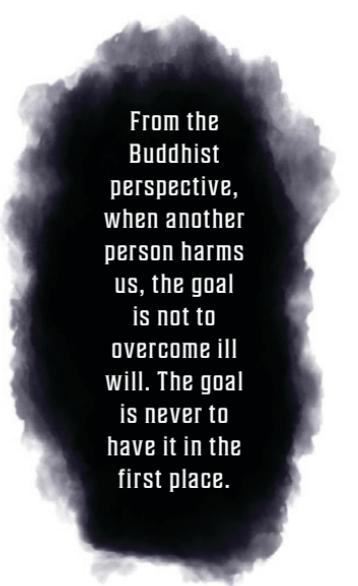
Perhaps forgiveness is primarily about how we react. This is the view of forgiveness that Jeffrie Murphy, a professor, has defended. Murphy argues, in essence, that forgiveness is renouncing our resentment on broadly moral grounds.

Additionally, it seems that we can forgive people even if we haven't fully renounced our resentment toward them. One way of looking at resentment is as a feeling of ill will toward someone. In that case, it doesn't look like we could forgive them and still resent them.

However, resentment might also be a moral protest that those we care about have not been treated properly. If that's what resentment is, then it seems we can forgive while continuing to resent.

Forgiveness is a matter of overcoming ill will. This is the view that we get from Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, who look at ill will as a matter of "wishing harm to someone, relishing the pain and discomfort that he suffers."

Simply getting rid of ill will isn't enough, Garrard and McNaughton argue. It also requires cultivating at least some measure of goodwill toward those we forgive. Being disdainful of or even indifferent to them isn't ill will, but it would block forgiveness.

From the Buddhist perspective, when another person harms us, the goal is not to overcome ill will. The goal is never to have it in the first place.

Moral Obligations

An important question related to forgiveness is this: If the wrongdoer demonstrates real contrition, are the people they affected obligated to forgive the wrongdoer? In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus provides an answer: "If your brother sins," he tells us, "rebuke him, and if he repents,

forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

On a straightforward reading, it looks like Jesus thinks we have an obligation to forgive anyone who repents. Additionally, the philosopher Laurence Thomas has defended the idea of victims having an obligation to forgive wrongdoers who deserve it. This is easier for some people to accept when it comes to minor offenses than for grievous transgressions.

Professor Kathryn Norlock also notes that placing an obligation on victims to forgive their victimizers, no matter how righteously contrite they might be, runs into other problems associated with gender, race, and social expectation. Traditionally, men have expected women to be forgiving, for instance, and for this reason alone, we should be cautious in affirming any obligation on the part of victims to forgive.

Though there can be debate over whether we have an obligation to forgive people who have done such great harm that it qualifies as evil, Thomas's argument points toward the connection between forgiveness and redemption. In order for an evildoer to be redeemed—to be morally transformed and brought back into the moral community—it looks like he might need his victims to acknowledge his contrition through their forgiveness.

Spiritual Redemption

God, in the Christian tradition, forgives human sin and redeems human beings. On this way of thinking, God does not simply forgive us. This way of thinking is associated with so-called satisfaction theories of the atonement. There are several important versions of this theory, but the basic idea behind any satisfaction theory is that through Jesus Christ, God is compensated for human sin.

The 11th-century Christian philosopher Anselm of Canterbury provides an influential satisfaction theory of atonement, which is often called the debt-cancellation theory. Anselm holds that humans, in our sinfulness, have incurred a debt toward God, because we owe God obedience and submission.

Until this debt is paid, Anselm contends, we not only deserve to be punished; justice demands that we be punished. Yet humans cannot repay their debt to God, because repayment would require living the perfect life of obedience and submission owed to God. As a result, Anselm argues, only Christ, who deserves no punishment, can pay the debt and earn a reward that can then be transferred to human beings.

Anselm's debt-cancellation theory doesn't emphasize forgiveness or fully explain why Christ had to suffer and die for our sins. With that in mind, it's worth considering another satisfaction theory—the penitential substitution theory. This theory goes back at least to 13th-century philosopher Thomas Aquinas, but the contemporary philosopher Richard Swinburne has recently developed it in interesting ways.

Swinburne points out that when we harm others and then seek forgiveness from them, we do four important things: We apologize, express remorse, repair the damage we've done, and offer penance (in the case of serious wrongs). Here, the idea of penance refers to suffering that one voluntarily undergoes or a sacrifice that one voluntarily makes in an effort to repair a relationship with another person. Swinburne thinks that, to reconcile ourselves with God, we must also apologize, express remorse, repair damage, and offer penance.

FORGIVENESS AND REDEMPTION

Unfortunately, we can only apologize and express remorse; we cannot repair the damage we've done, nor can we offer proper penance, because we owe God a life of perfect obedience. This is a type we all fail to live, given our fallen nature.

However, it would be unfitting for God not to offer us help. As a result, Swinburne argues, God sent Jesus Christ to offer his sinless life and death as willing reparation and penance for the sins of us all.

Swineburn's theory emphasizes the close link between not only forgiveness and redemption, but also redemption and penance. To be redeemed is more than just to be forgiven or to offer an apology or even to be righteously contrite; on this model, it requires making up for what we've done through a kind of sacrifice.

Moral Redemption

This lecture now turns to moral redemption, rather than the spiritual redemption that atonement theories deal with. Take, for example, the story of Ahimsaka, whose name means "harmless."

He started out as a good boy, but eventually turns to evil deeds—the gathering of fingers, cut off from live people—in order to obey a teacher's perverse instructions. He eventually earns the terrible nickname, Angulimala, or "garland of fingers."

Eventually, the Buddha intervened, presenting himself as a target. Chasing the Buddha with his blade, Angulimala ran as fast as he could, murder flooding his mind, but he could not catch the Buddha, even though the Buddha was only walking. Frustrated and confused, Angulimala shouted at the Buddha to stop.

At this, the Buddha turned to his would-be murderer and said, "I have stopped, Angulimala. Why don't you stop, too?" Angulimala did stop, and he followed the Buddha from that day on.

The villagers did not forgive him. What he had done was too terrible. They hated him and would beat him when they could. The Buddha noted this and told Angulimala that all of this was the consequence of his own violence. As such, he needed to endure their hatred and his pain with tranquility.

Angulimala's story is a story of redemption without forgiveness. As an enlightened being with no ill will to move on from, the Buddha could not forgive Angulimala. The villagers, who were victims, were so outraged by what he had done that they continued to harbor ill will against Angulimala. They did not forgive him, either. Yet he was redeemed, despite his inhuman crimes.

We can read Angulimala's story as a story about the miraculous powers of the Buddha to save those who seem beyond redemption. Alternatively, we can read it as a story about the power we all have, no matter what we've done, to transform ourselves so completely that we are no longer the monsters we once were. This second reading emphasizes our personal power to transform ourselves—our personal power to buy ourselves back through our own efforts.

SUGGESTED READING

Garrard and McNaughton, *Forgiveness*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1   How would you define forgiveness? What is the difference between forgetting and forgiving?

2   Do you think we have an obligation to forgive others for what they've done?

3   What do you think about moral or spiritual redemption?

THE ELIMINATION OF ANGER

Is anger always destructive? Is it merely a reflection of the dark side of human nature, or can anger play an important role in our moral lives? This lecture seeks to address those questions. The thoughts of the Buddhist monk Shantideva and the philosopher Seneca guide the lecture.

UNDERSTANDING THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

The Works of Shantideva and Seneca

Seneca authored a work entitled *On Anger*, which functioned as letter of advice addressed to his brother Novatus. *On Anger* is sophisticated and insightful, but it's also conversational and accessible to readers who don't know much about Stoic philosophy.

Shantideva reflects on anger in the sixth chapter of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, a work intended mainly for Mahayana Buddhist practitioners who aspire to become Bodhisattvas. (A bodhisattva is an enlightened being who, out of compassion, forgoes final liberation—or nirvana—in order to eliminate everyone's suffering).

Shantideva and Seneca never met each other, living as they did in very different places and very different times, but on one point they're perfectly aligned: Anger is so dangerous that we should avoid it altogether.

Shantideva and Seneca

Shantideva was a Buddhist monk who taught at Nalanda University in India during the 8th century. Seneca was a public intellectual, dramatist, orator, and the advisor and teacher of Emperor Nero in Rome during the 1st century.

What Is Anger?

The word Seneca uses when talking about anger is the Latin term *ira*, which he defines as a "burning desire to punish him by whom you think yourself to have been unfairly harmed." On this definition, anger is a strong desire, but it's also a judgment. When we become angry, according to Seneca, we want the person who has harmed us to be harmed in return.

Shantideva doesn't offer a precise definition of anger. However, in the Buddhist tradition, anger is a mental affliction bound up with the three root poisons of attachment, aversion, and ignorance, all of which lead to existential suffering.

THE ELIMINATION OF ANGER

This lecture will build on Seneca's foundation and work with this definition: Anger is an agitated emotional state brought about by the judgment that someone has wronged us (or those we care about) and typically accompanied either by a desire to harm the wrongdoer or by a hostile attitude toward them.

The Elimination View

Seneca and Shantideva think we should eliminate anger from our lives altogether. Stoic philosophers agree with Seneca about the need to eliminate anger, and the Buddha himself agrees with Shantideva that, even in the most extreme situations, anger is unjustified.

To make their case, both Seneca and Shantideva emphasize that it is irrational to be angry with nature. Here, the term *nature* means something like "the way things really are, rather than how they just seem to be." Both Shantideva and Seneca think that it's irrational to be angry with that.

To make his case, Shantideva often emphasizes the Buddhist doctrine of no-self. This is the doctrine that there is no stable and enduring self that lies behind our actions and makes us who we are.

Seneca doesn't endorse the Buddhist doctrine of no-self, but he insists nonetheless that "no sane man becomes angry with nature." For Seneca, because we are part of nature, we also count as interconnected citizens of the cosmos. As such, it makes no sense for us to wish anyone else harm.

Interestingly, Shantideva agrees with Seneca that we should regard each other as interconnected parts of a greater whole. This is because Shantideva believes that we are all unified in our desire for happiness and in our struggle with suffering. Once we recognize this, he argues, being angry with others makes no sense, because we're all working together toward the same goal.

The Moderation View

Another line of thinking is that, especially in extreme cases of wrongdoing, anger is reasonable and even appropriate. Such thinking might lead to an endorsement of the moderation view of anger.

The moderation view is most famously set forth by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle suggests that, rather than eliminate anger, we should manage it and harness its power. According to this moderation view, many instances of anger still count as bad, but many other instances are good. In feeling anger, we may affirm the struggle of the victim, the responsibility of the wrongdoer, and the injustice of the act.

Some people might endorse the moderation view, thinking it is impossible to eliminate anger. Anger is a basic human emotion universally found in all human cultures, meaning it is hardwired into us and impossible to eliminate. If we can't possibly eliminate anger, then we should prefer moderation over elimination.

THE ELIMINATION OF ANGER
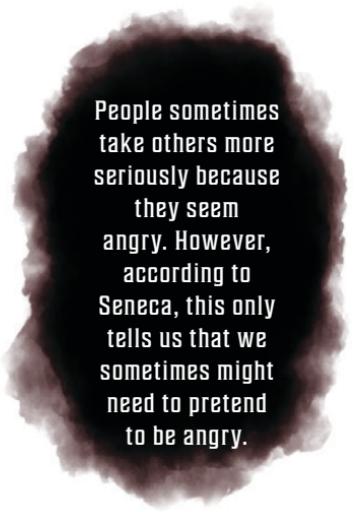
Seneca has a subtle and helpful response to this objection. He distinguishes between the initial shock we feel when "we believe there is an injustice" and the judgment we make.

Seneca thinks that the initial shock is an involuntary movement of the mind and, as such, doesn't count as genuine anger. Seneca's point is that genuine anger is more than an immediate gut reaction to a situation; it's a judgment that requires our endorsement.

Armed with this distinction, Seneca can accommodate the concern that we can't eliminate the initial, involuntary feelings associated with anger. He still insists we can eliminate genuine anger, because it's up to us how we respond to those gut reactions.

People sometimes take others more seriously because they seem angry. However, according to Seneca, this only tells us that we sometimes might need to pretend to be angry.

Another line of thinking is that anger actually helps us recognize what is morally important in certain situations. Seneca recognizes that there's something to this observation, but again, the distinction between reflexive anger and genuine anger can help here.

Our gut reactions to unjust situations can tell us a lot, but how we react to that information is what matters. Seneca and Shantideva can accept that gut reactions can be importantly informative, while insisting that genuine anger is destructive and irrational. Shantideva and Seneca also insist that rather than providing us with clear moral insights, genuine anger actually clouds our moral perception.

Anger as Motivation

Yet another argument is that anger can motivate us to do the right thing. Shantideva and Seneca obviously think that anger is dangerous, and so their basic response to the motivating power of anger is to emphasize anger's dangers over its benefits.

However, this calls for something that might replace the motivating power of anger. Shantideva and the Buddhist tradition are equipped to provide this, because they don't just want us to eliminate anger; they want us to replace anger with compassion and loving-kindness.

Compassion in the Buddhist sense is the recognition that others are suffering and the desire that anyone capable of suffering ultimately be free of suffering and its causes. Meanwhile, loving-kindness is the recognition that all sentient beings seek happiness and the desire that they have the conditions that allow them to attain it.

The Humanity-Affirmation Argument

Another argument regarding the moderation view of anger is the humanity-affirmation argument. The idea behind this argument is that the only way to affirm the humanity of those who have suffered injustice is to feel angry about their oppression. To do otherwise would be inhumane.

To make this argument, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum appeals to Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel's experience of being rescued from a Nazi death camp. On seeing the horrors of the camp, Wiesel recounts, an American soldier started yelling and cursing. Rather than finding the soldier's behavior upsetting or offensive, Wiesel found his behavior justified, reasonable, and genuinely humane.

This is a powerful story, and it seems to provide a compelling reason to endorse the moderation view of anger over the elimination view. To understand what Seneca and Shantideva might say in response to this story, consider the following thought experiment.

Imagine that instead of a frustrated soldier, Elie Wiesel had encountered Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. Avalokiteśvara is the embodiment of compassion and loving-kindness. If he had come upon Wiesel in that awful death camp, he wouldn't have become angry; he would have responded to him with the deepest kind of compassion, hoping to ease his suffering, and with the deepest kind of love, hoping to return him to his former happiness.

UNDERSTANDING THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

THE ELIMINATION OF ANGER

Those who would rather have a friend who acts like the angry soldier would likely endorse the moderation view. Those who would rather have a friend who acts like the compassionate Avalokiteśvara would likely endorse the elimination view.

SUGGESTED READING

Seneca, *Anger, Mercy, Revenge*.

Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What is your view of anger? How would you define it? What is your experience with it?

2 Do you agree with Seneca and Shantideva that we should eliminate anger? What is the most powerful reason, in your opinion, for eliminating anger?

3 What is the humanity-affirmation argument? Are you convinced by the argument? Why or why not?

BEING PEACEFUL IN A TROUBLED WORLD

This lecture considers how we might stand up against the dark side without allowing it to overwhelm us. The lecture examines a number of stories and tools that provide guidance for how we might do this.

BEING PEACEFUL IN A TROUBLED WORLD

The Pacifist's Challenge

In the Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu traditions, the concept of *ahimsa* is a fundamental ethical principle. *Ahimsa* is a Sanskrit word that means "without harm" or "non-injury." It's sometimes also translated as "the principle of nonviolence."

Ahimsa emphasizes the lack of harmful intentions and serves as a precondition for developing compassion—the recognition that everyone is suffering and the desire to eliminate the conditions for their suffering. Compassion, or *karuna* in Sanskrit, contributes not only to the elimination of other people's suffering, but also to one's own tranquility.

However, it is hard to maintain peace and tranquility in the face of danger. The world often presses on us in ways that make peace seem impossible. People sometimes unjustly inflict harm on others, so what are we to do in cases like this? How can we peacefully stand up to violence without allowing violence to consume us?

A common phrase related to this issue is "turning the other cheek," which recalls Jesus's famous words. In Matthew 5:39, Jesus says, "But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."

The Christian theologian Walter Wink has argued that this passage supports what he calls Jesus's third way. This is a middle way between the extremes of cowardly submission and violent reprisal. Wink suggests that in this passage, Jesus is telling the victims of oppression to stand up for themselves, to defy their oppressors, and to assert their humanity, but without answering the brutality in kind.

Wink suggests that standing up to violence in this way nullifies the oppressor's power. The oppressor can no longer shame the victim.

Mirroring Tendencies

Recent discoveries in neuroscience give some reason to think that acting nice toward someone may change his or her behavior. The reason for this has to do with mirror neurons and our mirroring tendencies.

When we move our bodies, we activate specific neural circuits in our motor cortex, and this happens even when we just watch somebody else move in a certain way. This is why it's nearly impossible to explain to a child how to tie shoelaces, but it's very effective to have the child watch a demonstration.

Research suggests that this is true not only for motor movements, but also for other behaviors. When someone acts aggressively, other people have a tendency to mimic aggression, because they are neurologically mirroring it. The same goes for kindness. When someone is nice to us, we have a tendency to mimic that.

Reframing Confrontation

The question remains: How can we remain calm and peaceful in the face of hostility and violence? Buddhist practitioners employ various reframing techniques in their journey on the path toward enlightenment and liberation—that is, on the path to nirvana.

For example, the 8th-century Mahayana Buddhist philosopher Shantideva makes use of many different reframing techniques in his masterpiece *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. In this work, Shantideva is writing for aspiring bodhisattvas—that is, beings who forgo final nirvana until everyone has achieved it.

In *The Way of the Bodhisattva,* Shantideva explains how we ourselves might not only aspire to become a bodhisattva, but also begin to engage in the process of actually becoming one. To help us accomplish this, Shantideva offers practical arguments and advice, including advice that helps address the question: When others assail and annoy us, what should we do?

BEING PEACEFUL IN A TROUBLED WORLD

One thing we have to do is resist becoming angry, and one of the techniques Shantideva offers for avoiding anger is a clear example of a reframing skill. This is part of how Shantideva describes the technique in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

> Those who stay close by me, then,
> To damage my good name and cut me down to size—
> Are surely there protecting me
> From falling into realms of grief.

Shantideva's central point is that we can skillfully reframe how we view those who slander us, who insult us, and who actively block our worldly ambitions. Rather than hindering us, they are actually helping us.

Worldly matters simply engender attachment and aversion. It is ignorant to think that such matters could make a person truly happy or could eliminate suffering. Instead of being angry with these people, Shantideva advises treating them as a source of joy.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist monk, suggests another tool. This is how Thich Nhat Hanh puts it:

> There may be times when you are angry with someone, and you try everything you can to transform your anger, but nothing seems to work. In this case, the Buddha proposes that you give the other person a present. It sounds childish, but it is very effective. When we're angry with someone, we want to hurt them. Giving them a present changes that into wanting to make them happy. So, when you are angry with someone, send him a present. After you have sent it, you will stop being angry with him. It's very simple, and it always works. Don't wait until you get angry to go and buy the present. When you feel very grateful, when you feel you love him or her so much, then go and buy the present right away. But don't send it; don't give it to the other person yet. Keep it. You may have the luxury of having two or three presents stored secretly in your drawer. Later, when you feel angry, take one out and deliver it. It is very effective.

This gift-giving technique changes us by moving us away from anger, resentment, and revenge. It moves us toward compassion, loving-kindness, and generosity. Additionally, it changes others by mirroring for them something humane, by easing their suffering, and by helping them reframe the situation, too.

People might resist the gift. They might even see what we're doing as ironic and insulting. However, Thich Nhat Hanh is suggesting that if we make this a practice and we do it skillfully, we can continue to be peaceful in the midst of trouble.

SUGGESTED READING

Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step.*

Wink, *The Powers That Be.*

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What do you think of the stories of Julio Diaz and Ryokan? Do you aspire to be like them? Do their stories worry you? Does it seem too idealistic to model our lives on them?

2 What's the difference between loving confrontation and loving de-escalation? Do you agree with one approach more than the other? Why or why not?

3 What do you think of Wink's interpretation of Matthew 5:39?

THE ALLURE OF THE DARK SIDE

This lecture explores the allure of the dark side. It focuses on what makes death, violence, and evil so fascinating. To do so, the lecture draws from philosophers and researchers, both ancient and modern.

The Story of Leontius

In the *Republic*, Plato tells the story of Leontius. One day, Leontius was walking outside the walls of Athens when he happened to see "some corpses lying at the executioners' feet." At this, Leontius found himself conflicted. On the one hand, he was disgusted as anyone would be by the sight and turned away; on the other, he had a strange desire to look at the dead bodies he had stumbled upon.

Plato's story of Leontius is rich and important in many ways. Plato, for instance, thinks this suggests a third division in the soul: Not only is there a distinction between reason and desire, but there is also a spirited part of the soul revealed here.

When we encounter a dead body, we react in distinctive ways. Professor Pascal Boyer notes that encountering corpses triggers very specific mental processes, related to three important themes.

The first theme is predation. For a long time, we've been both predators and prey. Viewing a dead body, so the story goes, triggers our sense of ourselves as potential prey and provokes fear.

The second theme associated with viewing a dead body is contagion. Corpses are decomposing organic matter; they are potentially toxic, so they require us to handle them carefully. In response to this, we find ourselves experiencing disgust at the sight of dead bodies.

The final theme that Boyer notes is violation. When we encounter a dead person, we experience a flood of distinctive thoughts and feelings related to the violation of a person. Encountering a dead person triggers our sense of what it's like to be a person and to have the properties associated with persons. Yet because this person is now dead, our expectations associated with a person become violated.

The Paradox of Horror

Picking up on this suggestion, psychologists Hank Davis and Andrea Javor used Boyer's three themes—predation, contagion, and violation—to study how audiences react to horror films. They had participants score 40 horror films according these themes.

The movies whose aggregate scores were higher tended to be rated more favorably on the Internet Movie Database. Effective horror films, it seems, impact us in many of the same ways dead bodies do. Their impact comes from their ability to trigger complex emotions and thoughts and to violate our expectations about the category of person.

Rubbernecking

When we rubberneck—gawking at disasters and accidents—we participate in a kind of morbid curiosity. One professor, Eric Wilson, thinks that we want to experience other people's suffering not in a sadistic way, but in order to empathize.

They also note that a sense of peril, associated with the theme of predation, is a "defining feature of the horror genre." Audiences find being menaced, frightened, or even disgusted pleasurable enough to want to watch horror films. Philosopher Noël Carroll calls this the paradox of horror.

This ties in with Leontius and his desire to look at corpses. We can imagine that Leontius felt fear—we can imagine that the executioners were menacing and the situation was dreadful.

Still, even though the dead bodies Leontius wants to see are real, which makes them importantly different from a horror film, he's relatively safe in the same way we are when we watch horror films. In neither case are we in immediate danger. Perhaps we are able to scrutinize dangers from a safe distance and rehearse real-world scenarios in a way that helps us learn about how we would handle horrible situations.

Hedonic Reversals

A hedonic reversal occurs when something that used to be painful or unpleasant becomes its opposite—that is, pleasant or pleasurable. Part of the explanation for this is that initially negative experiences can falsely signal that there is a threat to us. For instance, take a hot pepper that isn't really dangerous, or a roller coaster isn't truly going to kill anyone.

As we realize that we've been fooled—that our body isn't quite telling the truth—some of us at least start to derive pleasure. One professor, Paul Rozin, describes this kind of pleasure as derived from a mastery of "mind over body."

This is benign because it's safe, but it's masochistic because we end up enjoying what our bodies initially reject. We come to enjoy initially unpleasant sensations and feelings through this process of mastery.

Motivations

In a 1995 article, Deirdre Johnston identifies four different motivations that adolescents have for watching horror films. These motivations, she argues, suggest four different kinds of "experiences in response to graphically violent stimuli."

The gore-watching motivation is associated with people who seem to be curious about violence, who have an "attraction to the grotesque," and who seem to have a "vengeful interest" in killing and seeing people "get what they deserve." Meanwhile, thrill watchers focus "on the suspense."

THE ALLURE OF THE DARK SIDE

Independent watchers seem to care about playing a social role in which they can test their maturity and bravery and perhaps even demonstrate those qualities to others. Independent watchers identify with victims, but have a positive outlook.

Problem watchers also identify with victims, but they do not enjoy horror films. They tend to feel angry and lonely, and they tend to experience negative affect both before and after watching horror.

Johnston's study suggests that people with certain personality traits tend to be motivated to view dark things like horror films for very different reasons. They might get very different things out of their experiences.

Real Horror

When it comes to real-life horror, the philosopher Robert Solomon has argued that being aroused by instances of real horror is desensitizing and perhaps even pathological. More importantly, "it is morally repugnant, and the moral repugnance lies precisely in the fact that those who enjoy the [truly] horrible no longer find that the horrible provokes horror."

For Solomon, horror as a response to the horrible is something very unpleasant—something that's really a traumatizing and emotionally overwhelming experience. It's the kind of experience that makes us feel helpless and lost.

However, as the classicist Garrett Fagan notes, throughout many cultures over human history, audiences have been drawn to spectacles involving real horror. These range from executions to blood sports such as gladiatorial games.

One way to start explaining this is to point out that, rather than being subhuman and abnormal, people are drawn to spectacles featuring real horror partly for the same reasons people are drawn to all kinds of sports: They find a community of peers whose collective experience validates their shared view of how the world is.

For a modern example, consider reactions to the death of Osama bin Laden, the founder al-Qaeda and the man who is credited with masterminding the attacks of September 11, 2001. Ask yourself: Were you happy to hear the news? Did you read any of the accounts of the siege that led to his death with pleasure? If you did not derive pleasure from this event, do you know anyone who did?

It appears that there are all sorts of social, psychological, and moral factors that might drive us to enjoy or to find some satisfaction in what might seem so dark, at least at first blush.

Conclusion

Perhaps the reason people are haunted and fascinated by the dark side of things has much to do with mastery. This is the basic idea behind hedonic reversals. It's what flips negative experiences into something enjoyable or at least interesting and worth pursuing

This sort of exploration is what the Buddhist thinker Pema Chödrön has in mind when she says that, "in all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every black hole and bright spot."

THE ALLURE OF THE DARK SIDE

Of course, merely thinking about dark matters won't magically cure us or transform the troubled world, but it's a start. This means that thinking about evil and other dark aspects of the human condition isn't just some morbid curiosity. We're not being strange or childish. On the contrary, we're facing up to who we are.

SUGGESTED READING

Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror.*

Fagan, *The Lure of the Arena.*

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1   Can you identity with Leontius? Have you ever found yourself compelled to look upon something grizzly or terrible?

2   Do you enjoy horror movies and hot peppers? If so, does anything considered in this lecture make sense of your interest in them?

3   Do you think it is evil to enjoy real horror? Why or why not?

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